

FUNCTIONS OF THE BOOK

FOR SOCIETY AND SELF:

A STUDY IN SECULAR TRANSFORMATION

Reading and study were among the central values of traditional Jewish society. Indeed, it is impossible to explain the continuity of the Jewish people without reference to the unique status of the book. Any analysis of contemporary Israeli culture, therefore, must look first to the fate of the book as it is affected by the weight of tradition and of modernity. This task is attempted here. It is part of a comprehensive national study of the sociology of Israeli culture in the '70s.¹

THE PLACE OF THE BOOK IN TRADITIONAL JEWISH CULTURE

In traditional Jewish society,² the book refers, of course, to the Holy Scriptures and the body of rabbinic literature that was built

¹ This article is based upon data from "Israel Culture 1970" a study prepared for the Ministry of Culture and Education by a research team from The Communications Institute of the Hebrew University and the Israel Institute of Applied Social Research. The study was directed by Prof. Elihu Katz and Dr. Michael Gurevitch. During the field work, which was carried out in June-July 1970, some 3700 people were interviewed from 56 residential areas. Those examined constitute a representative sample of the Jewish population above the age of 18.

² By traditional Jewish society we refer here to that type of society which, according to Jacob Katz's definition "regards its existence as based upon a

upon them throughout the ages. The Jews came to be called the "People of the Book" by virtue of living according to the rules of *the* Book with which they were so preoccupied.

The commandment to devote time to study is indicative of this preoccupation. Jewish tradition did not leave leisure time—or, for that matter, any part of the rest of the round of life—to the discretion of the individual. As Katz points out, "the ideal of studying Torah demanded the exclusive employment of one's time as a matter of principle: every free moment that remained after fulfilling religious obligations, making a living, and taking care of other essential needs, was to be devoted to the study of Torah."³ If only a minority could devote themselves entirely to the study of the Torah, anyone who lived in this society was aware of the normative requirement of setting time aside for study and of justifying time spent otherwise. The daily prayers include lessons from scripture and rabbinic writings in order further to inculcate habits of study and to strengthen the appreciation of books.

Two major social functions were fulfilled by the popular study of *the* Book. (1) For one thing, this literature was the source of supreme authority concerning values and conduct. Its interpreters—the rabbis and the scholars—were at the apex of the system of social stratification.⁴ (2) Secondly, the continuous exposure—through perusal and study—to the ideas and images that are incorporated in this literature gives rise to a shared frame of reference, a shared set of symbolic experiences. Here is the key to the feeling of collective national identity which permeated the dispersed Jewish communities and which connected the present with the generations of the past.

Since the collective identity and continuity of the society is

common body of knowledge and values handed down from the past." From the historical point of view this is "the whole of world Jewry, at least from the Talmudic era (200 C.E.) up to the age of European Emancipation." Despite the geographical dispersion of different parts of the society, in his book *Tradition and Crisis* J. Katz emphasizes the social unity of the Jewish population based upon "a common religion, nationhood and messianic hope." In Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis, Jewish Society and the End of the Middle Ages*. The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961, pp. 3, 7.

³ Ibid. p. 162.

⁴ An analysis of the special characteristics of the Scholar of the Law is found in E. Simon's article: "Tomorrow's Jew in the Making, New Forces Reshape a Centuries Old Ideal." *Commentary*, Vol. 6, July, 1948.

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based upon exposure to certain books, and devotion to God is expressed in the reading and studying of these books, literacy, therefore, becomes vital for the Jew in order to fulfill his duties as a man and as a member of the community. This fact is illustrated in Jewish sources which, from the time of the Mishnah onwards, emphasize the collective responsibility which falls on the members of the community and public institutions to provide all members of the community with this knowledge. The obligation to teach the children of the poor, whose parents cannot afford to pay their tuition, and to begin study at a young age is particularly emphasized.

As a result, the widespread literacy of Jewish society was rather unique, and differs from what occurred in other historical societies. In other societies literacy was limited to groups of the social élite, to the aristocracy or to the clergy.⁵ This was particularly the case in Catholic countries. In traditional Jewish society, on the other hand, literacy was everyone's legacy. Some believe that this high degree of literacy among the Jews in the Middle Ages enabled them to fulfill specialized roles in European society, such as in commerce, and won for them the protection of the political authorities, and at times, even that of the Church.

If we accept McLuhan's assumption about the influence of print on personality, it seems possible that precisely this pre-occupation with study and reading shaped a type of rational and disciplined personality that was particularly suited to modern society.

THE SECULAR TRANSFORMATION OF THE VALUES OF READING AND STUDY

Two crises challenged the social and cultural order of traditional Jewish society, Hassidism and Haskalah (Enlightenment).⁶ The

⁵ On the processes of spreading literacy see C.M. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West*, Pinguin, 1969.

⁶ Jacob Katz's analysis, on which these thoughts are based, refers to Max Weber's assertion that religious charisma and rationalism are the two crises that befall the institutions of traditional society. Hassidism was, in large measure, a populist reaction against the aristocracy of the learned; Haskalah was a reaction against the inhospitality of traditional Jewish society to secular culture.

expressionism of the one, and the rationalism of the other, affected the traditional concepts of study and of the book. Hassidism heightened the value of religious experience, and by placing emphasis on charismatic leadership correspondingly diminished the value of disciplined self-study and the unmediated authority of the book. By contrast, the movement for Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) sought to open Jewish society to modernizing influences. In doing so, great importance was attributed to the values of study and reading, but the *meaning* of these activities was drastically changed.

The *Haskalah* marked the beginning of the secularization of the book. Study and reading became secular activities both from the point of view of their source of legitimacy and from the point of view of their content. Study is no longer founded in national-religious values but in individualistic ones which emphasize the development of the individual personality according to its particular inclinations. As a result, reading and study become either career-oriented activities or voluntary leisure activities rather than the normatively prescribed activity which was pursued "for its own sake." As for content, study and learning are no longer limited to a well-defined corpus of scriptural and rabbinic writings; on the contrary, emphasis is now placed on a wide range of secular subjects and on the reader's personal choice, according to his interests and inclinations. Obviously, the shared frame of reference which arose from continuous exposure to the *same* sources, during the traditional era, is seriously threatened by these developments. The People of *the* Book are beginning to be transformed into the people of books, or the people of reading.

This process of secularization, it is important to emphasize, does not mean that books and study became marginal values; on the contrary, they played a central role in the system of values of the Emancipation, and later, of the Zionist movement. Indeed, one of the fundamental assumptions of Zionist ideology was that the national revival of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel would encompass all areas of culture, including its traditional and modern elements, and that this cultural activity would encompass all groups of the population. The notion of "Spiritual Center" became one of the basic ideals of the Jewish state, in which the writing and reading of books would play a major role. Indeed, in the period preceding the establishment of the State, the

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implementation of this ideal began to take form.⁷ This was the period of the dramatic revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, of the establishment of institutions of science and art, of the founding of publishing houses and the undertaking of such literary enterprises as the translation of classic world literature into Hebrew. The underlying assumption in all of this was that the traditional values of reading and study would persist in the modern Jewish state, after undergoing secular transformation.⁸

THE VALUE ATTRIBUTED TO BOOKS, READING AND STUDY BY ISRAELIS

Almost a quarter of a century after the establishment of the State of Israel, and after the massive influx of Jewish immigrants from all over the world, we set out to examine the extent to which books, reading and study are significant both on the level of values and on the level of actual behavior.

We looked, first of all, at the salience of the concept of "the People of the Book" for contemporary Israelis. The representative sample of several thousand respondents was asked to indicate the extent to which each of a series of "national characteristics" that has been attributed to the Jewish people characterize the people of Israel today. A large proportion of the population affirmed that "the People of the Book" is still a central national characteristic. It is important to note, however, that the second generation considers this characterization less appropriate than does the parent (immigrant) generation, and that better educated people are also less likely to affirm its applicability.

⁷ S. N. Eisenstadt, *Israeli Society*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967, pp. 368-371.

⁸ Even in the State of Israel, despite counter claims which are perhaps partly justified, a continuity of this cultural tradition is still felt. R. Escarpit, who relies upon UNESCO data, reports that in the year 1962 the rate of publication in Israel, *mutatis mutandis*, was the highest in the world. (*The Book Revolution*, London, Harzap, Unesco, 1966).

Although in the years 1969-1970 the growth in the number of books published was smaller than in previous years, the rate of publication still increased. When we checked, according to Escarpit's system, the situation of books published in Israel in 1968 in comparison to other countries, it turned out that even in that year the rate of books published in Israel was among the highest in the world.

From the point of view of our discussion of the secular transformation of this concept, it is of considerable interest that the Israelis' image of themselves as "the People of the Book" is as closely connected to religious values as to national and humanistic ones. Indeed, a graphic representation of the correlations (Table 1) among the national characteristics reveals that

Table 1

Monotonic Correlation Coefficients * Between the Characteristic of "the People of the Book" and Other National Characteristics.

Love of studying the Torah for its own sake	.53
Awaiting the era of the Messiah	.46
Belief in Divine Providence	.45
Emphasis on the importance of family life	.52
Progressive social thought	.42
Developed sense of justice	.44
Industriousness and ambition	.45
Frugality	.33

"the People of the Book" stands midway between a set of religious characteristics, such as "the love of the study of the Torah for its own sake" or "the longing for the Messiah" and a set of secular ideals which included characteristics such as "a developed sense of justice" and "progressive social thought." In other words, "the People of the Book" is one of the few national characteristics which finds a place both in the self-image of the religious public and of the secular public, although there is good reason to believe, of course, that the meaning of the concept varies in the two populations.

The notion of "spiritual center" also finds expression in the interviews. When people are asked whether it is desirable that

* The monotonic correlation coefficient shows to what extent the answers to one question rise when the answers to the second question rise, without the assumption that the rise is exactly according to a straight line. The coefficient extends from -1 to $+1$, when $+1$ expresses a full monotonic connection and -1 expresses an inverted full monotonic connection. 0 shows a lack of monotonic connection.

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cultural and educational activity should be more intensive than in other countries, 70 percent answer affirmatively. Here there are no differences among the generations or among different educational groups; nor are there any differences among groups of different ethnic origin. On the other hand, it turns out that the desire for Israeli superiority in this field is perhaps a component of the religious mission-consciousness—the more religious the person, (the factor of education remaining constant) the more he tends to express his desire for Israeli superiority in this field.

The data also indicate that study, too, is highly valued. A majority of the population says that it is “important for me to study and to advance myself.” A large proportion of the population indicated great interest in the possibility of formal studies, not necessarily toward a degree, by way of radio and television, even if that meant substituting some instructional programming for general programming during prime television time!

On the whole, it appears that the values of the book, reading and study are still central to the Jewish community in Israel. There is evidence that the secular transformation of these traditional values actually “took.” Younger people and better-educated ones are somewhat more skeptical about whether the characterization, “People of the Book,” is still appropriate, and, indeed, their images of study and reading seem more connected with advancement and career. But, altogether, the traditional ideal of adult education “for its own sake” is still very much alive.

PATTERNS OF READING AND STUDY

Even if the potential is there, the question remains, How much of it is expressed in actual behavior? What is the extent of reading and study?

The most general finding in the field of reading behavior is that in Israel there is a high degree of literacy⁹ as compared to

⁹ This operational definition of literacy makes no pretence at conceptual precision. It refers simply to persons who reported themselves as readers of at least one book per year.

Table 2

Readers of books and readers of more than 8 books a year—in Israel and in European countries *

	those interviewed who read one book in the last year	the readers of more than 8 books a year	
	% from among the entire po- pulation	% among the entire popula- tion	% among the readers
Israel	77	42	55
France	56	33	59
England	63	39	61
Italy	24	9	38
West Germany	52	17	32
Switzerland	69	23	33
Austria	54	14	26
Denmark	67	39	58
Holland	66	35	53
Belgium	42	21	49
Portugal	28	15	53

* Reader's Digest *Survey of Europe Today*, 1970, pp. 129-121.

other European countries. (Table 2) More than three quarters of the Israeli population reads books,¹⁰ and 65% of the entire population reports that it reads the Bible at least occasionally. Although the amount of reading varies among the readers from one book a year to more than fifty books a year, it is important to emphasize that 77% of the entire population read at least one book in the last year, and that this is a high percentage in

¹⁰ In the study we accepted the respondents' subjective definition of what is a book. Examination of the titles given us by respondents in answer to the question concerning the last book they read confirms that the subjective definition is not far different from the following accepted definition: "a book is a non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages, exclusive of the cover pages" from "Recommendation concerning the international standardization of statistics relating to book production and periodicals," Unesco 1964.

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comparison to Western European countries. The number of "active readers" who read at least 8 books during the last year is also higher in Israel than in those countries.

As for Eastern Europe, we only have partial data, but there is some evidence to indicate that the urban population of the Soviet Union devotes more time to reading than the parallel population in other countries.

The results of studies on "time allocation" also show that, in comparison to other countries, the Israelis devote more time to reading.

However, we should not indulge in an overly optimistic evaluation of the situation in the field of reading behavior. A comparison of the reading publics in different countries shows that the percentage of "active readers," who read at least 8 books a year, *from among all readers of books* is lower in Israel than in France, Denmark and England. A comparison with data of studies carried out in the United States also shows that the reading habits of the reading public in Israel and the United States are very similar.

It seems that, although in Israel there is a larger public who are potential "active readers," this does not show up in the actual amount of reading of the public. The rate of "active readers" among all the readers is not different from that of other countries, and in some cases it is even lower.

There is another cause for concern. The demand in the field of reading is largely a demand of import. Although 70% of the readers mentioned that their reading is almost exclusively in Hebrew, most of the books read are really translated from other languages; only 20% of the readers mentioned that they consistently read original books in Hebrew.

There is a certain irony in the fact that the impressive achievement of the revival of the Hebrew language has led to the rapid "forgetting" by the second generation of the mother tongues of their immigrant parents. This is reflected in the high proportion of readership of books translated into Hebrew from other languages when compared to the proportion of books read in their original languages. The rate of reading of translated books, as has just been noted, also far exceeds the reading of books originally written in Hebrew.

As in other countries, we found that in Israel also education is

the most decisive factor in determining the reading habits of the individual. As the level of education rises, so does the amount of reading. Thus we can expect that in the next generation, with the rise in the level of education, the percentage of active readers will also increase. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that people's reading habits are influenced by the reading habits of their parents. At all levels of education, people whose parents are readers, read more than those whose parents do not read. Even among people of higher education, those whose parents read, read more than those whose parents do not read. It seems that for persons of low or average education, the socialization towards active reading is a process that will continue for two generations and will be completed with the rise in the educational level.

The findings of our study pertaining to the influence of the age factor are contrary to the findings of a reading study carried out in the United States.¹¹ We found that the amount of reading done by people with an education of over eleven years of school decreased with age. We did not find such a decrease among people of low and average education. According to the findings of the American study, however, it is precisely among the people of low and average educational levels that an abrupt decrease occurred in the amount of reading with increasing age. In an effort to explain this difference between the two studies, the amount of reading done by religious and non-religious respondents was compared. We expected that religious persons might prove to be heavier and steadier readers, and, given that religiosity is more concentrated among the less well educated, this would explain the steadier readership of less-well-educated Israelis. But the facts are otherwise: we found no difference between the reading habits of religious and non-religious persons of low and average education. Nevertheless, it may still be correct to assume that this finding is an expression of the influence of Jewish tradition—on the religious and non-religious alike, an effect which nullifies the influence of the age factor in groups of low and average education.

The traditional concept of study as a religious commandment probably increases study activities. The religious, at all levels of education, study more than the non-religious. Moreover, the gap

¹¹ P. H. Ennis, *Adult Book Reading in the United States*, NORC, University of Chicago, 1965.

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between the religious and non-religious is largest among those of low education. Since professional advancement has less value in this stratum, those for whom "religious" motivation is important practice this activity.

It is of interest that among the well-educated, non-religious persons report that they read more than religious ones. It is possible that the religious, in accordance with the traditional viewpoint, do not regard the reading of religious literature as reading but as study. Additional proof of this is the fact that the percentage of people who study, among religious persons who are well-educated, is much higher than the percentage who study among the educated non-religious.

The percentage of women who do not read books at all is slightly higher than the percentage of men who do not read at all. This may also be a result of the traditional concept according to which studying is an occupation for men. However, examining readers only, women read more than men. The amount of reading equalizes between the two sexes only in the ages of 24-35 when the women are busy caring for their small children.

Also, in the field of adult education, there is relatively great activity in Israel in comparison to other countries. Almost a third of the entire population is engaged in some form of study. About 22% are studying within formal educational frameworks, such as educational institutions and courses, and about 10% study by themselves. Among the better-educated (11+ years of school) of ages 18-50, the proportion of those studying reaches 50%.

In Western European countries the percentage of those who answered that they have participated in at least one course since they finished their studies varies from 59% in Sweden to 3% in Portugal. The average is 24% for all Western European countries.¹² Had a parallel question been asked in our study, it seems highly likely that Israel would have taken its place among the most developed countries in this field.

In an examination of the relationship between reading and other pastimes we discovered that a strong relationship exists, at all levels of education, between reading and study. A similarly strong relationship exists between reading, and "serious" recrea-

¹² Reader's Digest *Survey of Europe Today*, 1970, pp. 122-123.

tion outside the home, such as going to the theater or to a museum. That is to say that even at the behavior level the two concepts of reading find their expression—the more traditional meaning which connects reading and study, and the secular meaning according to which reading is one of many cultural pastime activities.

THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS ATTRIBUTED TO READING BOOKS

As has been emphasized, one aspect of the traditional idea of “the People of the Book” implies the exposure of an entire nation to an identical system of ideas and symbols. The images and values of the nation have been shaped by means of this common exposure, as well as its way of comprehending the world that surrounds it. Here lies the importance of the Book of Books and of the exegetic literature as a source and focus of the national identity that unified it in its geographical dispersion throughout history. On the other hand, the meaning of the secular concept of “the People of the Book” as a nation that studies and reads books is entirely different, even contradictory, from the traditional concept. Not only is reading, in the secular sense, an individual activity which isolates the person from his social environment; it also neutralizes his exposure to any system of identical symbols and ideas, since the variety of ideas to which the book reading public exposes itself is far larger than any variety of ideas offered by any other mass medium. The number of different books mentioned by respondents as the book they last read is immense, and the book mentioned most frequently as “the book read last” was mentioned by only 28 respondents. However the number of those interviewed who reported reading this book, though not as “the last book they read” was obviously much higher. In fact, this particular book stood out as a “best-seller” at the time this study was done.

Despite what has been said about the individualization of reading, there obviously exists the phenomenon of the “best-seller” which creates a common experience for large sectors of the public. Indeed, due to the great circulation of books on the subjects of the War and Holocaust, it occurred to us that

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there may exist in Israel a phenomenon which goes beyond that of one particular book becoming a bestseller, when a whole subject becomes a "bestseller" and creates a literary experience common to the entire nation. Indeed, the findings of the study do show that books dealing with the Holocaust or the Six Days War, are read by large parts of the population, and, unlike books on most other subjects, are not limited to particular social groups.

There is a high degree of agreement among the reading public as to the experience arising from the reading of these books. Most of them mention the fact that this literary experience contributes to a feeling of identification with the "collective memory" of the people and endows its readers with feelings of solidarity and security.

Similarly, when respondents were asked to compare five media (newspapers, radio, television, film and books) as to the extent to which they fulfill a variety of social and psychological needs, the book is given first place as the medium which helps "to strengthen the ties with Jewish tradition."

While the book still retains some of its traditional functions as an instrument of national solidarity, analysis of the entire list of functions assigned to the book and to the other media confirms that, for most readers, most of the time, the book is more closely associated with self than with collectivity. For most of the population, the book fulfills personal cognitive needs. Thus, reading is associated with self-knowledge and self-realization, as well as with personal escapist needs; two-thirds of the reading public, for example, say that books help them overcome feelings of loneliness. For half of the reading public, the book supplies an esthetic pleasure, a concept which is certainly not in the traditional spirit. Books rank ahead of the other media as the medium which helps man most to "know himself." It is an interesting contrast, this secular view of the function of the book with the traditional view which holds that the role of the book is to teach man "to know before Whom he stands."

Nowadays, newspaper, radio, and television help more than books in strengthening the identification with state and society. Books rank quite far behind these media of topical information, in the view of most respondents, with respect to all matters having to do with involvement in civic affairs. Still, it should

be pointed out that one-third of the reading public feels that books are also helpful in this sphere.

In comparing the needs fulfilled by mass media—television, radio, newspapers, cinema and books—for those exposed to them, it appears that the book is a medium that fulfills many and various needs. In other words, whoever uses books to satisfy one need, tend to use them to satisfy other needs as well. It is important to emphasize that among people of low and average education books are mainly regarded as an instrument of study, and as the level of education rises, books tend to satisfy more and more needs.

Another interesting finding concerning the functions of the several media is that the book is the least “interchangeable” of the media; in other words, when an individual indicates that books are helpful in satisfying a given need, he is unlikely to indicate that any other of the five media studied is helpful in fulfilling the same need. (Table 3) The lowest degree of inter-

Table 3

Matrix of Average Correlations of Helpfulness of Each Pair of Media for Eight Different “Needs”:¹³
Which Media Are Interchangeable with Which?

	<i>TV</i>	<i>Radio</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Books</i>	<i>Cinema</i>
<i>TV</i>	—	.71	.53	.26	.57
<i>Radio</i>		—	.69	.38	.49
<i>Newspapers</i>			—	.53	.37
<i>Books</i>				—	.51
<i>Cinema</i>					—

¹³ The eight needs are as follows:

1. To kill time
2. To be entertained
3. To overcome loneliness when I am alone at home
4. To release tension
5. To feel that others think as I do
6. To get to know the true qualities of our leaders
7. To understand what goes on in Israel and in the world
8. To keep up with the way the government performs its functions

With respect to each of these needs, respondents were asked to indicate “how helpful” each of the five media is in fulfilling the need. For a full discussion of this procedure and its results, see: Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch and Hadassah Haas, “On the Use of the Mass Media for Important Things,” paper prepared for the Symposium on the Effects of the Mass Media of Communication, XXth International Congress of Psychology, Tokyo, August, 1972.

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changeability is between books and television, that is, television is least likely to fulfill the social and psychological functions assigned to books, and vice versa. By contrast, television and radio and the newspapers are highly interchangeable with each other. Newspapers and the cinema (print and pleasure) are most interchangeable with the books.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to examine the place of the book in contemporary Israeli culture in the light of its central role in traditional Jewish culture. Certain clear cut continuities are pointed out: proportionately more Israelis read at least one book last year than did the people of the Western European nations; the values of study and reading are highly regarded; the designation, "People of the Book" is considered still applicable by large numbers of the population; the Bible is still widely read; books are considered an important connection to Jewish tradition; the literature of the Holocaust and the Six Days War—two traumatic events in contemporary Jewish life—serves the purpose of fostering national solidarity and a feeling of collective identity and purpose, much as *the Book* used to do.

Many of these examples of continuity suggest that the function of the book has undergone a process of secular transformation. The book is still important but some of its central functions have changed. The most important of these changes, probably, is the fact that reading and study have become individualizing rather than collective experiences, and the People of the Book has become the people of books or the people of reading. The functions of the book as a source of supreme authority, as a giver of status and as a source of shared metaphors through which to understand the world has markedly declined. Paradoxical as it may sound, the simultaneous exposure of the entire population to a television program may be more similar to the traditional function of the book as a source of integration and a provider of shared symbols than is the present-day reading of books by individuals, each sitting in his own corner.

Our study suggests that it is highly unlikely that television will replace the book or preempt its social and psychological functions.

As level of education rises, in Israel and elsewhere, books will assume an increasingly important place in satisfying needs of self-realization.

Whether the book will continue to symbolize something uniquely Jewish, and what share the book will have in the shaping of Israeli national character, still remains to be seen.