

Abstracts

Liberalism in Israel: "Good Persons", "Bad Citizens", and the Conditions of Human Flourishing

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Out of the varied repertoire of liberal theories, Israel's liberalism, embedded (much like American liberalism) in Israeli law, is "negative rights liberalism". The essence of this liberal variant is the conviction that the citizens of a state are protected by a series of liberties to allow them to lead their lives at their choices, immune from the intervention of the various branches of the state. The social conduct that is assured by this legal regime is the citizens' "urge for normalcy", i.e., their desire to act for the promotion of their own self-interests, as well as the interests of those close to them. In line with a distinction that may be found in Tocqueville's "Democracy in America", the "urge for normalcy" should be viewed as located in-between two poles: selfishness and sacrifice. (When Marx, in "The Jewish Question", identified the liberal regime of negative rights with selfishness, he was wrong; it should be identified with the urge for normalcy).

In all western liberal countries citizens are often expected to bear sacrifices for the promotion of collective enterprises, usually in the economic sphere. In Israel, in the early 1950s sacrifice on the part of citizens was demanded in the immigrants' absorption sphere, and since the inception of the state until this very day it has been demanded in the national security sphere. But there is an obvious tension between citizens' "urge for normalcy" and the states' demand of sacrifice. Indeed, it was Aristotle, in Book III of his "Politics", who first noticed that the "good person" is not necessarily "the good citizen"; different virtues are expected in each of these two functionings.

In the early 1950s, the state's demand of sacrifice on the part of the founding, Ashkenazi group in the immigrants' absorption sphere was met with resistance. As a result, as numerous socio-economic indicators attest, the processes of integrating Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews into one coherent society have only partly succeeded. This has important implications for the social basis of the liberal-legal project of Israel: its support by low-class Sephardim is low.

In the national security sphere, for many years the state did succeed in creating readiness for sacrifice among its citizens. The state has successfully applied a series of sophisticated cultural mechanisms to create this readiness. In recent decades however these mechanism substantially waned, at least when the Ashkenazi, secular, middle-class group is concerned. As a result, a marked decline in the readiness for sacrifice among members of this group is discernible. The void created has been filled up mainly by members of the religious-Zionist group. The article discusses the history of this group in an attempt to explicate the readiness