

Rootedness and Defiance

Visions of Morality and Social Change

DIVERGING FROM MULTIPLE HERMENEUTICS: GUT REACTIONS AND MORAL INTUITIONS

Unlike the previous chapters, this chapter is the result of an unexpected turn in the course of the research. At the end of the previous round of the focus groups, many of the Mizrahi informants told us that they would like to come back to continue to talk about the topics they had discussed. Although the request excited us, we were not surprised, since the participants had impressed us with their involvement, interest, and strong desire to express their opinions and voice their concerns throughout the process. In response to this request, I diverged from the methodology of multiple hermeneutics, which is based on group discussion of the statistical findings of the survey the participants themselves had created, which we had pursued to this point.

IDEAL-TYPE VIGNETTES

Instead of creating a conceptual discussion about the gaps between desirable and the existing situations, I chose to examine the respondents' "gut reactions" and moral intuition and experience (Kleinman, 2006) with regard to "real" or "archetypical" people. We presented the informants with four vignettes about four protagonists; each protagonist was composed of different characteristics, family background, sexual orientation, place of residence, occupation, attitudes to the state of Israel and Israeli society, general political and moral positions, and political activism.

In creating these protagonists' stories, we included components of the liberal grammar in each of the stories in order to confront the respondents with "real people" as tangible versions of the "good person." The protagonists in the vignettes were presented as complex figures, and I deliberately created an ostensible dissonance in the participants' minds. That is, in each of the protagonists we combined different units of meaning that belong to separate worldviews or to different types, in order to challenge the participants' social taxonomy. (For example, we described an individual with right-wing positions who is active in the LGBTQ community).

INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP MORAL EXPERIENCES: CREATING THE GROUPS

In constructing the groups, we recognized, on the one hand, that up to this point, the moral experience of the participants and their gut "sense of right and wrong" (Kleinman, 2006, p. 2) had been examined among strangers that shared similar demographic characteristics, forming relatively stable organic groups.¹ We had assumed that the group would allow for the emergence of an echo chamber for shared intuitions while also serving as a space in which differences in moral intuitions could take shape. This assumption proved to be correct. Yet, as we have witnessed throughout the previous chapters, the moral experience of the participants as individuals evolved during the interactions with others. As anthropologist Webb Keane has noted, "We do not discover ourselves already fully formed among others, with whom we must then contend. Rather, we come to be who we are within, and by virtue of, relationships with others, their bodies, their possessions, their languages, the ways they inhabit our imaginations and emotions. What follows this claim is far from settled" (2010, p. 66).

In other words, the relatively harmonious relationships among the participants, whom we had categorized as belonging to the same social network of meaning, did not necessarily mean that their individual moral experiences were identical or that the moral and social positions that they brought to the group were fully formed or definitive. Indeed, the social network of meaning chosen on the basis of their demographic characteristics as a "group" were fairly stable.² On the other hand, we have seen that the participants often disagreed among themselves although they reached common group positions through their interactions. These moments of disharmony provided an opportunity for a more nuanced reading of diversity within rootedness.

This time we created two new, mixed-gender groups, one of participants without a college education and the other of participants with a college education. The decision to create groups differentiated by educational level but not by gender stemmed from the class similarities we had observed in the women's and the men's groups, as well as from technical requirements (given the small numbers of participants available in this round.) The choice of only male protagonists was a

deliberate methodological consideration, intended to enable us to avoid adding gender differences to the already-complicated profiles.

DEFIANCE AND MORAL REASONING

I begin this introduction to the empirical section by presenting the most salient, central finding: of all of the characteristics of the fictitious protagonists we created, “defiance” against the social and political order in the name of external universal reason and as a way of living a moral life generated the strongest objections from the participants. Participants in both groups viewed social change as emerging from *relational reasoning* that derives from social relationships within the existing order, which is not imposed in the name of any universal moral principles.

Defiance as a Derivative of Universal Reasoning

Among moral and political communities identified with the progressive left in academia, politics, and civil society, the act of defiance against the social order derives directly from the belief in universal reason. This is ostensibly the result of moral decisions based on general Kantian principles that guide mature individuals as they act according to their consciences with regard to the existing social order. It is a universalist position that dictates a never-ending struggle for the rights of various groups perceived as “victims” of hegemony.³

As anthropologist Katriel (2020, p. 66) writes, “Defiant speech is one mode of resistance in grassroots activism, representing an attempt to intervene in the public sphere by challenging hegemonic constructions of reality and the power arrangements that sustain them.” Katriel further defines defiance as an action that is intrinsic to life in democratic, modern liberal societies and notes that “protecting expressions of lack of consent is the test and hallmark of democratic societies, ensuring the plurality of the public sphere” (p. 2). Katriel describes the discourse of defiance as it finds expression within the activities of the peace camp that she investigated—identified with the progressive left and a predominantly homogeneous, elite group of well-educated Ashkenazim (Hermann, 2009).

In general, for many progressive activists, the struggle against the existing order does not merely represent one possible agenda among many; rather, it is a moral duty of the conscientious and “good person” whose actions stem from a deep political and moral commitment to subvert the social order through the politics of defiance, in the name of “liberation” and in order to bring about social change.

Rootedness and Relational Reasoning

As we have noted, participants in both groups objected to the politics of defiance and believed that social change could be achieved from within the existing order rather than constant disruption of that order from an external position based on universal morality. They believed that the moral justification for social change is to be found in relational reasoning that derives from life within the

social fiber of the Jewish Israeli polity. There were, however, differences between the groups.

For the middle-class subjects, Mizrahi progress within the existing order is the organic route to social change. They experience themselves as full members of the Israeli Jewish mainstream, and the horizons ahead are open. They are thus not particularly troubled by instances of discrimination on the part of Ashkenazim that still occur here and there. They envision social change as a result of hard work, achievement, and active participation in the formation of the Jewish Israeli mainstream. They reject defiance in the name of “Mizrahiness” or the representation of Mizrahim as an oppressed minority group. The subjects from the working class, by contrast, view the politics of defiance as a threat to their identity and a challenge to the religious and primordial borders of the Jewish state.

It is important to note that the notion of relational reason creates an immediate reference to critical approaches that view relational power as merely a reflection of an actor’s position in the power structure. The reading that I am suggesting here does not deny the existence of hierarchies and power relations; however, it does not view the moral experience of our subjects in the field as simply produced by an existing power structure (as noted in the presentation of the liberal grammar in the introduction). The suspension of over-suspicion requires a suspension of the stable meaning that we researchers attach a priori to “structures,” and the absolute and external meaning that we give to “morality” derives from universal reason, which is deeply embedded in the liberal grammar of the critical discourse.

From a critical viewpoint, this discussion is an opportunity to revisit the various guises of false consciousness. To the critical eye, the position of the working-class Mizrahim appears as an internalization of the neo-liberal discourse that prioritizes an ethos of a meritocracy, according to which “anyone can make it,” a naïve belief in the Israeli version of the American Dream, while ignoring power relations and mechanisms of social reproduction. However, their experience of mainstreaming is revealed to be grounded in reality. As we saw in chapter 3, the participants are indeed experiencing social change and upward mobility, and Mizrahim are increasingly taking part in the formation of the Israeli mainstream in social, cultural, economic and political spheres.

The working-class participants’ objections to defiance stem from their deep need to defend the state and its Jewish character and the boundaries of collective identity on the basis of primordial codes (such as kinship and the ethics of belonging to the Jewish people) and/or religious codes. From a liberal-progressive point of view, this position is often seen as repugnant; even if it recognizes groupness and promotes the value of diversity, the liberal-progressive point of view finds it difficult to accord moral value to intergroup boundaries or to find a role for them in the liberal scheme of things, especially when they collide with individual autonomy.

It would appear that it was on the basis of this position that the facilitator reproached the participants in the working-class group. In response, they tried

their best to convince him that their rooted position does not make them “bad” or “immoral” people who lack compassion or human sensitivity. They attempted to present evidence to support their contention that that are kind toward others. However, they found it difficult to present an articulated, thought-out and coherent thesis that would explain how their rooted position, which denies defiance as a prime channel for social change, squares with their morality.

Traditionalism and Defiance

In the final part of this chapter, we will attend briefly to the traditionalist school in the new Mizrahi discourse, which articulates a moral language for its position and seeks to provide deep cultural content to the experience of rootedness. This school presents rootedness as a valuable social resource that forms the foundation for a coherent cultural and political program for social change. Perhaps it is not surprising that members of this group belong to the well-educated Mizrahi middle class. These activists make tradition the basis for an identity within the liberal framework of identity politics. For example, they demand recognition of the Mizrahi rabbinic tradition and equal representation of Mizrahi tradition within the public religious educational system.

On a deeper level, some intellectuals from the traditional stream (see, for example, Buzaglo, 2008) view traditionalism not as a return to the past, but as a dynamic revitalization in the present that is in constant flux and adapts itself to the times (see also Toubul, 2021). While in the progressive liberal discourse, primordial and traditionalist norms are usually seen as problematic, for traditionalist intellectuals and activists these primordial and traditional norms provide the key to the resolution of deep divides within Israeli society, such as left-right and secular-religious.

Furthermore, for Buzaglo the traditionalist movement, which is deeply planted within Jewish tradition, simultaneously engages with parallel movements around the world.⁴ Common to all these movements is the view that traditionalism is not merely a “culture” in the folklorist’s sense or a leftover from a dark, oppressive past, but rather a valid, alternative source of authority for the political and moral order.

I began this chapter, unlike the previous ones, by highlighting some of the central insights from the findings. I chose to do so in order to equip readers with a general map that might help them place the detailed dialogues that I present below within a clear analytic framework.

THE ENCOUNTERS

In both groups, the discussions opened with a brief reflection on the participants’ experiences in the previous meetings. Immediately following this, the facilitators explained that they would read each vignette, and after each reading, they would then ask the participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 4 how close they felt to each protagonist.

The four protagonists (whose full vignettes are given in appendix 3) were:

1. Shmuel, a heterosexual man of Iraqi origin. He is a teacher and has a family. He holds strong moral positions identified with the political left and believes that control over another people is morally corrupting. He expresses his concerns about the state of human rights in Israel.
2. Shaul, a gay man of Iranian and Sephardic Mediterranean origin who lives with his partner with whom he is raising a child. He is a successful economist who has “made it” by dint of his own efforts. He is identified with the political right and expresses his concerns about the future Jewish identity of the state in which his son will grow up.
3. Reuven, a Mizrahi straight male, who lives in a heterosexual family. His wife is the primary breadwinner, while he works as a maintenance man. He also volunteers with an organization that prepares youth for combat army service (a well-regarded “national mission”).
4. Yossi, a Mizrahi man who was unable to attend college because he devoted himself to supporting his family. He is hard-working and self-made and has managed to build a successful company. He gives to charity and supports the needy, contributes to the neighborhood synagogue, and tries to attend on Sabbath more often. He is not interested in getting involved in politics or social activism.

We will first discuss the group of men and women without a college education. These group members had already participated in the previous sessions divided by gender. To refresh the readers’ memory, we will briefly reintroduce them here.

Men and Women: Defending the State from Defiance

This group included three young men: Eliran, 20, an instructor in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) technical high school; Ron, age 20, a soldier on active duty; and Yehezkel, 28, a Jewish religious artifacts salesman. The older participants were Haim, 60, a factory worker; Gidi, 60+, a retired IDF veteran; Sasson, 65+, a butcher; Herzl, 47, religious, a small businessman; Hannah, a mid-50s former secretary in an industrial plant; and Ahuva, a retired nurse in her early 70s.

Each time, after reading a vignette, Facilitator B asked the participants to indicate on a scale from 1 to 4 just how close they felt toward the protagonist, reminding them that 4 meant very close and 1 indicated a sense of distance.

After they had rated the 4 protagonists, the participants were asked to reveal their answers:

Gidi: 2, 2, 3, 4.

Eliran: 2, 3, 4, 3.

Herzl: 1, 1, 3, 3.

Ron: I gave everybody a 2.

Hanna: 2–3, 3, 3, 3.

Ahuva: 2—but I’m not really happy about it, maybe just 1.5. I would give the next guy a slap, barely a 2. The third—4; the last one—1.

Yehezkel: 1, 2, 4, 4.

Sasson: 1, 1, 4, 4.

Haim: 1, 2, 4, 3.

Facilitator A: Now we will look at each character, and we will understand what was praiseworthy and what you criticized. We will try to understand your decisions. Because what is really important is to understand our thinking. It’s clear that there isn’t any right or wrong here from our point of view, but what really interests us is the perception that guides you with regard to each character. We’ll start with Shmuel. You remember Shmuel Farhi. Why [did you give him] a 2?

Gidi: The first part of this small news story—I was very pleased with it. He says he’s a teacher in Sderot.⁵ [. . .] In the less personal part, he writes [. . .]: “The conflict with the Palestinians is corrupting us.” [. . .] Why “corrupting”? Say there is an unresolved issue . . . you express your views in the ballots. You have freedom of speech. Next, he writes, “We have to recognize that we must establish two states for two peoples.” I say it’s this way, and you say it’s that way. We have a government, it was elected, let it negotiate. We want what’s best—why go to extremes? He says “must.” What do you mean, must? Come to the negotiating table, talk to them. Maybe we can reach a compromise? The last issue [. . .] migrant workers. Some say “I’m for it” and [others say] “I’m against it.” I’m thinking about this too, and I say, we need some of them and we don’t need all of them [to be in Israel]. Why fight [among us Israelis]?

Gidi was the first to express clear, sharp objections to Shmuel’s defiance of the state. Gidi was aware of the unsolved problem in the Occupied Territories but opposed a sweeping position that views the situation as corrupting. He was furious at the left’s presentation of its moral position as a supra-position above the political order and the elected government. Gidi did not present a primordial position that denies the legitimacy of electoral democracy. Rather, he viewed the elected government as representative of the state and rejected the existence of a supra-moral position that is above the “rules of the game” that stem from social relationships within which we act.

As in the previous chapters, the Mizrahi subjects in this group strongly opposed the idea that the state is involved in an evil that is corrupting society and that they

must therefore defy the government. They rejected the very concept of opposition to the authority of the state and the government. For them, the state is not a neutral instrument that has failed to protect the rights of universal citizens and non-citizens, whether deliberately or not. They identified with the government because “the government is the state, and the state is us.”

Facilitator B: What upset you the most about Shmuel?

Haim: [. . .] You don’t have to fight for the migrant workers and homosexuals. What is there to fight about? You have migrant workers [in Israel]. Somebody must take care of it from the top. I think we don’t need them here. You have to bring in the desirable amount, as they used to decide, and not let their numbers grow bit by bit. They’ve multiplied here too much. [. . .] They’re brought for a specific job. They finish and must go back home. That’s my perspective. [. . .] God forbid, if he’s working he deserves everything. When he’s here, he’s here—he’s been brought here to work. God forbid there would be slaves here—these are not slaves. He can come and get all that he deserves. But [once] his stay is over, goodbye, thank you, here’s your [flight] ticket.

Haim reinforced the ethnic-national starting position from which he drew justification or lack of justification for the struggle for others, the authority of the state and its leaders, and the boundaries of identity and citizenship. According to Haim, social problems are supposed to be solved in a top-down manner by the government. It is not the role of the individual citizen to defy the government, and there must be a clear division between the in-group and the out-group, that is, between “us” and “them” (guests, foreigners, strangers, and so forth).

The discussion continued:

Yehezkel: They call it “social ills.” Now, these migrant workers they have children, they all go to the military—celebrities. The migrant worker children—who are they anyway? We have Jewish children, our own children across the street here. A child goes hungry. I have to worry about him first thing, “the poor of your own city take precedence.” If it’s the child of someone from the Philippines, then with all the sympathy—and there is love, the people of Israel are compassionate and merciful and truly care for each other—I will give him Bamba [a popular Jewish children’s] food. I have to be concerned with him now [before anyone else].

Yehezkel presented the Talmudic verse, “the poor of your own city take precedence” (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 71a) which distinguishes between those who are “family” and those who are outside the family. However, he added, this

boundary is not impermeable and does not lead to a lack of compassion and sensitivity for the other.

Yehezkel was angry at attempts to dissolve these primordial boundaries, for example, celebrities who dissolved family boundaries. This echoed descriptions in the local media of initiatives taken by Hollywood celebrities (such as George Clooney and Angelina Jolie) for the benefit of underprivileged children throughout the third world. From his rooted position, Yehezkel offered an alternative to the politics of universalism. He drew authority for this moral position from Jewish tradition, rather than from a personal conclusion. He did not express himself in the singular; rather, he spoke in the name of “the people of Israel,” which had been so vilified and of whom he is a part. Our people, he tried to explain, are compassionate toward people and children from other peoples, but compassion and offers of aid do not entail acceptance of the universal regime supported by the progressive left.

At this point in the discussion, we could already discern repeated objections to attempts, which they identified with the progressive left, to label them “immoral people,” along with their vociferous attempts to express their own position about the group boundaries as morally valid.

Facilitator A: I want to check with Hannah. The score you gave seems to be exceptional—2.5.

Hannah: The first part [of the vignette] was nice, just fine. A guy with a social mission who’s happy with what he’s doing in life. Very nice. In the second part, it seems to me he fights against everything that can be fought. It’s not like he picked a certain direction or something. He seems to me that he’s looking for a battlefield, and wherever there’s war, he goes there. That’s how I see it.

Facilitator A: So there’s something not genuine there, you feel.

Hannah: Yes. [. . .] I believe that when someone is an activist, [. . .] he can promote one goal, maybe two or three, but not twenty! It shows that he simply enjoys saying that he fights or that he’s active.

Eliran: [. . .] In a certain way he does care about society, simply not about the right people. He’s looking for the margins of the margins, people that I don’t understand how you can call them Israelis and what they have to do with Israeli society. They have human rights and labor rights. I don’t believe migrant workers should be given permanent status or citizenship.
[. . .]

Herzl: There’s a slight difficulty. You wanted to show us the dilemma between the first and second part—or is it the same person? Because I think that until the end of the first paragraph, it’s a

person who lives in Sderot, and once you start with the second, then he's already moved, there's no such thing.

For Hanna, who is one of the less traditional participants without a college education, excessive activism created a problem of credibility. Eliran was concerned about the groups he defends and emphasized the structured boundaries of the politics of care. In Herzl's view, this protagonist could not simultaneously contain all of the contradictory characteristics. That is, the protagonist could not be categorized within Herzl's taxonomy because he combined components of meaning that do not belong to the same worlds.

Facilitator B: Let's move on to Shaul. We have more diversity here, 1—3.

Facilitator A: Let's take someone who chose a 1.

Sasson: Once he started talking to me here about where he lives with his male partner, he lost me completely. I don't get along with homosexuals. Don't get along with them, there's no helping it.

Ahuva: Then don't. I don't understand what's it to you people.

Sasson: I don't get along—that's my opinion. These people are corrupting all that's good in society. I live in Tel Aviv. She [Ahuva] lives in Afula, she doesn't know what goes on in Tel Aviv. [. . .] The demonstrations, the pride parades they have in Tel Aviv. Cut the nonsense. You can see them [everywhere]. They're corrupting all that's good. [. . .] Once he said, "I live with my [male] partner," he lost me.

[Everyone began talking all at once]

Up to this point, the group had proceeded as a harmonious echo chamber, in which the participants supported each other's moral intuitions, forming, in Durkheimian terms, collective representations. But although Sasson presented an overtly homophobic position, the other participants did not broadly dismiss Shaul's sexual identity. Ahuva's objections to Sasson's position led to tensions. Ahuva is "on the same team": she is made from the same organic fiber as Sasson, shares the same social network of meaning, and lives in the same moral community. Sasson could not simply dismiss Ahuva's position by claiming that she belongs to a different, despicable, and external moral community. He could not tag Ahuva as a "secular, left-wing progressive."

Sasson attempted to resolve their moral collision on the basis of differences in their hometowns: because she lives in a smaller, peripheral city, Ahuva is naïve. However, the other participants did not join Sasson's position about Shaul on the basis of his sexual preference, either.

The discussion continued:

Gidi: Professor Uzi Even used to lecture here. He is an educated man, an enlightened person, he is a university lecturer.

Sasson: So what? So what if he's a professor? He's messed up. Mentally, he's messed up.

Ahuva: Why? Is it his fault? Nature made him that way.

Sasson: It's not nature, it's him.

Ahuva: It's not him.

Sasson: Don't tell me no.

[Everyone began to talk at once]

Facilitator B: We understood what Sasson thinks. Let's hear Herzl.

Herzl: [. . .] On the homosexuality issue, he blew it for me. At least don't say that my son will have a Jewish state to grow up in. If we go to extremes and say we will all be homosexual in seventy years' time, we won't have children, [and] then we won't have a state either.

Herzl also clearly opposed homosexuality and was among the two participants who, together with Sasson, rated themselves as the furthest from this person's story. Herzl justified his opposition with his concern for the Jewish future of the state. However, his concern for the country did not convince Ahuva, who then received support from Hanna.

Hannah: I *did* relate to Shaul. The fact that he's homosexual is of no interest to me. What he does in his private life, in his own private bed, I really don't care about. What I did relate to was the fact that he climbed up from a relatively low position economically [. . .] and made something out of himself. [. . .] He cares about the country, he cares about what's going on, really. I think he's a very positive human being. The fact that he's homosexual, I don't even pay attention to that line.

Hanna made it clear that she had no interest in an individual's sexual preferences, as long as they are confined to the private sphere—"his own private bed"—and therefore she did not cast aspersions on Shaul and was positively impressed by his energy, advancement in life, and concern for the country. Sasson, on the other hand, continued to pathologize Shaul.

Sasson: Once this disease . . .

Hannah: Why do you call it a disease?

Sasson: It's a disease, not a tendency. It's a disease.

Hannah: If it's a disease, if someone was a terminal patient with something else, would you have treated him like this?

Sasson: Most of the AIDS and all those other diseases are from the gay people.

Hannah: But if someone had the flu, would you have treated him like this?

Ahuva: That's ignorance. Homosexuality is not a disease.

Herzl: He's talking about . . . the most virtuous thing is to procreate.
[. . .]

Hannah: There's a certain percentage of the population that's incapable of that. There are also infertile people. There's all sorts of things.
[Everyone began talking at once]

Facilitator B: Did anyone else give Shaul a 3?

Eliran: I did. First of all, I appreciate his background very much . . . I don't think there's a particular problem here. I also have homosexual friends, it's irrelevant. [. . .]

That's the only reason I didn't feel very close to him, because I'm not a homosexual. I appreciate his perspective very much. I highly appreciate his background, and the fact that he fights for what he believes. It says here that he worked hard for his [higher education] studies, despite his economic situation. That reminded me a lot of my mom. Grandpa didn't want her to go to the university at all, and my mother fought for it and saved cent after cent and went to study. I identified with that very much.

Young Eliran did not join Sasson in his objections on the basis of sexual preference, nor did he view sexual preference as a significant justification for discrimination. He even shared his close relationships with gay people, declaring, "I also have homosexual friends." He viewed gay people as equal partners in public space and justified his identification with Shaul by noting that Shaul is a hard-working person who was able to climb upward, even though he came from a low socioeconomic position.⁶

Ahuva: There is lack of knowledge about homosexuals here. I have nothing to do with them, but it so happens that you are very much lacking in knowledge. They do have children, sir. [. . .] The homosexuals are not poor people that need to be cared for. What's annoying about them is that demonstrativeness.

Facilitator B: You mean they should be quiet.

Ahuva: Leave in peace with yourselves. What you do in your own bed, be my guest.

Facilitator A: You're actually saying that it's no big deal. So why did you give him just 2, because he externalizes it?

Ahuva: No, because later on he attacked the state like it's the state's fault.
[Everyone once again began to talk at once]

Facilitator B: He doesn't want cowardly politicians.

Gidi: He writes, “too much cowardice,” “most politicians are willing to give up national territories with unbearable thoughtlessness.” This means he’s disrespecting people. What do you mean “thoughtless”? There’s a Knesset, there’s a government, there are ministers, there are committees—they decide. You voted for them. Me, you, he—all of us. On the other hand, he writes that “you cannot believe the promises made before the elections.” That’s politics. If he doesn’t know it, I suggest he go learn something about it. That’s what electoral politics is like. “I’m not sure my son will have a Jewish state.” You don’t like it here? Scram. It’s our state. We have to strengthen it.

Ahuva: He’s worried. He is afraid for his son’s future. I’m also willing to worry [mockingly].

Gidi: I’m also worried about my son’s future.

The discussion about Reuven, who at first glance does not fulfill the traditional male role of the primary wage earner and whose ability to earn money is inferior to his wife’s, did not generate any opposition.

Sasson: Reuven is a prince. He contributes to society. He’s fine. 4. I don’t have any issues with him.

Hannah: One thing about Reuven bothers me, even though I gave him a 3. [He says], “At this time, I don’t earn much as a gardener but I’m lucky that my wife is a sharp businesswoman.”

Facilitator A: Why does this bother you, Hannah?

Hannah: Because he’s a man without ambitions, and he’s lucky that he has someone who deals with things, so it’s OK, what’s the problem. Other than that, he’s a very positive person in my opinion. Only that part.

Sasson: The second part of the question is worth the whole upper part.

Hannah: I said that in my opinion he’s a very positive person and I gave him a 3, but that part bothered me. I don’t care that it’s his wife. Even if he said “I don’t make any money.” His lack of ambition bothers me more than the fact that his wife makes more money, and he counts on that. That interests me less.

Facilitator A: You’re a little interested that his wife earns more?

Hannah: No.

Ahuva: Why did he say that? What’s in it? Sometimes, a woman studies a certain profession, and she brings in more.

Hannah: It doesn’t matter.

- Haim:* He worked. While he was working to help her study and advance.
- Hannah:* I don't have a problem that his wife earns more than he does. That's fine. I don't have a problem with that.
- Haim:* She's got it a bit more. He worked. Paid for her studies. Today, she makes more money.
- Hannah:* That's fine, I don't have a problem with that.
- Facilitator A:* You seem very liberal to me, that the wife earns more than the man is fine with you. You don't have any problem with that?
- Gidi:* No problem. The head of Tnuva [a large dairy conglomerate] is a woman. She makes a ton of money, and her husband earns much less.
- Ahuva:* Same thing with Galia [Maor]. She's head of Bank Leumi.
- Gidi:* There are many successful women who earn more than the husband.
- Hannah:* It might be because of the husband's support.
- Haim:* Actually, the husband is the one who leads all the time, but he encourages her to study. He worked and she studied, and he took care of work and the house while she was out of the house.
- Facilitator B:* But he took on the role of a woman, no?
- Haim:* At a certain time, he gave her strong back up at home. He gave it, because she wanted to study, and he let her. Today, they are picking those fruits.

Not one of the participants expressed—at least not directly—any premodern view that a woman earning more than a man is an affront to the proper order of things, family values, or the “natural” position of the man as the wage earner. This modern liberal norm was accepted by the members of the group without any particular difficulty.

From here we moved on to the next part of the discussion, in which the facilitators exposed the group to the activities of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, an organization that defies the existing order in the name of Mizrahiness and with a universalist concern for all the weaker groups in the country.

- Facilitator B:* Now I want to tell you a story about an organization, and we want to hear your opinion about it. In the early 1990s, a group of Mizrahim organized and defined themselves as Mizrahim.

Ahuva: The Panthers.⁷

Ahuva confused the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow with an earlier protest group, known as the Black Panthers, named after the American group.

- Facilitator B:* No, the Panthers were in the 1970s. In the 1990s, a group of Mizrahim, some of whom were very well-educated, decided

that Ashkenazi hegemony was creating economic and cultural discrimination toward Mizrahim. Around this time, the government was giving the kibbutzim ownership of land, and these activists demanded that land and homes should be given to the people, mostly Mizrahim, who had been living in public housing. Some of the group concluded that the demands for equality and justice should include everyone in the country, including, for example, women, Arabs, and homosexuals. Others were worried that this would negate their Jewish cultural affiliation. It was a very difficult argument. If you had been there, what would you have done?

The group members did not relate directly to the facilitator's presentation or to his question.

Sasson: I say something else. To take care of the Arabs so long as they pledge loyalty to the state of Israel, serve in the military or national service, and then get their rights. As long as they don't do that, they deserve nothing.

Facilitator A: [. . .] I want to look further into this. Why should I worry about somebody else's rights, even if he does fulfill his obligations?

At this point, Facilitator B lost his composure. Distressed by and frustrated at the responses in the group, he raised his voice:

Facilitator B: It's my impression that there are two things that you value very much. One, is that they should lie low!

Haim: Who's to lie low, the Arabs?

Facilitator B: No, everyone!!! They should avoid making a fuss. Why on earth is Shmuel fighting? First of all, they should keep a low profile. Reuven and Yossi are good guys, they don't fight, they sit still. There's something good about lying low and not making too much of a fuss, it's good. This group says: "It's good."

The other thing this group is saying [. . .]: "The tribe." "We're a tribe." "We have to worry about the tribe." The tribe is organized in a certain way. "Our tribe has no homosexuals." "Our tribe is orderly." "Our tribe has no migrant workers." We are the tribe with our Jews. Whoever annoys the tribe even a little bit stays out or should stay out. You say, "lie low and we'll maintain the tribe." Whatever's inside is good. Anyone who makes noise or annoys the tribe is not good for us.

[. . .]

Gidi: You can have demonstrations and you can have everything, so long as it remains within reason. [. . .] Those [Arabs] in Umm

al-Fahm who go out [. . .] [and demonstrate] against the country and burn and act [out], that's not reasonable. It's unreasonable. [. . .] You should be harsh with them. [. . .] If you come and shout against the state, then the state doesn't need to give you anything. [. . .] Do you know that the Ministry of the Interior transfers funds to [Arab local] authorities on a regular basis?

Ahuva: But they're citizens, don't forget. They're Israeli citizens.

Ahuva reminded the group about her commitment to the principle of equal citizenship.

Gidi: Why demonstrate against the state? Why post a picture of [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah? If you're against the state, you won't get anything from the state. You'll collect your taxes from the inhabitants, and you'll have your own sewage and your own education, and over there you'll do [. . .]. I say if you want to get something from the state, you should respect it.

For Gidi, the idea of a demonstration against the very existence of the state is an internal contradiction. From his republican perspective, the discourse of rights is possible only within the framework of a political solution based on loyalty and honor to the state.

Facilitator B tried to place Gidi's test of loyalty in the ethno-national context, in order to identify racist roots.

Facilitator B: What you say is very interesting. For example, what would you say to the ultra-Orthodox when they demonstrate? And the majority of them don't serve in the army, either. They don't accept the state or Zionism.

[Everyone began talking at once]

Eliran: What about the parking lot in Jerusalem, that all the ultra-Orthodox were demonstrating against?

Facilitator B: What do you have to say about it?

Eliran: It's not OK.

Facilitator B: Why not? They demonstrated. What's wrong with that?

Eliran: There's freedom of opinion. I believe in pluralism and believe in everything. But when people lie down under cars over there . . .

Facilitator B: That's exactly it. Let them keep a low profile—let the ultra-Orthodox Jews also keep a low profile.

Eliran: They should fight, but . . .

Herzl: One of the deepest and most powerful messages in the Bible says "who are you to protect the Torah and Jerusalem?"—if you're truly religious . . .

Facilitator B sounded agitated at this point.

Facilitator B: “. . . sit still!”

Herzl: “You shall hold your peace.” “I [The Lord] shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace” [Exodus 14:14].

Facilitator B: It’s true that you’re saying it’s not good to lie down [under cars in protest], it’s like—just keep still.
[. . .]

Herzl: You can protest in a reasonable way like he said.

Facilitator B: What’s a reasonable way?

Herzl: The reasonable way is one that does not threaten public safety or disrupt public order.

Haim: Demonstrate, show your presence, [but don’t . . .]
[Talking all at once]

Facilitator A: We should be wrapping up now. I want to share a thought that occurred to me during our discussion today. [. . .] What I realized in both meetings and especially today—what you’re saying, if I get it correctly, is that we are against discrimination because we’ve been discriminated against. [. . .] You’re saying you’re against discrimination, but then you’re also saying, I can be against discrimination that affects what Facilitator B calls “my tribe,” the tribe that’s close to me. There’s a close tribe and a distant one. The closest tribe are the Mizrahim and Yemenites.

Herzl: Jews.
[. . .]

Facilitator A: I want to tell you why I’m bothered by this view. I’m bothered by the fact that it may be making us blind and callous about the suffering of others. [. . .] It sort of rationalizes why we don’t see the others’ suffering. [. . .]

Yehezkel: If I see a wounded kitten on the street, and I don’t go and treat it but continue to ignore it and move on, this doesn’t make me cruel. It’s true that I could, I did it once in Lod, I saw a car run into a dog. We went and called an animal welfare ambulance. [. . .] On Passover Eve I went with another friend, a man of means, and distributed food baskets to families. Three, four families in the neighborhood that we know have very little. We brought it to them. I know that I’m concerned, I’m worried now. The fact that there are more families and all kinds of stories in the press about families with an empty fridge—I can’t take care of everyone, but this won’t make me harsh. I mean, you must have natural compassion and natural sympathy. Even for migrant workers who

are frisked in the middle of the street and beaten up, it weighs heavy on your heart. Even more, you say it can't be that way, that's human nature. But you can't change the world. A bird in the hand. If you want to mess with the wars of the entire world and fight everyone together, you can't. [You have to] focus on a single issue. [. . .]

Ron: I think he reached an accurate conclusion for this discussion. Every time we talked about Mizrahi discrimination then everybody jumped, but discriminations from the past, that didn't interest anyone. [. . .] I am one of those who don't experience Mizrahi discrimination, I've said that several times. I was brought up perhaps in a very egalitarian home, and I feel for others' pain very much. I would dream about an equal society. As far as I'm concerned, everyone's the same. I have no problem with anybody, so long as he's a human being. Arabs are something else, that's an enemy, that can hurt you. I'm not into politics all day long, and I don't know much beyond that. I know that Arabs are not [included in this]. Right now, I'm talking about Jews as a society.

Yehezkel: I know that discrimination is wrong—it says so in Jewish Law and the Shulchan Aruh [the important sixteenth-century Jewish legal code]. It says that a father cannot discriminate between his sons. Our patriarch Jacob favored Joseph over all his brothers, and what this led to is a story we're all still suffering from. [. . .] You can't discriminate, not even at home. I know that from all this discussion and even from before, because I was raised that way. Our father would always tell us to keep away from controversy, steer clear of trouble, everything that has to do with evil. Simple, natural education. He said, keep away from that. I will educate my child that way. My child will also tell his friends, he will open up a circle. Change starts with little things, I mean with the little man and not necessarily large societies.

Facilitator B: We need to let you go and also move out of this room. We would like to thank you very much for coming and participating. [. . .]

The group was not willing to stop here, despite the attempts by the facilitators to end the meeting. As we will see immediately below, they were troubled and perhaps even offended by the facilitators' description of their position as absolutely immoral. In other words, it is possible to infer from the following section that the participants were responding to the imposition of the critical-progressive moral grammar, according to which constant defiance and attempts to undermine the

state are identified as the core of being a good person. The participants seemed to insist on upholding their sense of worth as moral human beings.

Gidi: From your perspective as facilitators, how did you come to think we said we don't care for the others? I think we do give to others, to society. I'm not talking [only] about Sephardic Jews. I'm saying society as society, which we are part of. We do help our fellow people. We do give when we need to. Give me half a second and I'll give you ten examples.

[. . .]

Ahuva: I'll give you an example. I volunteer in a hospital, with the Ministry of Welfare. How can you say I'm wrong?

In response to the feedback from Facilitator B, who portrayed them as a closed, tribal group that has sealed itself off from the suffering of the "other," they presented themselves as moral people. Their ethics did not derive from a fully formed universal reason externally imposed upon their life, yet Yehezkel presented himself as generally compassionate, even toward non-humans such as kittens. Ron emphasized his support for the value of equality, but this includes only Jewish society, and he justified excluding the Arabs from the discussion not because they are less human but because they are enemies who threaten the very existence of the state of Israel.

They once again emphasized, in their own words, that they were "moral people" who contribute to all of society and the needy (*Gidi*) and volunteer in hospitals and social welfare organizations (*Ahuva*). However, neither the language with which they sought to defend their morality nor their presentation of themselves as moral, sensitive, and compassionate people received any response from the facilitator.

In sum, in this discussion the Mizrahim expressed their clear and consistent opposition to defiance of the state. Their moral experience was shaped by their social relationships within the Jewish whole, with the state as its protector. Any form of defiance externally imposed upon the state in the name of universal reason posed a threat to their sense of collective identity and was understood as a violation of the rules of the game. Within the boundaries of the Jewish state, they accepted the principle of civic equality for all (including non-Jews) as long as this meant a minority that accepts the existence of the Jewish state and completely and loyally fulfills its civic duties.

They did not view themselves as an oppressed minority; this stance was alien to their lived experience (as expressed by Ron). They remained completely indifferent to the story of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow. They not only didn't know about it, but the story they were told did not lead to any political energy or identification. They opposed the universalist politics that the Rainbow seeks to advance, which equates Arabs with Mizrahim and positions both groups as minorities that suffer from the oppressive power of the state.

To this point, one can find some similarities between the position of our Mizrahi participants and a modern republican position insofar as the participants do not negate civil and democratic logic within an ethnic democracy (Smootha, 1997). And yet, it is important to note that defiance against the state does not necessarily refer to defiance against specific political representatives (especially those who are identified with the left) who might happen to be serving in positions of power, but rather to defiance against the Jewish state itself, which is a reflection of the Jewish whole within which they are rooted.

We will now move on to the group of Mizrahim with a college education.

*Mizrahi Men and Women with a College Education:
Mainstreaming and Aversion to Defiance*

The participants in this group of college-educated men and women were: Reut, 37, a pharmaceutical sales representative; Bat El, 29, a self-employed graphic designer who lives in Afula, a town in Israel's periphery; Osnat, in her 60s, who works for a newspaper; Gadi, in his early 50s, a computer technician from Jerusalem; and David, 25, a religious student studying mathematics. (Reut, Bat El, and Osnat had participated in an earlier group of college-educated Mizrahi women which is not discussed in this volume. In this session, they joined Gadi and David, whom we met in the group of college-educated men.)

As in the previous group, the session began with the facilitators reading a vignette, asking the participants to rate their sense of distance from or closeness to the protagonist, and then moving on to the next vignette. They then asked the participants to discuss their responses, beginning with "Shmuel."

David: Shmuel started out fine, but the second paragraph is one big no-no. [. . .] This type of person tries to blur the country's Jewish identity.

Facilitator B: How is that?

David: "The occupation is corrupting"—no way. "Two states for two peoples," "active in the Association for Civil Rights," "fights for migrant workers' rights," "homosexuals." [I'm] far from that. [. . .] For example, all this campaign for migrant worker rights. It's simply an attempt to flood the country with non-Jews and blur its identity. [. . .] I don't believe that the interest here is just [. . .] because they care about migrant workers. It's simply because if you flood the country with migrant workers, its Jewish identity is slowly erased. [. . .] It's wrapped up under the guise of humanism and human rights, and all those lovely words [. . .] There could also be some good intentions there, like "we're all human beings" and all. [. . .] But I believe there's also a purpose there, I don't know how hidden it is, of mixing the Jews with the gentiles, so that the Jewish identity becomes blurred.

Facilitator B: Why would anyone want to do that? To blur it?

David: That's the key question—it bothers them. They want a “State for all Citizens,”⁸ let's say.

Osnat: Who's “they”?

David: All these people who for example support the migrant workers' struggle and all those issues.

Reut: The Association for Civil Rights?

Facilitator B: They want to blur, that is they don't want Jewish, like denying their Jewish aspect.

David: They want to pull it into a state for all citizens.

Bat El: I don't think they looked at the Jewish side or . . .

David: I believe they did.

In this group, David was the only one wearing a kippah (traditional male head-covering) and therefore was assumed to represent the ideological right. Unlike the opposition voiced in the group of participants without a college education above, his suspicion was based on an understanding of the broader ideological context within which groups identified with the progressive left in Israeli civil society operate.

Bat El: It's like demonstrations for animal rights, OK, excuse the comparison [. . .] but [. . .]

Reut: [. . .] The Association for Civil Rights [. . .], people who are so far away from Judaism, they don't even think, they're looked at as non-Jews. Right? They don't really relate to that, it's a non-issue as far as they're concerned whether they're Jews or not, they are looked at as human beings. [. . .] Just like they won't leave a run-over cat on the road, they also wouldn't leave a Sudanese I don't know where, same thing.
[. . .]

Bat El: OK, about Shmuel—I also liked the first part. The second part—a bit less. He's too much—I don't like these kinds of people that want to make everything beautiful and plant flowers in the garden, like everything's all right in the ground, I don't know, this doesn't suit me . . . too much ideology.

Facilitator B: Like a bleeding heart?

Bat El: Bleeding heart, yeah. [. . .] I don't like this kind of people. They also have something underneath that they want to hide—that's Shmuel. [. . .] Shaul annoyed me a little, and it's not because he's gay, on the contrary—I love gay people, I think they're very creative and cute, but he's not pleased with what's going on, and he gets carried away too much. “My son won't have a state”—

that's a little exaggerated. Like [. . .] we know there are difficulties in this country, but [. . .] saying "That's it. Twenty years from now he won't have a house to build?"

Facilitator A: Is he whining?

Bat El: Exaggerating, yes, very much so.

Reut: Hysterical.

Bat El: Yes.

Reut: Shaul is hysterical.

[. . .]

Bat El: [. . .] I analyzed their character, according to whether I wanted to be their friend or not. [. . .] [Shmuel] is too much of a bleeding heart, he contributes too much to the weak sectors, and the needy, and women, and those, and the others. [Her tone is very disparaging]

Facilitator B: Why [are you speaking in] this tone?

Bat El: Because he's like that, he's annoying.

[Everyone began talking all at once]

Bat El: [. . .] I love the ideological ones, I love them very much, and that's his first part.

David: But so long as they keep it in the closet.

Bat El: But, no, I don't have a problem with that, I mean he can do what he wants with it. [. . .] But I really hate those who are too much like "I'm for the workers" and "the homosexuals and women are important to me," and all that.

David's position regarding the possible damage to the public square and the character of the state was a minority position in this group. The other participants were not concerned about it.

Facilitator B: Why don't you like them?

Bat El: Because I don't think they can talk, I don't *want* them for me, like Shmuel as a woman, for example, if anything. Why should he talk? [. . .] Shmuel [. . .] must have some kind of flaw in himself he would like to make amends for, and he finds a way to do it. [. . .] I think he is personally weak. [. . .] Usually in psychology all those who are very, eh. . . . Let's say, for example, a person who is very, very neat and tidy and he's very upset and he's meticulous and all that, then he's restless inside.

Reut: It's like he's growing on the weak people's backs.

Bat El: He needs to make up for that.

Reut: He empowers himself using others' weaknesses and all that.

Bat El: Precisely, that's the man, that's him. That's Shmuel, that's him.

Reut: He kind of fills himself up with others' content in general, [because] he has none [of his own].

Bat El: Yes, exactly.

Facilitator A: It seems to me, I have a feeling that with both of you, Reut and Bat El, have this image that looks more reasonable to you, the image of a person who fights for himself.

In this group, the logic of Bat El's objection to Shmuel's and Shaul's defiance and opposition to the state was different from the opposition presented in the group composed of participants without a college education. Bat El described this defiance in terms of personality ("weakness"), while Reut added the instrumental and manipulative aspect of defiance by a person who seeks to reinforce himself by showing "concern" for others. In other words, Reut and Bat El doubt the authenticity of the social activist, who is, in their view, not motivated by constant struggle against all of society's wrongs and a deep desire to mend the world.

In critical-progressive circles, this stance of defiance is part of the moral duty to defend the "plurality of the public sphere" (Katriel 2020, p. 2) in the name of universal reason, or Jewish values deeply rooted in the liberal-progressive vision of global social order. But for Reut and Bat El, this position is false, over-played, and not part of a web of genuine social relationships. They suspect it of being inauthentic behavior based on personal and psychological factors.

Yet at the same time, their opposition reflects a position that goes beyond the psychology of the individual.

Bat El: Actually, Yossi is a friend, and he gives in. He gives in because he is pulled into it, because they need him more, and so he gives in. He wanted to go to university, but he sacrificed himself for another. I identify with this . . .

Facilitator B: But he's not a weakling.

Bat El: No, he's not weak, he isn't acting out of weakness.
[Everyone begins to talk at once.]

Reut: He gives in according to his own priorities.

At this point, Reut and Bat El agreed about the importance of making choices from a position of strength. Reut echoed the neo-liberal logic and clarified her position regarding the individual's responsibility for their own situation.

Reut: I'm talking about responsibility, and a socialist state takes care of all of its citizens and provides welfare benefits. On the one hand, social benefits are supportive, and even people who contribute and

do things for others, support them, but on the other hand they decrease the individual's level of personal responsibility, the poor, neglected individual who doesn't pick himself up, because he depends on all sorts of other places to take care of him. And from where I come from, if you have personal responsibility and you take responsibility for yourself and promote yourself, you don't come out so pathetic, you just have to be in that state of mind.

Gadi: I wanted to say that I didn't give anyone a 1, because none of them are a burden on society, they are all working. Not one of them is a bum or is on welfare, and even Yossi, who got a 2 from me, I value him, and I didn't give him a 1, because he works, and he contributes to society and isn't counting [on others]. . . . What Reut is saying, counting on our socialism, on the state that helps poor and weak people, people who picking themselves up.

Osnat expresses a minority opinion, with a social-democratic criticism of the state.

Osnat: The state doesn't help all that much.

Reut: It helps.

Gadi: Unemployment, welfare benefits.

Osnat: Believe me, they've really cut back.

This random group of college-educated Mizrahim turned out to be quite diverse, and it included a right-wing ideological voice (David); various tones of neo-liberal voices (Bat El and Reut); and a social-democratic voice (Osnat). At the same time, not one of the participants related to the four protagonists' Mizrahi identity as an important factor that could explain their choices or generate criticism.

At this point, Facilitator B presented the story of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, in which Mizrahiness serves as an organizing principle, and the status of the Mizrahim is addressed through political opposition to the existing order and efforts to facilitate social change.

David and Reut were quick to respond. David denied the problem, and Reut was outraged by the attempt at defiance in the name of deprivation.

Gadi: That they wanted to give ownership to the homes in the veteran *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* was not because they are Ashkenazim, not because they are Ashkenazim. There were arguments, they brought various claims that they were the ones who settled on the land, they settled in the development towns and poor neighborhoods, so they don't have housing.

Gadi argued that if there had been a policy of discrimination against certain towns and neighborhoods, it wasn't a result of the ethnic background of the residents, but because of their geographic location. Reut quickly joined in.

Reut: I can, there is another point to what Gadi says. . . . There's this general Mizrahi whining about how they were stuck in the transit camps and all sorts of dump places, and all sort of . . .
[. . .]

Bat El: Well, if there are values, then there should be values [for everyone].

Reut: What? Aren't there any Ashkenazim that have to be helped?

Bat El: There are.

Reut: No? Everything is great for all of them?

Bat El and Reut supported a political position that promotes general values and principles, rather than Mizrahi identity politics.

Facilitator A turned to David.

Facilitator A: David, what do you say?

David: The first part, I don't like the part for the sake of the Mizrahim, I just can't connect to it. The second part.

Facilitator A: Why?

David: I didn't completely understand what they want to do—affirmative action? Demonstrate? It doesn't seem right to me.

Facilitator A: You mean, not this and not that.

David: Yeah, maybe.

Facilitator A: That's interesting, because I think maybe there's something—correct me if I'm wrong. On the one hand, it's like you said at the beginning, when we went around the circle, and you said that from your point of view, regarding the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi story, I don't know what you are talking about.

David: I don't think that I don't know what you are talking about, it's like, it's not dominant.

Facilitator A: OK, it's not dominant. Like, it doesn't play an important role.

David: Right.

Facilitator A: So you say that one side of the Rainbow, the side that goes on the Mizrahi issue, you say it doesn't speak to you, because it emphasizes something that from my point of view . . .

Reut: No way.

Bat El tried to clarify the reservations about the Mizrahi issue.

Bat El: I would say speak only about [general] values, but then I would lose the Mizrahi side of the Rainbow.

Facilitator A: And would you be willing to lose the Mizrahi part of the Rainbow?

Bat El: I think so. Enough already, how much can you deal with the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi thing. We have to stop this, if we really want to put a stop to the ethnicity problems, so just stop.

Gadi joined Bat El's and Reut's position.

Gadi: Right, yes. I wanted to say that I agree with what Bat El says, that really get out of the Mizrahiness a bit, because, like Bat El says, I can't feel that I am discriminated against because I am Mizrahi.

The participants were taking a strong stance regarding defiance toward the state or a hegemonic group in the name of the politics of Mizrahi identity. Did this stance stem from their naïve reading of reality—that is, was it an expression of denial of the fact of discrimination toward Mizrahim? David provided a fairly clear assessment of the situation.

David: I'm not sure that this is *passé* among the Ashkenazim.

His observation was immediately supported by Reut:

Reut: Right.

This strong agreement between Reut and David should not be taken for granted. They are both young, educated Mizrahim, but they belong to different, and occasionally hostile, social sectors. David's head-covering identifies him as belonging to the national-religious right, while Reut is a secular young woman from the geographic center of Israel. At first, it would appear as if they belonged to opposing camps, each embedded in a different world of meaning, and therefore it would not have been surprising if they had been deeply suspicious of each other. Despite this, with regard to Mizrahiness, they were in complete agreement.

David: I believe that among certain places, it still exists in the back-ground. I assume that everyone who spoke up here, me for example, simply decided to ignore that point, but I'm not sure that the issue doesn't exist for all of the Ashkenazim.

Facilitator A: Why?

David: You would have to ask them.

[. . .]

David: If, for example, we take this point about the Ashkenazi employer who had an Ashkenazi worker and a Mizrahi worker, and if he picks the Ashkenazi, then it's possible, I assume that the minute that he does this, he is making some sort of generalization, [and thinks] so if I am going to have problems, the problem will come from the direction of the Mizrahi worker.

Facilitator B: And what's the source of this generalization?

David: It seems to me that it's reality, that most of the criminals sitting in jail, for example, and most of the low-lives that a person meets during his life—are Mizrahim. So man, I know it's not acceptable today in the spirit of this culture to make generalizations, but I believe that a generalization isn't such a bad tool. The employer hasn't got the time to start checking out everybody, he needs a specific criterion to distinguish between this one and that one, so he uses ethnicity. Less chance of problems and screw-ups.

Facilitator B: You don't use generalizations.

David: In general, I do. I believe in generalizations as a criterion, but when you have to check each case, I try to be in the middle, between generalizations and on the other hand, a specific person is entitled to be judged on his own. But I believe that the Ashkenazi that does this, he does it on the basis of this distinction. I don't know, personally, I'm not so shocked by this.

[. . .]

Reut: I translate to myself what David said, into my own language, it's that an Ashkenazi boss would prefer that the head of the team under him would be an Ashkenazi. They speak the same language, intuitively, it's easier to get him to do things . . . talking the same language. A Mizrahi boss, would he prefer an Ashkenazi worker or a Mizrahi—I wouldn't take for granted what he would do.

[. . .]

Bat El: Right, right.

Reut: It's not at all clear to me what he would do. I don't think he would prefer the Ashkenazi.

Facilitator B: Does this mean that the Ashkenazi is more predictable than the Mizrahi?

Bat El: Yes.

Reut: Yes.

It seems that even in situations where the participants recognized discrimination against Mizrahim, it did not aggravate them, and they certainly did not justify defiance in the name of Mizrahiness. In fact, most of the participants even accepted situations of discrimination with equanimity and understanding (Osnat did not express an opinion, and she may have been in the minority).

This is the moment at which the power of the liberal grammar of the critical discourse could push our interpretive pendulum toward suspicion. From this position, it would be difficult to avoid adopting the overly suspicious stance that views the participants as expressing yet another denial, or even false consciousness

in one or more of its many variations. In order to capture the moment and use the suspicion against itself—that is, to become suspicious of suspicion—we must engage our sociological imagination at its most powerful and resist the urge to derive ethics entirely from universal reason or moral psychology. Ethnographic realism warns us against trying to do so through an appeal to seamless cultural traditions or cohesive moral communities (Keane, 2010). Freed from the commitment to the ethics of secular universal reason, which views their position as “an anomaly,” a “problem,” a “reactive position stemming from a pathological situation,” and so forth, we can ask: how do we make sense of the equanimity and understanding expressed by the young, educated and successful Mizrahim with regard to discrimination against Mizrahim?

Viewed from this alternative interpretive position, I suggest that their moral experience stems from relational reason, that is, from a moral-political position that develops in the context of wider relationships. Once again, it is important to emphasize that the relationality discussed here should be analytically distinguished from relationality that derives solely from power relations.⁹ Furthermore, this political-moral position does not stem from the sanctified principle of universal reason. As successful, middle-class Mizrahim, they are familiar with these principles, which form part of their cultural tool kit (Mizrachi et al., 2007; Swidler, 1986, 2001). Rather, they deliberately and consciously reject the rigid ideological application of these principles, which they do not view as an effective resource to advance their position in the flow of social life.

At the beginning of the session, the participants were asked to share their thoughts after the first meeting. David explained that looking back, he found it difficult to understand the in-depth discussion about Mizrahiness and thought that defiance in the name of Mizrahiness was an artificial way to bring up a topic that wasn't even relevant or connected to his life. As we saw, David was aware of signs of discrimination in various social contexts. However, surprisingly, he understood the logic underlying this discrimination, and didn't see it as the epitome of evil, as an excuse to adopt a defiant position toward the entire social order, or as cause for fighting.

David: In the previous meeting, in general, I had a sense that someone was trying to wake up the sleeping dogs.

Facilitator B: What feeling?

Facilitator A: Sleeping dogs?

David: This subject isn't so dominant in life, and it's strange to get to it and talk about it deeply. That's it, not much more.

David was openly attempting to convince the others that this topic is foreign to him and that it seemed phony and fake. At this point, the lights of the critical discourse begin to flash: “False consciousness!” “Denial!” However, in the following example, the critical monitoring system faced an even more challenging test.

At the beginning of the discussion, Reut shared the moments of “insight” that she experienced in the previous meeting. This occurred when she spoke about school and how she had never experienced discrimination even though she attended a school for gifted, elite children. She added that all of her friends in her class were Ashkenazim, and that she had been the only Mizrahi. When the facilitator pushed her and asked how she explained this, she stopped for a moment, and exclaimed, “Don’t force me to get it.”

At the beginning of this meeting, she said she came to a realization at the previous session. She described the event as very enlightening, and she had thought about it in the weeks that had passed since that meeting.

Reut: In the previous meeting, I felt the penny drop—and it was like a million bucks. I actually came to realize the size of the gap, and I think that [. . .] the strong common denominator of the people who came here is that, in fact, they deny the very existence of this gap. They live their lives, they study and advance without any interference, and whenever other people talk about some kind of gap, or difference in opportunities . . . then they get told or they respond, “It’s all subjective,” and “it doesn’t really exist.” In the meeting we had, which was entirely about the issue of tracking, which was accepted as a fact that you cannot really deny . . . I said I studied at Boyer [an elite school for gifted children in Jerusalem], and what do you mean, there was no gap. All my friends were Ashkenazi. I went back home and asked myself, “So what was I doing there?” Like, maybe there is something to it. So I went along with it and said, “All right, this must have been my trump card to get me to where I wanted. On the whole, I’m pleased with my accomplishments. I don’t stir up any hornets’ nests, I leave it just the way it was until now, and I move on.” But yes, I mean, this insight somehow follows me around. It is empowering, not the opposite. I mean, it’s precisely that I didn’t embrace victimhood, but. . . . But yes, there’s some injustice here, I described it more in terms of injustice. That it’s a little exasperating.

Facilitator B: It’s like it woke up angry feelings in you that weren’t there before?

Reut: First of all, for me, the default feelings are angry, then I get offended, hurt, I feel that. . . . In my case, first I get upset, then it can be that I will now be upset about this for about a year, and then the filtered emotion of what it really is will come. But yes, it’s kind of. . . . It’s like this Big Brother, that somewhat sat there, probably, at least I hope, I would like to believe that it wasn’t malicious, that they said, “These people will go here and the others will go there,” but the very pretentiousness of coming and saying, “We’ll draw up a state along those lines, and these will go here

and the others will go there.” So I come, too, my education is the economy, and free economy, and the fittest survive and succeed and win, and this for me the basic resource to climb the ladder with. So it doesn’t fit my worldview. This idea that someone will come and go, wait a minute, let me straighten this puzzle out . . .

Facilitator B: But it sorts of sounds like, you said that after all, the market’s invisible hand is not so invisible after all.

Reut: That’s it, right, this is what I realized here, and I tend to believe it’s true. I mean, I don’t know, I believe you, I never studied the history or dug into this, I didn’t deal with it so much. I accepted it as given and when I looked at those materials, it didn’t seem proper to me. I guess it [discrimination] never went away, and it’s not for nothing that things happened, but on the other hand this is the market, this is the [local] swamp and we will swim across it with this, with what we have today.

Even for a suspicious reader, Reut’s heartfelt testimony left no room to doubt her awareness of the unequal structures. Reut was not in “literal denial,” in the words of Stanley Cohen (2001). She was aware of the possibility of structural inequality and even trusts the academic experts who confirm the existence of structural ethnic inequality. However, her conclusion from this realization did not lead her to adopt a defiant position toward the hegemony in the name of Mizrahiness in order to destroy the foundations of the oppressive structure; rather she chose to move forward within the “swamp” according to the rules of the game and the market, as she has until now.

Reut did not believe that power is static and does not regard her inferior position as permanent. She looked the unequal structure straight in the eye, recognizing its past implications and current significance. To critical ears, her de-politicization of the neo-liberal discourse could be heard as uncritical acceptance of crushing, Darwinian power. For her, this is an empowering force and a general metaphor for an open social horizon. The image she adopts is not one of *power over*, but rather *power to*—that is, the power to act and to determine your own life trajectory.

For her entire life, Reut had been surrounded by an Ashkenazi majority in elite educational institutions and in her work as an economist in central Israel. In contrast, Bat El has experienced life on the periphery, where she has been part of the majority. For this reason, she found it difficult to make the connection between the discussion of Mizrahim as a minority group and her lived experience.

Bat El: In my area, I’m talking about Afula—I live in Afula, if you’re interested. And I don’t know, the deputy director of education is a real Moroccan-type, he’s even one of the old-timers. . . . I work with the municipality, they are my customers, so I go to the municipality, and I said to myself, he’s a Moroccan, that’s

it, that's it. I started going over everybody, one by one, one is a Yemenite—and I look at the good jobs, and they are our representatives in Afula, good jobs . . .

At this point, it is important to remember that Mizrahim make up a majority of the Jewish population (see Y. Cohen, 2015, ch. 1), and in the periphery, as Bat El described, they are identified with the political, cultural and economic elite. This trend fits with Alba and Nee's (2003) description of the experience of assimilation and ethnicity in light of demographic trends in the United States, in which groups that are officially defined as ethnic minorities become demographic majorities. As they note, "The foreign-born and their children now constitute about 20 percent of the American population. They are concentrated in a number of large states such as California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Illinois, magnifying the regional impacts of immigration. Their presence has been dramatically visible in California, the nation's most populous state, where one in eight Americans resides" (p. 9).

Osnat: The stigmas still work, in my opinion. They work today, too, but there are other players. There are the Ethiopians, the Russians—they are all sorts today, there are other players in this equation, and not only Mizrahim.

ROOTEDNESS AND MAINSTREAMING

Unlike the subjects with no college education, the subjects with a college education did not view defiance against the state in the name of Mizrahiness as a collective threat. Instead, they did not understand it because it did not relate to their life experiences, and they felt it even weakened or stigmatized them.

The participants in this group spoke from a position of integration in the civil and social Jewish Israeli mainstream. They take their identity as Israeli Jews in the civil space of the Jewish polity for granted. For them, the moral and political significance of discrimination by Ashkenazim stems from what I have referred to as relational reason, part of the flow of life and the dynamic quality of ethnic relationships as middle-class Mizrahim who have become part of the mainstream. Incidents of discrimination do not change the way they experience their lives as people deeply connected to Jewish Israeliness for whom the horizons are open.

This description is consistent with the model of assimilation in American society presented by Alba and Nee (2003) and with my arguments regarding the assimilation of Mizrahim into general Jewish Israeli society through the expanding middle class. Alba and Nee argue:

Assimilation, as a form of ethnic change, may occur through changes taking place in groups on both sides of the boundary. Consequently, we define assimilation as the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences. "Decline" means in this context that a distinction attenuates in salience, that the occurrences for which it is relevant diminish in number and contract to fewer and

fewer domains of social life. Individuals' ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group (typically, but not necessarily, the ethnic majority group), and individuals on both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class; in other words, they mutually perceive themselves with less and less frequency in terms of ethnic categories and increasingly only under specific circumstances (p. 11).

The phenomenon in American society described by Alba and Nee is currently taking place in Israeli Jewish society. This can be attributed to three primary factors. First, Mizrahim constitute the demographic majority among Jews and the expanding middle class has made them part of Israeliness.¹⁰ Second, Mizrahim are constantly moving from the working class into the middle class (U. Cohen and Leon, 2008; M. Dahan, 2016). Third, there is no doubt that they fully belong to the Jewish polity (Mizrachi and Herzog, 2012), and this distinguishes them from other minority groups who are either situated outside of the Jewish polity (such as migrant workers and asylum seekers) or are found next to the Jewish polity because, although they are citizens, they are not full partners (Palestinian citizens of Israel).

These three factors reinforce the process of the mainstreaming of Mizrahim in Israel. Congruent with the model proposed by Alba and Nee, the process of assimilation of Mizrahim in Israel can be explained by their organic connection to the Israeli mainstream. This, however, does not entail erasure of their ethnic identity in favor of processes of modernization, as earlier theories of modernization had posited and hoped; nor it is a process of cultural self-negation in the face of the Western-Ashkenazi hegemony that fixes their inferior position in the process of modernity, as Swirski and others have claimed. Even if these arguments do have some basis in reality, in the process evolving before our eyes, we can observe the foundational role of Mizrahim and Mizrahiness in the ongoing creation of the Israeli mainstream.

The constitutional role of Mizrahiness in the evolution of Hebrew, especially Hebrew slang, provides a clear example. From a survey 1,500 internet users conducted in 2017, linguist and journalist Ruvik Rosental (2017) discovered that four-fifths of the most common slang words in Hebrew came from Mizrahi sources. In popular music, "Mizrahiness" plays a foundational role in defining Israeli mainstream culture and determining the musical taste of the middle class.¹¹

Guy Abutbul-Selinger (2022) shows that Mizrahi identity has become a cultural resource for Mizrahi adolescents, granting them qualities, such as self-confidence, hipness, authenticity, and a sense of belonging, that have become valuable in mainstream Israeli society. For those with an education, Jewish Israeli rootedness is allied with what Alba and Nee (2003) refer to as mainstreaming. From this position of full integration and involvement, a struggle in the name of "Mizrahiness" by a small minority made no sense to our middle-class Mizrahi informants. It did

not fit their experiences and choices; it was irrelevant to their lives and perceived as disempowering and stigmatizing.

Here we see the difference between the two groups. Working-class participants revealed a tendency to defend the state from defiance because the state represents the Jewish kingdom and is the epitome of the Jewish whole as a primordial and religious entity. For those with a college education, their Jewish Israeli identity reflects their integration into mainstream Israeli society and their rooted identity as citizens whose horizon is open and who are full participants in the creation of civil space, culture and Israeli identity.

In both cases, the moral and political meaning they attach to instances of inequality stemmed from what I have termed relational reason, rather than from a universal reason imposed on their organic social life. Both groups expressed a moral position not derived from a structured, comprehensive school of thought, but from their actual moral experience, deeply embedded within social relations. The working-class participants exemplified a more primordial and religious form of rootedness, which is often criticized by progressives. Try as they might, they were unable to convince even the facilitator that their objection to defiance was not immoral or a sign that they are inhumane or uncompassionate.

While the rooted working class was defenseless against the well-articulated progressive ethic, over the past few years a growing movement has taken root in academic culture and public discourse. This movement, traditionalism, presents rootedness as a deep, well-argued position and demands its proper representation in society, culture, and politics. In the next section, I will briefly address this traditionalist stream in social thought and public discourse. This new Mizrahi movement consists of intellectuals and social activists who struggle to make Mizrahi tradition present in Israeli cultural and political life, a positive identity in the liberal isomorphism. They seek to overturn the “problem with the Mizrahim” by transforming it into a solution for all of Israeli society.

ROOTEDNESS IN THE MAKING: DEFIANCE IN THE NAME OF TRADITIONALISM

In his book “The Third Israel,” Rabbi Piron (2021), a former Israeli Minister of Education, writes about his family: “Regard for the importance of the State was like a regular member of our family. This included strong emotions, as well as self-negation in the face of that which was greater than we: the duty to serve the commonwealth, to be emissaries to our people” (p. 13). Piron also articulated his stance toward traditionalism:

There are those who think that regard for the centrality of the institutions of the state is an anachronistic worldview, because liberals, enlightenment and global culture cannot coexist with regard for the state that sanctifies place, community, and one’s own people. Regard for the institutions of the state ostensibly prioritizes togetherness over

the individual. It presents sacred values in an era in which we are used to disputing and reconsidering all of our two-thousand-year-old beliefs. In the face of the outburst of sanctification of individual liberty and individualism, the regard for the centrality of the state and its institutions seeks to sanctify togetherness, to enhance the role of the sublime, of that which we cannot know, and national glory. Traditionalism is in need of renewal; first, it is identified only with Mizrahim . . . although it should not be viewed as characteristic only of them. . . . Traditionalism is a deep, coherent view of the world, with deep roots in the chronicles of our people and the world.

The political-cultural project that Piron is promoting is part of a broad trend among Mizrahi intellectuals and activists to present the traditional position identified with rootedness as a position with conceptual, historical and cultural depth that is valid in and of itself and has roots in the past, yet turns to the future as it innovates and renews itself.

In his pathbreaking book *A Language for the Faithful*, philosopher Buzaglo (2008) presents the traditional position that I have described here as rootedness as one that views the connection and loyalty to a whole that is greater than the individual. This description reflects the nuclear identity of those whom I have defined as the rooted Mizrahi subject. Buzaglo views the revelation at Mount Sinai as the constitutive event of the Jewish people. However, he warns, just as this event is a cornerstone in the early history of the Jewish people, it could become a source of contention among the Jews. The contrast between secular and religious could become an argument over the question of revelation. He writes, “loyalty to Jewish identity, to the fate of the Jewish people and its values—and not loyalty to the report of the event on Mount Sinai—is what binds together the many faces of Judaism that we meet in our generation” (p. 19).

The rooted Mizrahi subject is identified with the traditionalist who is loyal to the greater Jewish whole and connected to it through his/her very soul. The traditionalist’s religious and primordial Jewish identity is not fixed in the past, but rather, as Yadgar and Halsall (2015, p. 2) write, the rootedness of this primordialism is in constant flux: “Traditionalism is a dialogical (yet surely not equal) stance in relation to tradition; it is a concept that denotes an individual’s or a community’s loyal yet reflective—favorable and even sanctifying in principle yet interpretive, critical and selective in practice—attitude toward what they view as the tradition that constitutes their identity, that is: constitutes them as subjects.”

The flexible and dynamic character of traditionalism in its meeting with modernity is a clear example of what S. N. Eisenstadt (2002) has referred to as multiple modernities. It is by no means premodern nor fixed in an ancient past, but rather inherently connected to modernity, and it even plays a central part in the design of that modernity. However, it is important to remember that ignoring the loyalty of the traditionalist position to the Jewish whole, in the name of a universalist politics that views boundaries of identity (religious and primordial) as unnecessary, can be viewed by the rooted Mizrahi subject as an existential threat.

To be sure, Jewish traditionalism is not exclusively Mizrahi and a significant proportion of non-Mizrahim in Israel also define themselves as traditionalists.¹² Ashkenazi traditionalism as portrayed in the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof*¹³ represents a premodern form of traditionalism, whereas Mizrahi traditionalism in its current form is definitely modern (Yadgar, 2013). It is also important to note that many Mizrahim, especially those who belong to the expanding middle class, do not necessarily identify with traditionalism. Yet their republican position is deeply embedded in the mainstream Jewish Israeli identity, in which rootedness is taken for granted.

As an intellectual position and a political proposition, traditionalism serves as a valuable resource, enabling Mizrahim to define a flexible new political agenda that is capable of creatively coping with the challenges and crises of identity Israel is currently facing. At the same time, traditionalism serves the educated Mizrahim as a valuable resource in the politics of identity within the Jewish religious space.

The organization Memizrach Shemesh serves as an example of the demand for representation of traditionalism within the Jewish ethno-national space. Memizrach Shemesh epitomizes the connection between the democratic and liberal codes of civil society and Mizrahi-Sephardi tradition. According to their website, “Memizrach Shemesh is a *Beit Midrash* (House of Study) and Center for Jewish Social Activism and Leadership in Israel. We cultivate leaders and train activists who are dedicated to the values of communal responsibility and social action rooted in all Jewish traditions including those of the Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage.”¹⁴

In 2014, Memizrach Shemesh triggered a public storm about the Jewish studies curriculum in religious schools when it published findings showing rabbis from Muslim countries over the past two hundred years were underrepresented in religious school curricula in comparison with Ashkenazi rabbis. The issue was raised on social media and generated so much attention that the head of curriculum in the Ministry of Education was forced to appoint a pedagogy advisory committee, composed almost entirely of representatives of Memizrach Shemesh and its original sponsor, the Alliance Israélite Universelle. The committee was tasked with introducing the pedagogical advisory team to the philosophy and thought of Mizrahi rabbis and proposing relevant educational programs. The advisory committee demanded that every quote from an Ashkenazi rabbi be matched with a quote from a Mizrahi rabbi. They further demanded that the ministry add educational units focused on the Sephardi tradition, such as a unit on *piyut* (Mizrahi liturgical poetry), which, they asserted, was the manner in which Mizrahi rabbis inculcated their theological messages. Ultimately, the head of the Jewish philosophy curriculum in the Ministry of Education published an additional manual that included the philosophy of leading Mizrahim, such as the Ben Ish Hai and Rabbi Khalphon Hacohen. In most cases, quotes from these rabbis replaced the quotes from Ashkenazi rabbis that were in the previous manual.

While not all of their demands were met, and the activists therefore considered their success to be only partial, the ministry did give the organization a key position in its deliberations and acceded to their demands for curricular changes. This can be seen as an important achievement, especially in view of previous attempts by Mizrahi activists that failed to bring about any change, leading many parents over the years to abandon the public education system and transfer their children to ultra-Orthodox schools (Picard, 2018).

This incident permits a glimpse into the dynamic space of negotiations and struggle for the representation of the Mizrahi tradition in the name of the liberal principles of equality and diversity. However, it is important to emphasize that defiance in the name of “tradition” can only be wielded by educated Mizrahi traditionalists who are familiar both with liberal-democratic values and Mizrahi-Sephardi tradition. The efficacy of defiance in the name of tradition was possible due to the organic connection between the religious-Zionist establishment and the state institutions and their acceptance of the principles of democracy, equality, and representation. Based on their double position as “traditional and well-educated,” the activists could serve as cultural brokers for effective political activity. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that these acts of defiance as a means for social change were contained within the Jewish ethno-national space.

This chapter completes the analytic description of what I have described as the ideal type of the rooted Mizrahi subject, who refuses to be categorized according to the liberal grammar of the current critical discourse and remains in an ontological position of rootedness, as distinct from the ontology of the autonomous individual. I will now place the rooted Mizrahi subject within a broader analytical framework alongside other forms of rootedness in Jewish Israeli society. I will ask: what is the difference between the rooted subject and the concept of the embedded subject, familiar to us from early sociology and the thought of Michel Foucault? What are the implications of the proposed analysis on the concept of understanding—*verstehen*—in sociology, in particular, and in the human sciences, in general, with regard to the nature of power relations? In the next, and final, chapter, I will expand the discussion to the broader implications of the findings of this research.