The story most often heard in discussions of religion and secularity in Israel is the parable of the two wagons. It is taken from a famous debate between David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, and Rabbi Avraham Yesha'yahu Karelitz, popularly known as the Hazon Ish, a prominent religious leader at the time.

Ben-Gurion asked the rabbi for his views on the desired relations between church and state and between religious and nonreligious people in Israel. The rabbi answered that religious and secular Jews were like two wagoners trying to cross a narrow bridge from opposite directions. Who should cross first? The wagon that is less loaded and therefore lighter should move to the side and make way for the wagon with the heavier load, the rabbi argued. He explained the metaphor in the following way: There are two different cultural agendas in the State of Israel. One is the agenda of the secular Zionist Jews; the other is that of the religious Jews. The religious wagon should be allowed to cross first because it is much heavier, laden with tradition, values, commandments, and heritage.

Ben-Gurion adopted this metaphor and its implications, viewing the empty secular wagon as the one that had to make way for religious demands in the formation of church-state relations in the emerging state.

Some scholars claim that the story is an accurate portrayal of church-state relations in Israel to this day. They argue that although the majority of Israelis are secular Jews, the religious Jews in the country have excessive political influence. According to their line of argument, this is due to the historical error committed by the founders of the state and manifested, for example, in Ben-Gurion's actions and in those of other politicians who wanted the religious parties to join the government coalition at any price. The outcome of their actions is an ongoing conflict and a non-liberal system.

The linguistic correlation in Hebrew between the words halal (emptiness) and hiloni (secularist) encourages and reflects the Israeli political discourse on the issue. The “empty” part is allegedly lacking in fixed norms
and values; that is, it is flexible and changeable, so it should adjust itself to religious seriousness and “fullness”. However, the story of religion and secularization in Israel is much more complex and is built upon much more than clear-cut dichotomies, mutual misconceptions, and narrow political considerations.

The objective of this chapter is to analyze the complexities and dialectics of the concepts of religion and secularism in Israel and in the Hebrew language, as well as the manifestations of these complexities in Israel’s socio-political dynamics. I examine some of the theological and practical aspects of religion and secularism in Israel, as well as the tensions and contradictions between religion and secularism and their various manifestations in contemporary processes.

The first part of the chapter analyzes the apparatus of Jewish-Israeli religion and secularism. This analysis focuses on parts of the linguistic and theological background of Israel’s definition of religion, and on secularization processes and their impact on the formation of Israel’s political identity. This contextualized analysis illustrates the complex nature of religion and secularism that is peculiar to Israel. The second part of the chapter addresses few manifestations of the religious and secular formations in various spheres of Israeli socio-political life. The chapter concludes by pointing to current changes in the formation of the religious and the secular in Israel, changes that may be labeled “post-secularism”.

Religious-Secular (Dati-Hiloni):
Linguistic and Theological Settings

There is no Hebrew equivalent for the word ‘religion’ and its variants in Latin. Discussion of religion in its Christian sense usually focuses on the configuration of faith, institutions, theology, and practices. It is a category that stems from the peculiarities of Western Christian history. In late antiquity it developed within the broader context of Roman culture and the Church, to distinguish between the corpus of a person’s civil pursuits and the worship of God. However, even in Christian tradition, this concept was not static throughout history. The term religio came into frequent use in its modern sense only in the fifteenth century. Prior to that, the discussion revolved around fides (faith) at all its levels and with all its mystical, theological, and practical meanings. Religio entered the discussion when it became necessary to offer a new formation of the religion in opposition to the state and the new science, as part of the adoption and