

Circus in a Frayed Tent

by

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The larger historical context

At the end of the 19th century, the convergence of the ancient Jewish messianic hope for restored sovereignty, secular humanism, and romantic nationalism gave rise to a new movement, Zionism, which actively sought the re-establishment of a Jewish sovereign state in the area where one had existed during the first millennium BCE. This movement ultimately attained its goal, in 1948. Along the way, it revolutionized Jewish identity, raising a question which has yet to find a definitive answer: Is Judaism a religion, a nationality, or something else?

Since the sovereign state of Israel contains, like just about every other state in the world, a population that is mixed religiously and ethnically, and since it defines itself as both a democracy and a Jewish state, this unresolved question regarding the definition of “Jewish” vexes any attempt to explain and contain – not to mention resolve – issues that are ongoing sources of uncertainty, tension, and even open conflict in the region: issues regarding individual rights, religious freedom, minority rights, cultural autonomy, and borders. “Who is a Jew?” and “What is a Jewish state?” are questions that have occupied the Israeli parliament, courts, and popular discourse since the state was formed.

This dilemma is of course not limited to the Jewish sphere: “Who is an Arab” is also not obvious; is “Arab” a political, cultural, linguistic, or religious category? Are Egyptians Arabs just because they speak Arabic? There are Christian and Muslim Arabs – why not Jewish Arabs? There are Egyptian Jews and Syrian Jews; why not Palestinian Jews? For ethnographers these are interesting academic questions; for the inhabitants of the region they are questions that matter, a lot.

Seen in a wider context, this question of how to define identity and how identity should correlate to political divisions and structures is The Dilemma that has driven much of the history of the world in the past century. In the First World War the pluralistic multinational empires of Europe and the Middle East exploded into dozens of ethnic nation states. The resulting division, in which these states were not and could not be homogeneous, was not stable. The status quo after Versailles crashed and burned with World War II; the status quo after that war began to disintegrate with the collapse of communism; and so the number of ethnic national entities has continued to grow as particular identity groups seek to attain sovereignty over their own little plots of territory (always, it seems, at the expense of others). And it seems there is no end in sight to this process. It has now spread to the Middle East with violent upheavals across the region, whose outcomes are not at all clear as yet. And then there’s Africa...

The immediate context

Despite the uncertainty and tension described above, surrounded by a world driven to extreme bloodshed by similar conflicts, through wars and severe internal ideological divisions, Israel has succeeded in surviving as a functioning democracy for over six

decades, with orderly elections, separation of powers, a strong court system, a quasi-constitutional body of basic laws preserving individual freedoms, and relatively free and vibrant public discourse on every topic. One might have thought, until 2000, that the glass was more than half full, and that economic growth, democratic processes, and middle class aspirations would unite the population and overcome the historical baggage and centrifugal forces. Then, in the fall of 2000, in a sudden development that shocked many, riots in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 spread to the Arab communities within the 1949 borders, leading to violent confrontations with the police, and 13 fatalities. Now, looking again at the glass, it suddenly looked emptier than we had imagined. It became clear to many that the sustainability of the Israeli status quo was not obvious.

The population of the state is about 75% Jewish and 20% Arab, (and 5% “other”) with the Arabs about 82% Muslim, 10% Christian, 8% Druze. All are citizens of the state of Israel, with the same ID cards, passports, drivers’ licenses, income tax, social security, health care, and civil and political rights. While there are some mixed neighborhoods in some cities, most Israelis live in ethnically homogeneous communities, and attend separate, parallel school systems operated by the Ministry of Education – the Jews in schools where the primary language is Hebrew; the Arabs studying in Arabic.

There are areas of life which are fully integrated, like the health care system and some commercial and industrial establishments; however, for the most part the two populations lead separate social and cultural lives, in separate residential communities. Jews, as the majority, generally don’t speak Arabic, and rarely enter Arab communities. Arabs, as the minority, generally speak Hebrew, and often work and shop and obtain various services (notably higher education) in Jewish towns and institutions. Most Jews serve in the Israeli army which nominally has universal conscription. Most Arabs are exempt by virtue of their identity (here religion enters and complicates the picture, as Druze Arab men and non-Arab Muslim men are drafted, while Muslim and Christian Arabs are not).

What became starkly clear in 2000—with the unparalleled rioting by Arab citizens-- was that the perception that the above description represented a *modus vivendi*, a stable status quo, was an illusion, and we were sitting on top of a volcano. Separate but equal was painfully unequal. What looked like calm coexistence to the Jewish majority looked, from the underside, like institutionalized injustice in many spheres. When the top blew off, at least some observers realized that without change, deep change, the sustainability of the state might be in question. Is it possible to maintain a functioning democracy in which 20% of the population perceives itself as marginalized – philosophically (this is a “Jewish state”), economically, educationally, and culturally? If there is no common set of values, institutions, and symbols to which the vast majority of the citizens feel a sense of belonging and loyalty, what centripetal forces will hold against the centrifugal ones? Do we have the wisdom, and the will, to move toward creating such a shared core, toward creating a national identity that transcends ethnic or religious identity? Do we have the luxury to continue to refrain from trying?

Why a circus?

The wake-up call of the riots of 2000 gave rise to hand-wringing and soul-searching, and many discussions of “what should be done.” One direction that was and remains crucial is the application of the tools of democracy (public pressure, lobbying, legal action) to bring about a fairer distribution of power and resources. Another direction that has drawn less attention has been the educational and cultural effort to build a cultural common denominator and shared sense of citizenship.

Out of discussions of this challenge arose the idea of a circus. Circus is a multicultural/international tradition, language-independent, non-competitive, based on trust and cooperation, transcending divisions of class and age. Perhaps, it was suggested, circus could serve as a mechanism for creating a shared cultural experience that favored neither majority nor minority, and that could have wide circles of influence since it is a performance art aimed at a mass audience.

The circus arts – juggling, clowning, acrobatics, etc., have been around since time immemorial, and are part of cultures around the world, appearing in religious and secular contexts, from China to Rome to the Temple of Jerusalem. “Traditional” circus-- the nomadic community of performers-- is a fairly recent tradition, originating with equestrian ring shows in 18th century England, and experiencing its greatest flowering with the travelling tent shows of early 20th century North America and Europe.

A motif that seems common to the individual circus arts and to the tradition of the traveling ring show is the pushing of boundaries. Circus performers test the limits of physical strength, of the laws of physics, of social convention. They play with these boundaries, teasing them and the onlookers, often taking real risks themselves – and on behalf of the crowd which identifies with them. In this sense, circus is subversive, and binds audience and performers together in a conspiracy to push the limits of what is acceptable and consensual and safe.

The traveling circus, perhaps because it was here today and gone tomorrow, not part of the established social order, gave off a whiff of the exotic and even the illicit. If one wanted to reject middle class norms and expectations, one “ran away to the circus.” The circus blurred barriers of identity and class, mixing performers and audiences from widely different backgrounds for moments of great excitement and happiness. And then it moved on and life returned to normal. Circus in this sense is part of the same phenomenon of temporary casting-off of norms that is found in Carnival/Mardi Gras/Purim.

As economics and technology and cultural shifts took their toll on the tent-show tradition, in the mid-20th century, a new manifestation of the circus tradition arose: social circus. Circus artists and educators around the world began to realize that there are aspects of the circus arts in general, and the circus show tradition in particular, that can serve as tools for education and social change. Adolescence, after all, is all about pushing boundaries and taking risks. Youth at risk are at risk because they feel the need to take risks.

What if adolescents could be given the opportunity to take real risks, but in a context that accepted and even glorified them, while controlling the danger involved? What if persons whose lives are constricted by boundaries of class and religion and ethnicity

could experience an environment where such boundaries are at least temporarily erased? In the past half century, social circus, in particular youth circus, has grown to a world-wide movement; there are dozens if not hundreds of circuses throughout the developed and the developing world, large and small, some highly sophisticated, professional institutions, some local, home-grown. There are national and international networks and associations, and a growing body of academic research (for a partial bibliography, see: http://community.simplycircus.com/research/thesis_papers.htm) and attempts at creating standards of training and safety. There is a variety of styles and emphases, reflecting different professional approaches and different cultural environments.

The Galilee Circus

The founders of the Galilee Circus were only vaguely aware of the history and current status of youth circus in the world. They were drawn to the idea of circus out of an intuitive sense that an activity that was not dependent on language, that required a high degree of cooperation and trust among the participants, and that represented a multicultural tradition, might be appropriate as a means for breaking down barriers of fear and alienation between Jewish and Arab youth in the Galilee, who live completely separate lives but within a compact geographical area.

In the fall of 2003, the Galilee Circus began operation, one afternoon a week in a rented school gymnasium in the Jewish city of Karmiel, with nine Jewish children and 16 Arabs. The focus was on juggling, unicycle, stilt-walking, and basic tumbling. There was a performance for the families and invited community members at the end of the year. Ten years later, the circus comprises over 60 children aged 6-21, holds practice four times per week, and features juggling, unicycle, tight rope, trapeze, aerial silks, acro-balance, and more. It performs frequently (for a fee) for a variety of audiences, local, national, and international.

As a result of a chance encounter in 2006, a partnership developed between the Galilee Circus and Circus Harmony in St. Louis. At that point the Galilee Circus was still a small and not particularly intensive program, with practices once or twice a week, and occasional performances. Circus Harmony was already a well-established circus school with a very professional youth performance troupe. Thus, when a delegation of performers and staff from Circus Harmony spent two weeks with the Galilee Circus in Israel in 2007, and hosted a delegation from the Galilee for two weeks in St. Louis in 2008, the impact on the nature of the Galilee Circus program was powerful. In a relatively short time, the expectations, the tone, and the degree of commitment and responsibility that characterized the Israeli program underwent a massive upgrade. The exposure to a world-class youth circus raised aspirations and skill levels, instilled new habits and a new self-image. From an after-school club the Galilee Circus advanced to being a true youth circus, in which performance was central. Five years (and another cycle of reciprocal exchanges) later, the Galilee Circus is unrecognizable compared to how it appeared before entering this partnership.

Other, less intensive, encounters with youth circuses abroad have also had impact, notably a training exchange with Circus Poehaa in the Netherlands (funded by the Anna Lindh Foundation), which exposed the coaches and performers to European circus traditions, influenced by the Commedia del Arte. The Galilee Circus has also

benefitted from professional support by volunteers for varying periods of time, bringing experience from youth circuses in Europe and the United States.

These encounters with the world of youth circus have a significant value beyond their contribution to the level of skills and showmanship of the Galilee Circus. They link the participants into a world-wide network of “circus people,” a network that, in the tradition of circus, transcends local, ethnic, religious, and national identity. In the first meeting with the St. Louis troupe, one of the American performers asked upon arrival, “How am I supposed to know who is a Jew and who is an Arab?” Which was, of course, exactly the point: the goal was to create a place where he was not supposed to know, because, at least for a few hours or days or weeks, it really didn’t matter. The circus, as the place where boundaries and limits are pushed or blurred or overcome, is the place where participants can leave their hyphenated identities outside the tent and be just “circus people,” sharing a language and a set of formative experiences with fellow performers around the world – the place where they are judged by what they can do (together with others) and not by their group affiliation.

Challenges

Consistently, through the years, a central challenge has been the recruitment of Jewish participants. A few reasons can be suggested for this:

- There is generally a larger array of after-school activities offered in the Jewish communities of the region than in the Arab towns and villages.
- Jews are more likely to be afraid of or uncomfortable participating in a mixed activity, feeling no particular motivation to integrate with the minority, whereas Arabs are more likely to seek out such programs as a means of integration and advancement.
- Jews tend to be unfamiliar with Arabs and Arab culture, whereas Arabs are familiar and comfortable with the majority culture.

Over the years, with the visible success of the circus and the spread of its reputation, this challenge has diminished somewhat; however, maintaining the current equal proportion requires a serious marketing effort each fall.

On the other hand, while for seven years the circus met in a school gymnasium in the Jewish town of Karmiel, in 2010 the program was moved to a community center in the Arab village of Ba’aneh – when no suitable facility could be found in Karmiel – and the proportion of Jewish participants held constant. We take this as an indication that the reluctance of Jews to participate has diminished over the years, and that the modeling by the veteran Jewish performers of willingness to travel to practice in an Arab village has served to encourage younger participants to see this aspect of the program as acceptable.

Another important challenge has, of course, been funding. Keeping the doors open and the balls in the air has required a constant effort to obtain foundation grants and individual contributions. Participants pay an annual tuition fee which is comparable to the cost of other after-school activities, and which covers about 20% of the cost of operation. In recent years, fees for performances, paid by groups and institutions sponsoring shows for their members, have provided another 10% of operating costs.

A third challenge, which has diminished over the years but is still a source of frustration, is that of visibility. The circus exists, of course, not just for its participants, but for its audience. While the improvement in quality and the growing focus on performance have led to increased audiences, the total number of people in Israel who have seen a show or who are even aware of the existence of the project remains very small. It seems that public relations and marketing must be an integral part of operating such a program, requiring serious investment of thought and resources in order to maximize the impact of the circus on Israeli society.

Achievements

It was not obvious, when the project began, how great its potential was. As the years have gone by, evidence has accumulated that the implementation of social circus in the Jewish-Arab reality in the Galilee was indeed an appropriate action, and has had significant impact.

One piece of evidence is the simple fact that the circus has not only survived a decade, but grown, both retaining children for years and attracting new participants every year. At the same time, it has evolved from a minor weekly informal interest group to a highly skilled performing troupe with a graded series of preparatory levels, and a growing – paying – audience. It has taken its place as one among many youth circuses around the world, and maintains active connections with several other circuses. It is interesting to note that most school- or sports-based Arab-Jewish encounter programs are quite short-term – usually a limited number of sessions scattered across a year. In the circus there are children who have worked intensively together for as long as ten years, essentially growing up together.

One very gratifying development has been the existence, from the early years, of an active parents' committee, meeting periodically to discuss ways of supporting and advancing the circus, and planning social and cultural events for the circus participants' families – creating a community of families around the circus, and spreading the impact of the project by bringing together Jewish and Arab parents and siblings of the participants around a shared interest. Such joint informal activity by Jewish and Arab adults is not a widespread phenomenon, to say the least.

We have noted the impact of the circus on the participants' own identities and values through informal observation and occasional more formal evaluation interviews. A typical example of their responses can be found in this excerpt from a feature by Kristin Holmes, in the Philadelphia Inquirer, July 21, 2012:

"It was weird at the beginning, to be so together with Arabs. It didn't feel normal," said Einat Opalin, 17, who specializes in performing aerial stunts while wrapped in strips of silk. "But I changed my mind. I saw that a person is still a person."

Opalin and fellow performer Roi Shaffran, 15, live in Karmiel, a Jewish city near Deir al-Asad, an Arab town where fellow performer Hala Assadi lives with her family.

"I've learned to trust them and believe in my friends, and not be shy," said Assadi, 14, known for her contortionist-like flexibility.

Many of the troupe members' friends outside the circus question or deride their association with people who don't share their background.

"I don't care," Assadi said. "I know I'm doing the right thing."

Shaffran has learned not to talk about the circus with friends because of what he describes as their negative point of view.

"I used to say things to them, but I found that if you talk to friends about politics and religion, nothing comes out of it," he said.

Defining success

There is an ongoing debate among "peace educators" in Israel as to the relevance of programs like the Galilee Circus. There is one school of thought (probably the dominant one) that argues that cultural interactions like this one merely plaster over the difficult reality, creating an illusion of "coexistence" which is just a cover-up of a deep and painful conflict. According to this view, such projects are even dangerous, for they create a false sense of security and reconciliation that will ultimately lead to bitter disillusionment when the underlying conflict erupts through the superficial sugar-coating of personal friendship. We are juggling in a burning tent, distracting the crowd from the hard truth. What we need to do is to confront the conflict, to talk about it, to process it, to hold it up to the light. Only then do we have a chance of overcoming it. There are many programs that follow this approach, in which participants go through an often painful process of trying to listen (or trying not to listen) to the historical grievances and personal fears of the other, and through this to reach some kind of common ground.

Another perspective is this: Before we can have a serious and effective discussion of the historical and ideological conflicts that divide us, we have to have a common language, some kind of cultural common denominator, a joint loyalty, an awareness of the humanity of the other – otherwise, the other remains other to us, and his/her claims are the claims of a group, or a caricature, not of a person toward whom we feel any affection, responsibility, or commitment. If we really share nothing but the conflict itself, if we and our relationship are defined by the conflict, then maybe we almost have a perverse interest in its perpetuation.

Circus will not bring peace to the Middle East. But it can help to make dialogue possible by reducing fears, lowering barriers, and building trust. It can provide a model, unattainable perhaps on the large scale, of a shared loyalty that transcends ethnic identities. It can teach the art of taking risks for the common good. It can demonstrate, to a wide audience, that what appears to be impossible is indeed possible. None of these may be sufficient to bring about the requisite social change, but without them, no change is possible.

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