



## *Introduction*

This book seeks to present an understanding of some of the major social, political, and cultural trends that have lately been shaping (or perhaps better, reshaping) Israeli society. Rapid change is a cardinal feature of nearly all contemporary societies, and Israel is hardly an exception. Indeed, many Israelis take a certain pride and marvel too at the scope and speed of change in their own compact, highly differentiated society and culture.

To list some of the more obvious big-scale structural changes: The population has grown from roughly three-quarters of a million in 1948, the year of Israel's founding, to more than nine and a half million today; what in its early formative years had been a relatively homogeneous Jewish society has become much more complex and divided, particularly as the result of massive immigration waves and the rapid growth of the large Palestinian-Israeli and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish minorities; the 1967 military conquest of the West Bank and Golan regions, and Israel's subsequent colonization of those areas, has greatly expanded both the geographic size and the captive Palestinian populations living under Israeli control; substantial portions of the economy have been modernized, liberalized, and tightly linked to global trends and developments; the earlier established Labor Party regime has lost its central leadership role and been replaced by the political domination of the Likud Party; and, not the least important, the society now includes a majority of third- and fourth-generation Israelis who have grown up in the country and consequently share some common cultural understandings and repeated experiences.

Taken together, these changes are deep and wide-ranging, and they provide the overall background for examining Israeli society's newly emerging features and altered directions. And, accordingly, one of this book's primary objectives is to depict and analyze an array of major groups, central topics, and contentious issues that now confront (and often confound) the society. The focus is not upon a single place

or a specific group, but instead this study is broader and seeks to comprehend society-wide trends, possibilities, paradoxes, as well as limitations. This is somewhat unusual in anthropological studies that typically have focused on a particular group of persons, or a small, bounded community, rather than upon the larger encompassing differentiated society. However, in this instance I wish to explore the wider society's complexity and pervasive deep divisions, and to provide paths for readers to gain a close detailed understanding of present-day contexts and realities. Each of the book's chapters focuses on a particular social segment or segments and a related set of issues – and, taken together, they comprise a portrait of Israeli society's contesting groups and rapidly changing cultures.

Previously, a growing number of edited books have produced a rich and engaged anthropological literature. Emanuel Marx's book titled *A Composite Portrait of Israel* (1980) was the first publication of this kind, and there are now at least a dozen edited books in English and Hebrew that consider major issues confronting Israeli society. The paramount, most inclusive of these collections is the book *Perspectives on Israeli Anthropology* (2010). Edited by Hertzog, Abuhav, Goldberg, and Marx, this book includes thirty-one articles ranging over such diverse topics as contemporary Jewish Ultra-Orthodox groups, West Bank settlers and their settlements, Palestinian–Israeli communities, and much more. Taken together, the articles present a panorama of diverse Israeli groups and lifestyles – while at the same time the editors emphasize that they do not represent “an integrated account of Israeli society” (page x). This is a major objective of the present study – not all of Israel's institutions and multiple contexts are included, but the book provides a broadly interconnected account of present-day Israeli society and its likely directions.

To be more specific: Following Chapter 1 that reviews changing Israeli cultural self-images and understandings, Chapter 2 focuses on ethnicity and the relationships between the two major ethnic-group clusters called Ashkenazim and Mizrachim. Chapter 3 examines the increased diversity and volatility introduced by four new minority groups – recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have been classified by the state as ‘Other’ rather than ‘Jewish’; Israeli Ethiopians who have redesigned themselves in the face of racial prejudice; foreign workers and refuge seekers who are marginalized and exploited; and the Israeli gay community that has become more

uncloseted and prominent. Chapter 4 follows the Palestinian–Israeli minority from the 1948 Naqba to the present, and emphasizes both the barriers and discrimination they contend with as well as their resilience and vitality. Chapter 5 explores Israel’s fast-growing religious communities, with special attention given to the Ultra-Orthodox haredim who have become a stronger force in the society. Chapter 6 reviews the process whereby Modern Hebrew was reinvented and ‘Israeli Arabic’ also emerged and then turns to explore the contending voices of Israeli popular music – nationalist ballads, Israeli rock, and Middle Eastern-styled melodies.

This is a brief statement of one of the book’s primary objectives, and the second objective is to conceptualize the relationships between the mainly secular Jewish majority population and the two large and significant minority segments, the Palestinian Israelis, and the Ultra-Orthodox haredi Jewish communities. Taken together, these two minority groups amount to a third of the total population, and their numerical size and influence will likely grow in the future. The society’s increased complexity means that there is no longer a single accepted way or design for ‘being Israeli’ and, instead, there are multiple different expressions of being an active accepted part of the society. The analysis probes the nuanced meanings of ‘Israeliness’ and proposes that there are diverse expressions of ‘being Israeli’ – the dominant, mainly secular Jewish majority versions and the Ultra-Orthodox haredi and Israeli Palestinian versions. These internally complex majority–minority clusters contest and influence one another as they shape the society’s political–cultural formats and directions. This topic is referred to throughout the book and is more fully presented in Chapter 4 and especially in Chapter 7.

Depicting a society as complicated and rapidly changing as present-day Israel is a daunting, complicated project. Not only are there many key institutions and cultural frameworks whose interactions produce conflict and change, but also critical events such as repeated wars, intifadas, and other enflamed conflicts also lead to new social constellations and revised attitudes. Fortunately, there is a rich and up-to-date literature that depicts many facets and corners of Israeli life and cultures, and throughout this book I cite selections from books and articles that can provide close understandings of complex situations. The list of selections and citations is lengthy – the bibliography lists nearly 300 sources – and additional materials might have been added.

Many but not all the citations come from the work of anthropologists and sociologists whose research provides detailed ethnographic-styled depictions of current Israeli contexts. The incidents and case studies were selected, since they are appropriate illustrations or can clarify some point or issue. Most of the included source materials are taken from English publications, while others are from the many books and articles published in Hebrew.

Finally, this book also has an additional dimension. Just as it was nearing preparation for publication, a series of unanticipated major events shocked Israeli society. First, in early 2023 a newly-elected far-Right government proposed changes intended to weaken the Supreme Court and thereby strengthen the reigning political parties, and this 'judicial reform' was met by widespread public opposition thereby splitting the society into opposed antagonistic groups. Second, and far more shocking, on October 7, 2023, Palestinian Hamas military forces broke out of Gaza and attacked nearby Israeli towns and villages, and soon thereafter the Israeli army invaded Gaza and the hugely destructive war spread to several fronts.

These ongoing events are reviewed in the Epilogue written in March 2024. With many things changing so quickly, this book cannot be 'up-to-date' regarding outcomes of the Israel–Hamas War and the proposed changes in the judicial system. Nonetheless, the Epilogue briefly documents these recent critical events and relates them to the analytic framework presented in Chapter 7.

I learned a great deal about many different topics from reading and thinking about the relevant research literature, and I am grateful to all of those whose work is cited. Special thanks to Aaron Weingrod and Dena Oster, who helped enormously in preparing the book. My thanks too to Fern Seckbach who prepared the Index, and also to Natasha Burton, my editor at CUP, and Balamuthukumaran Pasopathy who guided the book's production. I also want to thank friends and colleagues who commented on the book's chapters: These include David Rosen, Moshe Shokeid, Adel Manna, Judah Matras, Yoram Bilu, Tamar Katriel, and Dan Rabinowitz. They and others pointed out numerous errors and offered suggestions after reading early drafts of the book. All the remaining errors and omissions are my own.