

Article

Jewish Civilizationism in Israel: A Unique Phenomenon

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Abstract: Populism and civilizationism have transformed the politics of many countries. Many scholars consider them the biggest challenges to democracy since the rise of fascism and communism in the first half of the last century. The close affinity between populism, civilizationism, and rightwing politics has also been analyzed and recognized in many countries from Turkey to India to the US. However, there are three areas that distinguish the appearance of civilizationism in Israel. First, in contrast to many other countries, civilizationism in Israel is not a new phenomenon. It has been an essential part of Israeli nationalism or Zionism since the early 20th century. Second, unlike many countries, Jewish civilizationism in Israel is an article of faith for all major Israeli political parties. It is not a slogan raised only by the rightwing, conservative part of the political spectrum. Finally, one observes an affinity between civilizationism and populism. Civilizational rhetoric is the mainstay of populist leaders, such as Trump, Erdogan, etc. In Israel, populism and civilizationism have no special relationship as civilizationism is mainstream politics. All politicians, populists and non-populists, have to pay homage to Jewish civilizationism; otherwise, they will not succeed. This paper analyzes the Israeli founding fathers' statements, the Declaration of Independence, Israeli state symbols, the revival of the Hebrew language, the Law of Return, the first debate in the Knesset, and the more recent Nation-State Law to demonstrate how Jewish civilizationism is old, mainstream, and not exclusively populist.

Keywords: Israel; civilizationism; populism; Zionism; Hebrew; Nation-State Law; Law of Return; Israeli state symbols; Nationalism; Netanyahu



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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a rise in civilizational rhetoric in several democratic societies across different continents. In April 2022, Turkish President Erdogan inaugurated the Islamic Civilizations Museum in Istanbul to showcase the versatility and superiority of Islamic civilization ([Daily Sabah 2022](#)). In November 2022, Jordan Bardella won the presidential election of the rightwing National Rally party, replacing Marine Le Pen, promising to defend French civilization ([Associated Press 2022](#)). In December 2022, Modi said, “India was the most refined idea of human civilisation, the most natural voice of humanity” ([The Statesman 2022](#)). While the focus of nationalism is territorial, the civilizational rhetoric prioritizes defending or saving a civilization based on religion, not a state. The state is considered a single manifestation of civilization that spans many territories and millennia. Both rightwing and leftwing populist leaders have used this rhetoric to win voters and elections by denouncing liberalism and established mainstream parties. For instance, in Europe, numerous rightwing populist European parties and leaders have fought and won elections based on the argument that Christian civilization or Judeo-Christian civilization and traditions are under threat from Islam, Muslims, and other refugees that do not belong to the White Christian civilization ([Yilmaz and Morieson 2021](#); [Ozzano and Bolzonar 2020](#); [Brubaker 2016](#); [Kaya and Tecmen 2019](#); [Marchetti et al. 2022](#)).

[Yilmaz and Morieson \(2022\)](#) have identified civilizationism as another thick ideology that populism, a thin ideology, attaches to itself to give itself a solid defensible argument. They define civilizationism in the following way:

Civilizationism is an idea which posits that the world and its peoples can be divided into several 'civilizations', most of them defined by religion. Adhered to populism, civilizationism defines self and other not primarily in national terms, but civilizational terms (Brubaker 2017). It gives content to populism's signifiers by, first, categorizing people via civilizational identity (whether self-imposed or imposed by populists). Second, by framing 'the people' as morally good because the civilization to which they belong is morally good and derived from good religious values. Conversely, civilizationism adhered to populism allows populists to frame 'elites' as morally bad insofar as they have betrayed and abandoned the values and culture of the people's civilization. Equally, 'others' within the same society are framed as morally 'bad' because they belong to a foreign civilization with inferior values derived from an inferior religion.

This article focuses on Jewish civilizationism in the state of Israel. Three aspects distinguish Israel from most other countries where civilizational rhetoric and politics have been successful. First, in most of the other countries, such as in the United States, Turkey, India, and Poland, civilizationism, linked with religion, was until a few decades ago a fringe phenomenon (Saleem 2023). Scholars link it primarily to the 21st century. This might be the case for other countries but, as this chapter will show, Israeli civilizationism is mainstream and as old as the Israeli state, if not older. Israeli nationalism or Zionism is based on Jewish civilizationism. From the First Zionist Congress in 1897 to the Nation-State Law passed in 2018, Jewish civilizationism has monopolized Israeli nationalism and defeated attempts by many Israeli scholars and leaders to make Israel a state honoring the histories and lives of all its citizens equally.

Second, in numerous countries, civilizationism is closely associated with rightwing nationalism and populism. It is the rightwing parties and movements that have raised the flag of civilizationism, and they are its key torch bearers. Whether it is the Republican Party in the US, the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, or the Bharatiya Janata Party in India, the rightwing conservatives spread religio-civilizational rhetoric and are the most impressed by it. This is not the case in Israel. It was the socialist, broadly secular leftwingers that raised the flag of Jewish civilizationism and created the state of Israel. Even after the creation of Israel, the broadly leftwing parties ruled Israel for thirty years and kept Jewish civilizationism alive.

Finally, when one studies other country cases, one observes an affinity between civilizationism and populism. Civilizational rhetoric is primarily the mainstay of populist leaders. Civilizationism has played a key role in making such leaders win elections and dominate the political arena. Erdogan and Modi, two populist leaders, have used civilizationism to completely change the politics of their countries. Now, even the opposition parties in Turkey and India have to resort to civilizational rhetoric to prove their authenticity. Populist leaders instrumentalize religion and religious identity to create a sense of fear that the national culture and identity are civilizational, and that it is under attack by people from foreign civilizations living not only outside the state but also inside the state. In Israel, this exclusive affinity between populism and civilizationism breaks down. As Jewish civilizationism is not limited to the left wing or right wing, similarly, it is not limited to populist or mainstream politics. Jewish civilizationism is Israeli nationalism as propagated by the state, and rejecting it means rejecting the basis of the state. Therefore, no political party, populist or non-populist, can succeed in Israel without bowing to this altar.

2. Israel: The Oldest Nation?

Israel is comparatively a new state but calls itself one of the oldest, if not the oldest of nations. Israel came into being in 1948. Although most of the Jewish people lived outside Palestine, they were always part of the myriad of people living in Jerusalem and Palestine. They were, however, never a majority or rulers of Palestine since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Romans, Byzantines, and Persians ruled one after the other before Muslims conquered the area in the seventh century. After a brief interlude of Crusader

rule, Muslims ruled this area until the First World War. The Ottomans were the last Muslim rulers. Sultan Selim defeated the Mamluk Sultan in the 16th century to make Egypt, Hejaz, and Palestine part of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman rule ended in 1920, during the First World War when British forces conquered the Levant.

The League of Nations granted Britain the mandate to rule Palestine. The Mandate period is a period of increasing tussle, and at times violent bloody clashes, between the local Arab Muslim Palestinians and mostly immigrant European Jews. The UN Partition Plan of 1948 was considered unjust by the majority Arab population and neighboring Arab states, and the first of the three wars between the newly created Jewish state and the neighboring Arab states started in 1948. Israel was successful as it was in the next two Arab–Israeli wars fought in 1967 and 1973. Thousands of Palestinians were expelled by Israel in 1948 and afterwards, creating the worldwide problem of Palestinian refugees, a fact denied by the Israeli politicians (Hirsch 2007). The Oslo Agreements of the early 1990s envisaged a two-state solution and started the gradual acceptance of Israel in the neighborhood. However, the increasing number of Jewish settlements and their support by Israeli governments made the two-state solution impossible to implement (Muasher 2022).

The main argument of the chapter is that Jewish civilizationism is not something new. Jewish civilizationism existed before Israel and it was the basis of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. It is not a recent adoption by strong rightwing populist leaders, like Islamist civilizationism by Erdogan or Hindu civilizationism by Modi in countries with secular constitutions. The following section demonstrates that Zionism, the actions/views of the Zionist founding fathers of Israel, the Declaration of Independence, Israel's state symbols, the revival of the Hebrew language, the Law of Return and Israeli citizenship, and the Nation-State Basic Law cannot be comprehended without resorting to Jewish civilizationism.

3. Zionism

During the late 19th century, the Zionist movement, after debating the efficacy of other places, including Uganda and Argentina, began promoting the migration of European Jews to Palestine. Although most of the pioneer Zionist leaders were secular (as discussed below) and the movement was predominantly secular, its origin and basis were religious. Judaism, its history, culture, and civilization were what provided the vital and decisive link of Zionist European Jews with Palestine. The word Zion itself is of Biblical origins and means Jerusalem or the land of Israel. The following passage in the Bible tells of the capture of Jerusalem by King David:

The king and his men marched to Jerusalem to attack the Jebusites, who lived there. The Jebusites said to David, "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off". They thought, "David cannot get in here".
7 Nevertheless, David captured the fortress of Zion—which is the City of David.
(2 Samuel 5)

Zionism was a movement to save Jewish people and Jewish civilization, irrespective of where they lived. Judaism was the basis of defining the specific group of people that needed to be saved and Jerusalem, or the ancestral holy land of Palestine–Israel, was the place to build this old-new nation because Judaism and the Bible predicted that it was the destiny of the Jewish people. "Exile" would remain exile unless Jewish people were settled in Eretz Israel. The following passage details the association of the secular Zionist movement with Judaism:

Zionism as a political movement was preceded by various developments in the post-Enlightenment period. The term itself only appeared in the 1890s, but the importance of Zion in the life and thought of the Jewish nation was present throughout its history. The blessing 'Next year in Jerusalem' was part of the Passover ritual, and when praying in the synagogue Jews faced towards the east. In the history of the nation, the appearances of numerous messianic figures, including Shabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century, were connected with the

aspiration to return from exile. Numerous small Jewish settlements existed in the Holy Land throughout the centuries, and individual migration was a constant feature of Jewish life. (Cohn-Sherbok 2012, p. 2)

The first Zionist Congress gathered in Basel, Switzerland in 1897. Around 200 delegates participated in the Congress. Unsurprisingly, although delegates came from seventeen different countries, they were primarily European. Middle Eastern Jews did not have much representation. After a heated debate, Congress adopted the Basel Program. The main points of the program were as follows. First, Zionism focused on Zion, Jerusalem. After debating about different places and their respective advantages and disadvantages, it was decided that Palestine was the best place to establish a state for the Jewish people. Second, to achieve this aim, Zionists decided to support immigration to Palestine and the Congress sought funds for promoting their cause, strengthening Jewish consciousness, and immigration.

4. Israel's Secular Founding Fathers' Views and Actions

Theodor Herzl is considered the father of Zionism and a founding father of Israel. A secular, assimilated European Jew, Theodor was not religious and remained secular all his life. Born in Vienna, he gradually rose in importance as a playwright and a journalist. The Jewish question was of little interest to him in his early years and his success as an assimilated Jew allowed him to overlook the need for a Jewish state. His only son Hans was given a secular upbringing and Herzl notably refused to allow him to be circumcised. However, several events close to the 1890s made him think about the horrors of European anti-Semitism. It must be understood that he was not interested in Zionism because of religious reasons. It was his second-best solution to the age-old (European) Jewish question. The first was always the equality of European Jews in their own states and societies. He wanted his fellow Europeans to discard anti-Semitism so that Jewish people, like him, could live peaceful, successful lives but after years of observing the European societies, he realized it was not to be.

We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes super loyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native lands in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still decried as aliens... The majority decide who the 'alien' is; this, and all else in the relations between peoples, is a matter of power. (Hertzberg 1959, p. 209)

Unlike religious Jews, Herzl did not have the option and patience to wait for the Messiah to come and release Jewish people from bondage as Moses did thousands of years ago. So, Herzl decided to come up with a solution, i.e., creating a state for Jews. However, although based on Jewish civilizationism, Herzl's vision was a modern socialist utopia, with public ownership of the majority of land and natural resources and agricultural co-operatives. He recognized that Palestinians already lived in Israel and, therefore, dreamed of a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and pluralist state, with Arabs as part of the leadership (Brenner 2022). Judaism was supposed to play a minor role in this state, which was to be a model for other states. Herzl was against establishing a theocracy and priests were to be confined in their temples in this model state:

Theocracy

Shall we end by having a theocracy? No, indeed. Faith unites us, knowledge gives us freedom. We shall therefore prevent any theocratic tendencies from coming to the fore on the part of our priesthood. We shall keep our priests within the confines of their temples in the same way as we shall keep our professional army within the confines of their barracks. Army and priesthood shall receive honors high as their valuable functions deserve. But they must not interfere in

the administration of the State which confers distinction upon them, else they will conjure up difficulties without and within.”. (Herzl 1946, p. 147)

Most of the other founding fathers of Israel also had a deep respect for Jewish culture and civilization and understood there could be no Israel without Jewish civilizationism but, at a personal level, they were not only not religious but also disliked the religious orthodoxy of Jewish religious elite. Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am), considered the father of cultural Zionism, was a secular Jew. Although proud of the spiritual heritage of Judaism, he was critical of Orthodox Jews. Chaim Weizmann, the first President of Israel, was a world-renowned biochemist. He had Orthodox schooling but later became secular and developed a strong dislike for Orthodox Jewry because of their inaction. An ardent Zionist and scientist, he was deeply concerned about the lack of technological and scientific advancement and had bitter debates with rabbis at Zionist Congresses. He was afraid the Orthodox would “weave religion into Zionism” which would suppress spiritual freedom and hinder technological development in the future Jewish state (Stern 1999, pp. 223–52). Similarly, David Ben-Gurion, the first and until recently the longest-serving Prime Minister of Israel, belonged to a relatively assimilated Polish family. His father was not an observant Jew, supported Zionism, and had stopped wearing the long Jewish coat and adopted a short European jacket. David Ben-Gurion did not like Ultra-Orthodoxy and contested the religious worldview that rejected anything secular. Despite being a leader of Zionists and a believer in Jewish civilizationism, he went to a synagogue only a few times after he came to Palestine as a young man during the First World War. However, perhaps nothing epitomizes early Zionist leaders' relationship with Judaism than Prime Minister Golda Meir's following quote:

It is not only a matter, I believe, of religious observance and practice. To me, being Jewish means and has always meant being proud to be part of a people that has maintained its distinct identity for more than 2000 years, with all the pain and torment that has been inflicted upon it. (Meir 1976, p. 386)

For Meir and many other Zionists, it was not about religion but people, and their 2000-year-old culture and civilization. Golda Meir also, when asked about her belief in God, famously said, “I believe in the Jewish people, and the Jewish people believe in God.” (Carner 2015).

5. Declaration of Independence (1948)

If civilizationism is a form of discourse or rhetoric that uses a religio-civilizational classification of peoples in order to define national identity, then Israeli leaders have always used civilizationism. The Israeli identity as promoted by the Israeli state has always been deeply informed by the Jewish identity.

Let us analyze the Israeli declaration of independence, the foundational document of Israel. It is a modern document, calling the new state democratic and granting rights to all people living in it, but references to Jewish people and their history and civilization abound. The relationship between the people signing the most important document in Israel's history and the land where they are establishing a new state is based on religion, religious history, religious books, and religious civilization. Without going into the debates happening at the time of the declaration, this article focuses on how this seminal document, as it was passed and it exists now, refers to the Jewish people, their history, and the Bible. It is difficult to make sense of several sections of this document or even the name “Israel” without knowing the history of Judaism and Jewish civilization. The word “Jews” is mentioned five times while the word “Jewish” is mentioned nineteen times in the one-page declaration. Israel is used twenty-seven times and the combination “Eretz-Israel” twelve times. Both these words have religious significance and come directly from the Bible (Knesset 2022). Eretz Yisrael or Eretz Israel was mentioned for the first time in 1 Samuel 13:19 to refer to the land promised to the Jewish people:

Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole Eretz–Yisrael because the Philistines had said, “Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!”

Later, it is used many times again, although the exact boundaries of the land are not clear. Similarly, the word Israel has biblical significance. In the Book of Genesis, Jewish Patriarch Jacob wrestled with a *man* until daybreak without being overpowered and was then blessed and given the name “Israel”, which means “one who wrestles/struggles with God”. This name was then used to denote Jacob’s progeny, specifically, descendants of his twelve sons (the Twelve Tribes of Israel) and more broadly, the Jewish people.

The very start of the declaration informs that the declaration was signed in Eretz–Israel and it is capitalized to point out its significance. The first paragraph also refers to the land as the birthplace of Jewish people, where they attained statehood, and created the Jewish civilization (cultural values of national and international significance). It also refers to the Bible as the eternal Book of Books that the Jewish people gave to the world.

The declaration then refers to one of the most important events in Jewish history, the exile from Eretz–Israel, and how the people remained hopeful of returning to “their” land. This is a clear exposition of civilizationism as people living in Ethiopia, Morocco, Poland, France, India, Palestine, Iran, Spain, etc., are all linked to Eretz–Israel because they belonged to one religion. Although one could argue that Jewish ethnicity is also common among all these people, the whole impression of the declaration is religious.

Next, one observes a reference to the Jewish calendar, a calendar used by the Jewish people to mark religious events and holidays. Led by a secular Jew, most of the signatories of the declaration were secular European Jews, who had spent their lives according to the solar Gregorian calendar, but they decided to give precedence to the Jewish calendar thrice in this declaration. First, it is used to indicate the year of the First Zionist Congress. The Gregorian calendar year is also given but it is in parentheses. Later, the ending date of the League of Nations’ mandate is given as “the eve of Sabbath, the 6th Iyar, 5708 (15th May, 1948)”. Again, the Gregorian calendar date is given a secondary position. Finally, in the end, the signing date of the declaration is given as “ON THIS SABBATH EVE, THE 5TH DAY OF IYAR, 5708 (14TH MAY, 1948)”, (capitalization in the original). The Sabbath is mentioned twice most likely to give further religious significance to the event. Jewish civilizationism clearly permeates the whole document.

The reference to the First Zionist Congress again justifies the struggle for the state of Israel as the “national rebirth” of Jewish people in their “own country”. The “historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz–Israel and the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home” is again referred to in connection with the Balfour Declaration (1917) and the League of Nations’ mandate. Then, in capitalized words, the state of Israel is declared established by the people gathered in the room again referring to “BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT”. If the religious or Biblical idea of “promised land” is rejected or considered unimportant, all these above references cannot be understood. They only make sense because all of us know that although most of these European people, whose ancestors have lived in Europe for generations, have no direct connection with Palestine, they do have a historic religious connection.

The end of the declaration is again replete with religious references. Israel seems more like a reimagination and recreation of the ancient Jewish kingdoms, instead of a modern state. Jewish immigration to the new state becomes a significant action and Jewish people are not referred to as an ethnic community but as “Exiles”, a religious reference. Next, the universal values of freedom, justice, and peace are mentioned as the foundational values of the new Israeli state but the declaration makes clear that these values are envisaged in a specific religious way, “as envisaged by the prophets of Israel”. The final paragraph mentions “PLACING OUR TRUST IN THE ROCK OF ISRAEL” (capitalization in the original). The “rock of Israel” has again Biblical antecedents. In Psalm 19:15, God is referred to as the people’s rock and redeemer:

Let the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

This reference to “rock of Israel” was in fact a compromise between Orthodox who wanted to invoke the name of God and secular Jews, who opposed any mention of God. In the end, God could not be left out (Strum 1995).

6. The State Symbols

After the creation of the state, Israel’s founding fathers had to choose symbols of the new state. Flag and anthem are particularly very important as the state is regularly identified by them. The colors, patterns, and pictures on the flag are chosen based on what is important for the state and its elites. As the Israeli state was created based on Jewish civilizationism, symbols that are linked with Jewish civilization were chosen by the Israeli elite. Israel’s flag has many religious connotations. It has a blue Star of David in the middle and two horizontal blue stripes that are inspired by similar stripes on a tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl (Sapir and Statman 2015).

The Star or Shield of David (Magen David) was not a uniquely Jewish symbol earlier but gradually became popular in many Jewish communities in the Middle Ages. It was associated with the Zionist movement from its inception. The Star became further associated with Judaism when Nazi Germany ordered that all Jews wear a yellow star as a badge or on an armband. The colors blue and white have also been associated with Jews since the late 19th century.

The Star of David is an outstanding example of the variable significance of symbols. The power of the message they convey does not primarily stem from their original use in history. At first, the Star of David had no religious, political, or social connotations whatsoever. It gradually became popular in the gained a very powerful connotation as a result of its terrible abuse by the Nazis.

The blue and white stripes which symbolize a life of purity, guided by the precepts of the Torah, and the Star of David, which symbolizes rebirth and new life for the Jewish people, tie the State of Israel, through its flag, to the past, present, and future. This is evidently why the Zionist flag prevailed over the political considerations that had prompted the leaders of the new state to propose substitutes for it (Gilad 2016).

The Israeli anthem, Hatikvah (the hope), is from a nine-stanza Hebrew poem by a Zionist poet, Naftali Hertz Imber (1856–1909), inspired by a romantic poem and a Roman folk song (Zion 2013). It has many religious connotations. It gives voice to Jewish hopes that one day they will return to Zion, Jerusalem. The original poem mentions many symbols of Jewish civilization. It not only refers to Zion but also to the Jewish Temple, the (Western) Wall, (King) David, and the two thousand years of Jewish exile. It has also been linked to the Passover prayer, “next year in Jerusalem”. Associated with the Zionist movement from the start, it was sung at the First Zionist Congress in 1897 (Marx 2016; Aronson 2008, p. 21). The translation of the two-stanza Hatikvah (truncated poem) that was adopted as the Israeli anthem in 2004 is as follows:

As long as in the heart within,
The Jewish soul yearns,
And toward the eastern edges, onward,
An eye gazes toward Zion.
Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope that is two thousand years old,
To be a free nation in our land
The Land of Zion, Jerusalem. (Marx 2016)

The state emblem of Israel is also religious and depicts a seven-lamp menorah surrounded on both sides by olive branches. The menorah is one of the oldest Jewish religious symbols. According to Bible, it was God that revealed to Moses the design for the menorah, which was then placed in the First Temple. The menorah represents the return of Jews to Jerusalem and the glory of Judaism in Jerusalem (Mishory 2018).

The choice of these state symbols demonstrates beyond doubt the importance of Judaism and the affiliated Jewish culture and civilization to the state of Israel. For Israel,

religio-civilizationism is not something new. It was the basis of Israel's foundation in Palestine, and it is still important to it as it is criticized by many as a settler-colonialist state, established in the Middle East by Europeans.

7. Revival of Ancient Hebrew

Hebrew is a three thousand-year-old language. It is part of a group of Semitic languages, which are a branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Hebrew has been read or spoken since the 14th century BC and was the language of the ancient Jewish people in Palestine. However, by the 19th century, it was a dead language as it had no longer been used by ordinary people for close to two thousand years. It was only used by rabbis in temples and synagogues. Now, it is the national language of Israel and is spoken by almost nine million people. Its miraculous revival as a modern living language is a testament to Israel's deep love and attachment to Jewish civilization.

In the late 19th century, when a slow process of Jewish immigration to Palestine started, Jews spoke a variety of languages. Yiddish, a West Germanic language, was the language mostly spoken by Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern and Central Europe and was very common; most of the early Zionists were from this group. Therefore, many, including Herzl, thought German or Yiddish language should be the language of the future Jewish state. Many local Jewish communities and those who emigrated from the Middle East, Mizrahi Jews, however, spoke Arabic. There was no lingua franca in which everyone could communicate with everyone, although when Jews of different groups needed to talk to each other, some of them did use Hebrew with a Sephardic pronunciation but it had a very limited vocabulary (Kaufman 2005).

At this point, one man, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, made the revival of Hebrew, the ancient language of Jews and Judaism, his life mission. He created hundreds of new Hebrew words, compiled the first modern Hebrew dictionary, and edited the first Hebrew-language newspaper. Later, the Zionist movement adopted Hebrew as the future national language of the Jewish state and, after independence, the state of Israel did everything to make millions of refugees coming from all parts of the world well conversant in Hebrew (Mann 2021; Rabin 2008).

Hebrew was not the mother tongue of even a few hundred Jews. It was no longer spoken by any Jewish community existing in the world. But the Zionist movement and the state of Israel chose this language because it was the language most associated with Judaism and Jewish civilization.

8. First Debate in the Knesset (1949)

Jewish civilizationism is again evident when one analyzes the first significant debate in the new Knesset on 4 April 1949. The issue could not have been more important as it concerned the foundation of the new state. The question to be decided was the approval of the armistice agreement with Jordan, thereby ending the fighting and formally accepting Jordan's annexation of the West Bank. But the debate was on an even bigger issue, i.e., was there going to be a Greater Israel, close to the Biblical version of the "promised land", or a smaller one based on what was possible. There was a lot of criticism as most members wanted a Biblical Israel. However, Ben-Gurion made a historic speech and won the day. The speech is important as it shows that, while negating members' demand for a Greater Biblical Israel, Ben-Gurion never denied the legitimacy of their demands. He never questioned Israel's right on the West Bank or the basis of Israel's right on the West Bank, which certainly had only one basis, religious or Biblical. He only mentioned practical difficulties that did not allow the nascent Israeli state from claiming its birthright. Let us analyze the following speech in detail.

A Jewish state, or shleimut haaretz [the integrity of the biblical Greater Israel]? Well, a Jewish state . . . over the entire country can only be a dictatorship of the minority. A Jewish state, even just in western Palestine [i.e., not including Transjordan], cannot possibly be a democratic state because the number of Arabs

in western Palestine is larger than the number of Jews. We want a Jewish state, even if not in the whole country. Who is “we”? The Zionist Movement, a large majority of the Yishuv and a large majority of the pioneers and the fighters and the soldiers and those who died fighting for it . . . And so, when the question before us was Greater Israel without a Jewish state or a Jewish state without Greater Israel—we chose a Jewish state without Greater Israel . . . We did [initially] demand a Jewish state over the whole country. And it would have been possible had the Mandatory Power [Great Britain] fulfilled its duty and enabled the immigration of a million Jews over two years . . . But now, we do not want to launch further war against the Arabs. I want one thing to be clear. We believe that the creation of the state, albeit less than Greater Israel, was the greatest act in Jewish history since ancient times . . . The criterion by which to judge these armistice agreements is whether they are better than no agreements, not whether they are better than a miracle. If a miracle happens and the Messiah comes, there will be peace in the world and all will be good. But it is our task to save the Jewish people by natural means, until the supernatural miracle happens. And judged by natural means, these armistice agreements have advanced our prospects. They have strengthened our international standing. They have enhanced our ability to bring in immigrants. They have enhanced the possibility of eventual peace and friendship with the Arabs.” (Peres and Landau 2011, pp. 233–35)

Ben-Gurion linked the state of Israel to Jewish civilizationism by arguing that the Jewish leaders “did demand a Jewish state over the whole country” and that there would have been a Biblical (Greater) Israel, encompassing the whole country, if Great Britain had helped them. Then, he praised the creation of Israel, a Jewish state, as “the greatest act in Jewish history since ancient times”, as if Israel was a continuation of what happened thousands of years ago. He was appropriating Judaism, Jewish history, and civilization to support the Israeli state and Israeli nationalism. Next, he brought two religious concepts, “miracles” and “Messiah”, to again use Judaism to justify the actions of the state. What he was contending was that all wishes of Jewish people, including that of Biblical Israel could only be fulfilled when the Messiah arrived, as promised in the Bible, and that there are miracles.

9. The Law of Return (1950) and Nationality Law (1952)

The Israeli Law of Return, passed in 1950 and amended twice in 1955 and 1970, is a very peculiar law. It grants Jewish people automatic citizenship in Israel. Citizenship laws are usually based on blood (*jus sanguinis*, i.e., one or both parents of the person are citizens of the state) or on birth (*jus soli*, i.e., being born in the state, birthright citizenship). No other nation in the world has a law that grants citizenship on arrival to adherents of a particular religion born anywhere in the world. While Jewish people have a right to citizenship, Palestinians living in Israel for generations have limited rights to citizenship (Blecher 2005).

The law leaves no doubt that it is another evidence of civilizationism as it uses the religio-civilizational classification of Jewish people to define Israeli national identity. In the law, the word used for an immigrant to Israel is “Oleh”. The word for immigration to Israel is Aliyah, which is a Hebrew word and means “ascent” or “going up”. According to the Jewish tradition, a journey or pilgrimage to Eretz–Israel would result in the elevation of one’s spirituality, hence the choice of the word Aliyah and Oleh, one who does Aliyah.

Israel’s founding father and first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion made clear, if it was not clear to anyone already, that Aliyah was based on Jewish religion, the Bible, and Jewish civilizationism. While passing the Law of Return, he said:

“This law does not provide for the State to bestow the right to settle upon the Jew living abroad; it affirms that this right is inherent in him from the very fact of being a Jew; the State does not grant the right of return to the Jews of the diaspora. This right preceded (sic) the State; this right built (sic) the State; its source is to

be found in the historic and never broken connection between the Jewish people and the homeland.” (Edelman 1998)

The Nationality Law, passed in 1952, further strengthened the monopoly of Jewish people over Israeli citizenship. While forcibly expelled thousands of local Palestinians, who had lived in Palestine for generations, were denied citizenship, anyone belonging to Judaism was granted citizenship of Israel as a birthright, to be claimed whenever they liked. In 1970, the automatic citizenship was extended from Jews to their non-Jewish children, grandchildren, and their spouses (Acco 2020).

It can be argued based on the above discussion that these laws were based on Jewish civilizationism which preceded the state and created the state. Even an atheist Jew, who does not believe in God or the Bible, can come to Israel and will be immediately given Israeli citizenship.

10. Nation-State Basic Law (2018)

The above discussion shows that Jewish civilizationism was the basis of Zionism and Israeli nationalism from the start. Israeli nationalism was territorial, but the nationalist idea was based on Judaism and Jewish civilization. Israel was created not to save Jews living in Israel or immigrating to Israel but to save all the Jewish people living in the world and to save the Jewish culture and civilization.

A recent boost to Jewish civilization came with the passage of the Nation-State Basic Law. It is important to point out that Israel does not have a constitution. In the early years, there was a long debate in the first Knesset (Israeli Parliament) about the necessity for a constitution. Initially, there was a pledge by the government that a constitution would be debated and passed. However, later on, there were delays, and numerous members of the governing coalition and opposition parties were not happy. The government gave myriad reasons for not debating and passing a constitution. However, according to the Knesset official website, the foremost reason for not having a constitution was “the alleged clash between a secular constitution and the Halacha (the Jewish religious law).” (Knesset 2007). The growing role of the Jewish civilizationism of Israel also becomes evident when one compares the three constitutional proposals of Dr. Leo Kohn, a Jewish Agency employee who worked for Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs and also served as professor of International Relations at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He was asked to write the constitutional proposals by the Jewish Agency leadership (Radzyner 2010). It was clear that a secular Jewish state in the 20th century could not state emphatically that it had nothing to do with the centuries-old religious law because it was created to save Jewish culture and civilization and it was Halacha or Jewish religious law that had saved Jewish culture and civilization for millennia.

Because of the importance of Halacha for the Jewish people, after much discussion, the suggestion of Knesset member Yizhar Harari (Harari proposal) was accepted, and it was decided that there would be no grand effort to approve an entire constitution in a couple of years. The Knesset would approve the constitution piecemeal. There would be two kinds of laws, regular laws and Basic Laws. The regular legislation would require a simple majority of members attending the session while the Basic Laws—which would be part of the future Israeli constitution—would be approved by a super majority. The Basic Laws would gradually become a constitution. Each Knesset from 1950 onwards has thus acted not only as a Parliament and approved regular legislation but has also acted as a constituent assembly and approved Basic Laws that are considered part of the (future) constitution of Israel (Knesset 2007).

A recent example of Jewish civilizationism was the passage of the Basic Law “Israel—The nation-state of the Jewish people” in July 2018. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared it “a defining moment” in the history of Israel (Bard 2018) as unlike other laws, it clearly established the primacy of Judaism and Jewish people in Israel.

The Nation-State Basic Law declares that “the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People” and “the exercise of the right to national self-determination in the State of

Israel is unique to the Jewish People” (Article 1). This article links the state identity and state nationalism exclusively to people of a specific faith i.e., Judaism. Although around twenty one percent of Israeli citizens are Arabs, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, they are excluded.

It also provides constitutional sanctity to the state flag, state emblem, and national anthem that have clear linkages to Judaism or the Jewish people (Article 2). As discussed above, all three are associated with Jewish civilization. Article 2 of the Basic Law re-affirms Israel’s commitment to Jewish civilizationism. Moreover, these have been given additional protection and significance by making them part of the constitution.

Article 4 declared Hebrew the sole state language. Previously, Arabic and Hebrew were both state languages, although the state never gave Arabic equal importance, status, or recognition. This article further strengthened the relationship between the state and Jewish civilization, due to Hebrew’s special relationship with Judaism and Jewish civilization, as explained above.

The law also states that Israel will remain open for Jewish immigration (Article 5). It also makes it mandatory for the Israeli state to preserve ties with the Jewish diaspora and to “preserve the cultural, historical and religious heritage of the Jewish People among Jews in the Diaspora” (Article 6). Perhaps most controversially, the law declares that Jewish settlement development is a national value and orders the state to encourage and promote the establishment and strengthening of such settlements (Article 7). Finally, the Sabbath and the Jewish holidays were established as state holidays and the Hebrew calendar as the official state calendar (Article 8 and 10) (Government of Israel 2018). All these changes codify Israel’s special relationship with Jewish civilization and the Israeli state’s efforts to promote Jewish civilizationism. Supporters of the Basic Law have argued that many (or most) of the provisions in the law depict the reality of today’s Israel. However, it was only in 2018 that the Basic Law was codified for the next generations (Berger 2018; Bard 2018).

11. Conclusions

As explained at the start of the chapter, Jewish civilizationism in Israel is different and unique, although the relationship between religions and civilizationism is common in the 21st century (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). Israeli Jewish civilizationism is not specific to rightwing parties and movements; it is not recent, and it is not specific to populist leaders. It is old, bipartisan, and used by both populist and old mainstream leadership. Both Ben-Gurion, a secular socialist Prime Minister in the 1950s, and Bibi Netanyahu, a conservative rightwing—and some say a populist—Prime Minister in the 21st century, were believers in and propagators of Jewish civilizationism. The reason is its link with the Israeli state and its nationalism. The creation of a new Jewish state in the Middle East or Palestine cannot be explained without resorting to Jewish civilizationism.

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