CHAPTER 7

Israeli Youth: Homeland, Diaspora, and Global Identity

Equally complex is the relationship of Jewish-Israeli youth to their country. The small country is home to a highly diverse population. Jewish immigrants have been coming to Israel from around the globe for over a century. Some Israeli youth recently arrived in the country themselves; others have grandparents or great-grandparents who were pioneers of the pre-State settlement. Israeli Jews span the religious spectrum from ultra-Orthodox through atheist; spiritual/religious beliefs affect the nature of their relationship with Israel. As the state school system is divided into general and religious streams, and there are numerous independent schools (mainly catering to the most religious populations), students receive differing narratives on the history of Israel and the meaning of citizenship.

Further, Israelis also move to other parts of the world, so that there are thousands of youth whose parents are Israeli, who think of themselves as Israeli, and who may spent part of their time in Israel, but are being raised and educated in other countries (mainly but not limited to North America and Western Europe).

1 Being Israeli

1.1 National Pride

Overall, Israeli students are proud of their national identity. Almost all the students in both streams said they think it is ‘good’ to live in Israel and describe their emotional connection to the country as close.

Students in the religious school system expressed somewhat stronger pride in national and religious identity than their peers in the general school system. Similarly, within the secular school system those calling themselves religiously

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1 About 20% of Israeli citizens are not Jewish: 17% are Muslim, 2% are Christian 2%, and 1.5% are Druze. http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_02&CYear=2010. This chapter does not address the national identity of Israel’s non-Jewish population.

2 Ichilov, Salomon, & Inbar, 2005.
traditional indicated greater national pride. The students in the two school streams were equally likely to describe their relationship to Israel as close.

In sharp contrast to their Diaspora peers, for the Israeli Jews the relationship to the country is seen as a key part of their Jewish identity: 80% of the students in both the religious and general school said they see their relationship to Israel as a component of their personal Jewish identity.

“Born again” as Israeli. Further, the Israeli students were presented with the same hypothetical question of what nationality they would choose if they could be ‘born again’. Overall, three quarters would retain their same identity as Israeli Jews. In the religious school system, over 90% declared they would choose again to be Israelis. This was somewhat lower in the general school system, particularly among the younger students. The greatest difference between these students and those in the religious schools was not an explicit desire to live in the Diaspora, but rather the sentiment that nationality was not important: 14% of the 9th graders in the non-religious schools said national and religious identity would not be important to them in this hypothetical scenario, while only 2% of their peers in the religious schools gave this answer. A survey of Israeli adults posed the same question, and found similar results: 71% said they would choose to be born again as Israelis if given the opportunity.³

³ Arian & Keissar-Sugarmen, 2012.