

McIsrael? On the “Americanization of Israel”

Drive up to Golani junction in the hills above Tiberias at nearly any time of day, and you'll find dozens of soldiers, hitchhiking home or back to their bases. A few meters away stand the stone and concrete structures of the Golani Memorial—a national shrine to the fallen of that crack infantry brigade . . . Since last year, some of the structures have been partially obscured by a new kind of monument: the golden arches of a McDonald's franchise. Welcome to the new face of Israel!

OPENING A McDONALD'S IN THE immediate vicinity of a national shrine not only modified the character of the place, traditionally associated with national memory, bereavement, and national history.³ It could also serve as a symbolic statement. As the above comment demonstrates, the juxtaposition of a McDonald's and a national shrine seemed to be emblematic of what the commentator described as “the new face of Israel,” referring specifically to the process of the “Americanization of Israel.” What remained unclear, however, was the meaning of the “new.” Did it refer to the “Americanized” character of the place, or did it refer to the possibility of a friendly co-existence of a local tradition and a newly-imported American icon? Did the “new” mean a cultural conflict or a cultural fusion? Or perhaps the “new” meant simply a state of cultural confusion.

The ambiguity exuded by the new character of the Golani Junction is inherent to the issue of “Americanization.” It is a relatively simple matter to enumerate the traces of “Americanization” and their impact on various cultural genres and social and political institutions. It is much more difficult to locate Americanization in a broader framework of socio-cultural changes. Generally speaking, in the sphere of culture, “Americanization” denotes the impact of mainly popular American culture on cultural contexts outside of the United States. Basically it involves cultural importation and transplan-



The McDonald's restaurant, Haifa.
Courtesy of the Government Press Office.

tation. Americanization means a cultural change. Yet beyond the well-known and frequent referrals to global appeal of and fascination with America in general and American mass culture in particular, Americanization takes place in distinctly local contexts and cultural settings.

What seems to be a global process of Americanization is actually a set of different Americanizations, each representing the impact of America and American popular culture on the local cultural context. But each case of Americanization should also be explained in terms of the local social and cultural context in which it takes place. Ignoring these contexts amounts to a rather reductionist view of Americanization as a mechanical process of change that occurs as an aspect of a global "shock wave," regardless of specific local conditions.

The modified personality of the Golani Junction concretized in terms of place and local landscape the emergent "new Israel." Referring to the "Americanization" of Israel highlighted one aspect of the process, albeit highly visible and publicly prominent. As evident in sporadic public utterances and media commentaries, Americanization seemed to epitomize the nature of the "new Israel" emerging in the 1990s.³ Focusing on Americanization as the main feature of a rather elusive and perplexing process of

change is understandable, since the introduction of the "American way of life" was easily accessible in terms of the prominent icons of American popular culture which became an aspect of the Israeli experience. Yet beyond the intuitive understanding that the "Americanization of Israel" in the 1990s suggests a major change in the ideological and cultural make-up of Israeli society, some questions arise: What actually does the "Americanization of Israel" mean, and is it a feature of the 1990s, or, rather, the culmination of a long process? Is it only a local variation on a global theme, or does it resonate with, and reflect deeper, changes in Israeli society and culture? A further issue is the manner in which references to Americanization are employed in a wider debate; namely, about the new character Israel is in the process of assuming. And last, but surely not least: What are the consequences of "Americanization" for Israeli society and culture?

This paper sets out to examine the "Americanization of Israel" in terms of these questions. The central thesis is that it has been both an important aspect of the emergent "new Israel," representing a society at the final stages of the foundation phase of its history.

The analysis does not purport to survey all the phenomena that fall under the category of "Americanization," nor does it attempt to pass a moral judgment on the Americanization of Israel. Its main objective is to place it in the relevant contexts; namely, the global and the local, at the convergence of which "Americanization" has taken place. Further, the paper discusses the manner in which "Americanization" has been embedded in the public discourse of Israeli cultural identity and national ethos. The paper concludes with an attempt to evaluate the meaning and significance of Americanization with specific emphasis on the public debate about it, being an aspect of a wider debate about Israel's cultural identity, value system, and national character.

FEATURES OF AMERICANIZATION

"For us, Coca-Cola is the symbol of freedom"
(The general director of Coca-Cola in Albania)⁴

From the American perspective, Americanization represents the export of patterns of American mass culture, especially in the spheres of consumption, entertainment, and leisure, into foreign cultural contexts. From a local perspective, it entails appropriation and imitation of the American way of life and the subsequent transformation of local cultural conditions. Both perspectives represent two sides of the same coin; namely, the "global hegemony" of the United States and the triumph of American capitalist

culture, the spread of which seems to create a global superculture that undermines and even supersedes local cultures and traditions.

Focusing on specific icons of American mass culture—for example, Coca-Cola, Levi's, or, more recently, McDonald's—tends to obscure the fact that Americanization also represents the diffusion of American cultural themes, codes, norms, and values. This aspect of Americanization represents a substantial cultural change that goes beyond the mere availability of American products on the local market.

A feature of Americanization is the significance assigned to the image in the cultural production of social reality. The image and image-making are central to American culture. According to Daniel J. Boorstin, "An image is the kind of ideal which becomes real only when it has become public"⁵ The importance assigned to the image reflects the notion of social reality as a set of images that can be tailored by experts. Social reality is an interplay between images, and this has far-reaching cultural consequences: images replace ideals, celebrities supersede heroes. Rating measures value, and values supplant virtues. Public opinion is manufactured in terms of opinion polls, and politicians trade off images rather than ideological commitments, to the effect that politics is embedded in mass culture. Boorstin also observes, "[t]he shift in common experience from an emphasis on 'truth' to an emphasis on 'credibility' . . ."⁶

Patterning advertisement and commercial television according to American models also means the celebration of the image as a quintessential theme of Americanized societies and cultures. It should be noted that Americanization also entails the development of retail mechanisms and modes of consumption that transcend specific products. In this sense, America is not only exporting consumer products, but also, and more importantly, the means to consume those and other products. To this category belong supermarkets, and more recently shopping malls and credit cards, designed to enhance and rationalize consumption. Donald Ritzer observes that "[f]ast-food restaurants are bringing to the rest of the world not only Big Macs and french fries, but more importantly the American style of eating on the run . . . Similarly, credit cards make it easier to purchase American goods . . . and more generally, the American consumer culture."⁷ Yet perhaps the crucial point here is Ritzer's original observation that, unlike Coca-Cola and Levi's, "[f]ast food restaurants and credit cards are better seen as means of consumption than as consumer products."

Americanization celebrates the notion that American mass culture, especially in the sphere of consumption, entertainment, and leisure, is a model worthy of emulation. Americanization evinces popular fascination

with the American way of life as the embodiment of the American Dream. In the popular mind worldwide, America is not only “the land of the free,” but a consumer paradise. The notion of America as technologically advanced, economically prosperous, and culturally vibrant makes it a model for emulation for the rest of the world. In this sense, America is the quintessential model of an advanced capitalist culture. This model celebrates market economy, individual freedom, civil rights, and democratic government. It also suggests social inequality and acute commercialization of social life, the supremacy of the image, and the veneration of consumption. Significantly, the model endorses individualism and hedonism, self-fulfillment, and the pursuit of happiness as the quest for unrestrained pleasure. In this sense, Americanization mainly entails the transplantation of characteristic patterns of American mass culture that pertain to consumerism, entertainment, and leisure. This aspect of Americanization is the reason why it is perceived by its opponents as a harbinger of vulgarity, commercialism, and superficiality. For others, it represents what is modern, contemporary, advanced, and trendy.

Despite the high esteem accorded to the American way of life, it should be noted that Americanization is the result of the activities of local agents



The Malha shopping mall in Jerusalem.
Courtesy of the Government Press Office.

that have a stake, be that economic, political, or cultural in the strict meaning of the term, in endorsing and promoting it. Furthermore, it is not a mechanical superimposition or a simple procedure of transplantation, but rather a dynamic process of selective borrowing and active appropriation of patterns of American massculture.⁸ It is an interplay between the American model and local conditions that produces each specific Americanization as a local variation on the global theme. The tensions and conflicts that accompany Americanization reflects what seems to be its tendency to emphasize modernity at the expense of tradition and uniformity distinctiveness.

THE LOCAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

As a process of cultural change, “Americanization” should be understood in the parameters of the effects it has on local conditions, which provide the appropriate frame of reference for understanding the meaning and significance of Americanization in the specific historical and cultural context in which it takes place. In Israel, where Americanization denotes a cultural reorientation that marks the transition to a post-foundational stage of Zionist history, the relevant frame of reference is the Zionist society that emerged in Jewish Palestine in the nation-building phase of Zionist history. The discussion in this section emphasizes two ideological themes that dominated the foundation phase of Zionist society. One concerns cultural orientation: the renewal of Jewish culture in national terms and in a Hebrew mold. The other addresses the pioneering ethos as a matrix of Zionist ideals and collectivist values. As a celebrated ideal and a dominant image, the Hebrew-speaking pioneer represented the quintessential “new Jew” that the Zionist revolution sought to create.

At the center of the Zionist revolution was the notion of national renewal and specifically, the shaping of a Hebrew cultural identity. Hebrew was the cultural idiom of national revival, and the casting of Jewish identity in a Hebrew mold was a primary Zionist objective.

Another central theme of the nation-building phase of Zionist history was the pioneering ethos. To a large extent this ethos was associated with the ideology of the politically and culturally hegemonic Labor Zionism, which was suffused with socialist ideas. The pioneering ethos celebrated service, contribution, fulfillment, and self-sacrifice in collectivist terms. It entailed the rejection of self-interest in the service of higher, national goals. According to this ethos the most prominent expression of pioneering activity was the foundation of a kibbutz. This form of Zionist settlement became associated with modern Israel, and, as late as 1972, the kibbutz still represented “the soul of Israel.”⁹

In a speech delivered in 1935, Chaim Weizmann, the prominent Zionist leader and the future President of Israel, explained the cultural aspect of the Zionist revolution:

We did not come here to copy the life of Warsaw, Pinsk, London, etc. The content of Zionism is changing all values according to which Jews lived under the pressure of foreign cultures. But where are the new values created here? We live here a life of translation, translation of *galut*. Even Hebrew is translated. We have to change the translation and create the original. We are only the pioneers and have to pave the road for those who will follow us.¹⁰

The outstanding significance assigned to Hebrew cultural identity and to the socialist-oriented pioneering ethos characterized Zionist society in the stage of its formation. Both belonged to the nation-building phase of Zionist history. In this phase, Zionist society was an ideologically mobilized, morally puritan, and economically austere society, at least as far as the official ideology of the politically and culturally hegemonic Labor movement was concerned. At this stage, pioneering was celebrated, whereas Western popular culture was dismissed as irrelevant and even decadent and therefore corruptive. In 1964, a tour of the Beatles in Israel was canceled because the state refused to provide the necessary foreign currency; according to the view of the Education Ministry, the concert was of no cultural value. Yet the 1960s also witnessed the gradual erosion of the pioneering ethos promoted by the state as long as David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of the state, had been in power. Ben-Gurion resigned in 1963, and his resignation signaled the end of an era also in the cultural history of Israel. This does not mean that a revolutionary change was launched, but rather the onset of a process of opening-up to outer, mainly Western, cultural influences and a parallel decline of the officially promoted pioneering ethos.

The year 1967 and the Six-Day War are commonly considered as a watershed in Israeli history, an historical turning point that compels the notion of “before” and “after.” From the perspective of the cultural history of Israel, 1968 was to be highly significant. In 1968, on the occasion of the 20th Independence Day, Israel Television began broadcasting from Jerusalem. Though only one channel of a state-controlled broadcasting corporation, the introduction of television amounted to a mini-cultural revolution that signaled a further distancing from official views held in the era of Ben-Gurion. In an unrelated move in the same year, a new beverage was launched: Coca-Cola. The Hebrew logo of the American version of the “taste of life” was imprinted on bottles filled in Israel, and Israeli consumers were able to

partake in the “real thing,” which soon replaced local substitutes such as Tempo Cola and the like.

The relevant context for launching Coca-Cola in Israel was neither commercial nor cultural, but rather political. With its operation in Israel, Coca-Cola defied the Arab boycott against firms trading with Israel, and therefore the consumption of this quintessential symbol of Americanization was associated with patriotic sentiments. Tapping into these same sentiments, Israel television launched itself with the transmission of the Independence Day parade held in Jerusalem. Marking the 20th anniversary of Israel’s independence and a celebration of the military victory of the 1967 war, the parade was a major patriotic celebration.

This patriotic connection notwithstanding, the introduction of television and Coca-Cola signaled that Israeli society was undergoing a process of cultural re-orientation and that Israel was losing its pioneering character. The signs of change were everywhere, and more importantly, Israelis were aware of the change and of its meaning. While writing about Dizengoff Street, then at the height of its popularity, a writer for *National Geographic* who visited Israel in the early 1970s quoted an observation made by an Israeli about the changing character of the street: “A few years ago . . . everyone on the street wore khakis or shorts. Now it’s more settled, more fashionable.”¹¹ The meaning of the changes taking place in Israeli society were made explicit by a young Nahal soldier the writer met while visiting a small Nahal settlement on the Golan Heights: “For most young Israelis, . . . the old pioneering dream is fading. They want to be part of the modern country, not the pioneer country.”¹² The juxtaposition of the “modern country” and the “pioneer country” was revealing. It disclosed that the cultural reorientation of Israeli society was widely perceived in terms of modernization. In the 1990s, this process of modernization became generally known as “the Americanization of Israel.”

AMERICANIZATION AND THE EMERGENT “NEW ISRAEL”

*“Once we all built the country. Today we are all start-ups.”*¹³

In the 1990s, the Americanization of Israel became a public issue. On the occasion of Independence Day in 1991, the Hebrew daily *Hadasht* published a special supplement dedicated to different aspects of the Americanization of Israeli popular culture.¹⁴ An article that appeared in 1993 in the Hebrew bi-monthly *Skira Hodshit* suggested a comprehensive survey of the “Americanization of Israel’s culture.”¹⁵ Two years later, the bi-weekly *The Jerusalem Report* dedicated a special issue to the “Americanization of Israel.”¹⁶



The shopping mall at the Dizengoff Center in Tel-Aviv.
Most of the signs are in transliteration or in English.
In the center there is an advertisement for Domino's Pizza.
Courtesy of the Government Press Office.

These articles highlighted Americanization as a central theme of contemporary Israel. On the immediate level, it represented the “invasion of all things American.” On a deeper level, Americanization meant the introduction of consumerist behavior and values, leisure activities and entertainment patterns and lifestyles into Israeli culture. In 1995 Tom Sawicki observed: “Israelis are eating American, shopping American and spending their free time in ways that well-to-do Americans would easily recognize.”¹⁷ In the 1990s, the Americanization of Israel assumed the forms of a cultural revolution, yet it should be noted that this decade witnessed only the culmination of a process that had begun long before. Hollywood films had

always appealed to the public. The first supermarket in Israel was opened in 1958 in Tel-Aviv. In 1960, the government controlled radio, the Voice of Israel, introduced commercials; the public council in charge of it protested against what it considered to be the commercialization of the medium. In mid-1960, the Shalom Tower, the first skyscraper in Israel, was built where the Herzliya Gymnasium, a venerated symbol of Tel-Aviv, had formerly stood. Jeans and Coca-Cola were already available in the late 1960s. In 1977 the first shopping mall in Israel, the Dizengoff Center, was opened in Tel-Aviv, and a little later an Israeli version of a McDonald's appeared in the form of the hamburgers sold at McDavid, a name that made it clear that it was a local variation on an American theme.

The pace of Americanization was accelerated in the 1980s. Color television was introduced in 1980; in 1986, the Ayalon shopping mall in Ramat-Gan was opened and a new mode of shopping spread all over the country, with the new shopping malls and modernist shopping centers catering to an increasingly motorized population. Israel's middle class exchanged small apartments in the cities for the comfort of suburbia that emerged around the big cities, in areas where once citrus trees had grown. Residential and office towers in the cities complemented the Americanization of Israel's urban skyline.

Shopping malls, credit cards, and retail chains promoted mercantile development and consumerist values. Cable and commercial television were introduced in the early 1990s, and the monopoly of the Israel Broadcasting Authority was finally broken in the name of freedom of choice. At the same time, American fast food chains began marketing their products in Israel, along with the philosophy of American fast food. Most notably, McDonald's, the icon of Americanization world-wide, began selling hamburgers in Israel in 1993. Another thing was the Americanization of Israeli politics. This process went beyond adopting American methods, such as primaries and even the hiring of American consultants by both Netanyahu and Barak—Israeli commentators failed to realize that the significance assigned to “credibility” in politics, prominent in the anti-Netanyahu political campaign, was an important aspect of the cultural Americanization of Israeli politics. The emphasis on “credibility” rather than on “truth” indicated that image and imageering was becoming established in Israel's political culture.

In an interview he gave in 1997, the then American ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, maintained that the love felt by Israelis toward America reflected the “special relations between the two countries.” This popularity of America in Israel seems to indicate that a special and intimate

relationship that transcends transient political interests prevails. Israel seems to be fascinated with a country that represents at the same time a consumer paradise and a haven of democracy and civil liberties. “For the most part, America is a wonderful country—the land of opportunity, freedom and democracy, and the beacon of individual liberty.”¹⁸ Yet the Americanization of Israel was more than an expression of adoration and unreflective emulation of American values and patterns of mass culture. It was also an important aspect of the emergent “new Israel” that represented the transition of Israel from the nation-building stage of its Zionist history, dominated by the ethos of labor Zionism, to a post-foundational phase.

A multi-faceted process of economic change and cultural re-orientation, the Americanization of Israel was an important feature of the “new Israel” that was replacing a pioneering society that apparently had become obsolete. The decline of the pioneering society was apparent in the crisis of the kibbutz and the Histadrut [Federation of Trade Unions], symbols of the new Jewish society that Labor Zionism had sought to establish. Americanization also designated the process by which the once hegemonic pioneering ethos of labor Zionism was replaced by an advanced capitalist culture. The erosion of the pioneering ethos and the rising tide of capitalist Americanization were mutually supportive procedures. The “kibbutz crisis”—namely, the financial collapse and disintegration of the communal framework, and the break-up of the Histadrut—were the other side of mercantile development and advanced modes of consumption, American fast food, American-style talk shows, and sophisticated advertisement.

As a process of economic and technological change, and especially in the manner in which it permeated patterns of everyday life, the Americanization of Israel affected the entire society. On the cultural level, however, its meaning should be differentiated. It seems that, in its capacity as a process of “cultural transfusion,” Americanization reflected the changing views and concerns of Israel’s secular elite, formerly identified with nation-building and the associated pioneering ethos. Especially for “worldly sabras,” members of this elite eager to modernize Israel by casting it in the mold of a westernized society, Americanization meant transforming Israel into an advanced, sophisticated, and allegedly more tolerant society.¹⁹ On the other hand, those sectors of society that had not been influenced by the pioneering ethos of the secular elite and did not have its cultural concerns, most notably ultra-Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs, were less susceptible to the change of cultural values that Americanization allegedly heralded and brought about.

For some, weary of the pressures characteristic of a nation-building

process, it meant that Israel was at last becoming a “normal” society. For those adhering to traditional values and concerned about the distinct cultural character of Israel, this “new Israel” challenged and even defied cherished Jewish and Zionist traditions. With Americanization being a highly visible aspect of the emergent “new Israel,” evaluations of Americanization could not be separated from the evaluation of this “new Israel.” Accordingly, Americanization was also a discursive context for discussing and debating the character of Israeli society and culture.

PROS AND CONTRAS

*“America, my friends, America. In the middle of the dunes, in darkness, the arch of McDonald’s is bright between blue and red neon and a diversity of blinding lights. Eight o’clock, Saturday night, and the parking lot is full. And inside, white lights, and bronze rails, and the marble floor, and the big doll of McDonald’s, two floors high. Let’s run and watch the magic . . . America. . . . This is the dream.”*²⁰

Traditionally, European intellectual élites considered American mass culture vulgar, commercialized, and superficial, and the rejection of Americanization as a danger to local cultural traditions was part of the elitist bon-ton.²¹ This tendency was further encouraged by the prevalence of the Marxist aversion to profit-making and the ostensible commercialization of social relations and cultural activities. In Israel the situation was different. A few critical references to the Americanization of Israel notwithstanding, the intellectual and cultural élite, purporting to represent the “enlightened Israel” and by-and-large identified with the cultural and political agenda of the liberal and secular left, endorsed it as an unavoidable aspect of the westernization and modernization of Israeli society. In particular, Israeli academics served as conduits to western ideas and values and to the western/American way of life. Trained in western universities, most notably American ones, where they also spend their sabbaticals, writing in English and publishing in western scientific journals, the west determined the character of Israeli academic discourse. With the west (actually the liberal-secular myth of the west) as both a cultural frame of reference and an obligatory norm for what was modern and enlightened, Israel’s westernized secular-liberal élite was open to western intellectual fashions, ideas, and lifestyles, and to rendering them not only legitimate, but also normative.

From the perspective of those committed to the western character of Israeli society, Americanization integrates Israel into western culture. In this sense it has become an aspect of the struggle of “progressive” and “enlightened” Israel against what had been seen in the cultural evolution of

Israeli society as not conforming with contemporary western norms; for example, “*galuti* parochialism,” “Zionist particularism,” “Jewish tribalism,” “religious fundamentalism,” “Israeli chauvinism,” and so on.

Amos Elon, a writer and a journalist known for his left-wing political views, articulated this attitude explicitly in an interview that was published in *Ha’Aretz* in February 1998. When asked whether he feared the American influence on Israel’s politics and culture he replied:

I think that the Haredization (ultra-orthodoxization) of Israel is a much greater danger. What is known as the Americanization of Israel entails many positive things, like the idea that we live in a pluralistic society, the idea that we live in a secular society, and that we are masters of ourselves and therefore live according to the laws we determined for ourselves. Americanization was also what abolished the political bolshevism that existed here in the 1950s and the 1960s. The Haredization, or the nationalization of Israeli politics as it is evident in the right wing, both religious and national, is much more dangerous and frightful. *Luckily Americanization is a phenomenon in Israeli society since it saves us from becoming a fascist or a theocratic state.*²² [my emphasis, M.A.]

Yosi Abadi maintained that the alternative to an Americanized Israel was a Third World society. In his view, the agenda of those committed to an “enlightened Israel” was the struggle against “fanaticism and primitiveness that aspire to loosen the connection of Israel to the western world by portraying it as a bastion of materialism, money, pornography, and drugs, and not as the origin of values of democracy and free enterprise. . . . The Israeli alternative is empty, permeated with cults, slogans and empty myths.”²³

From a different perspective, Americanization represented the old Zionist quest to normalize Jewish existence. Herzl, the Zionist visionary, perceived the future state of Jews in the mold of the central European civilization he had known and cherished. In this respect, Americanization amounted to adjusting the original vision to the conditions prevailing a century later, when the cultural norm was the West in general and American capitalist culture in particular. When in 1995 Amnon Rubinstein, then Minister of Education, declared that he did not fear Madonna and Michael Jackson, he did not articulate his admiration for their music, but rather the view that their popularity in Israel represented the normalization of Israeli culture in that it was compatible with normative western culture. Normalization meant that Israel was “a nation like any other.”

A left-liberal dislike of Americanization was articulated in a specific

political context: in derogatory references to Binyamin Netanyahu's American background and style after he had been elected Prime Minister in 1996. Shulamith Hareven, a distinguished writer and publicist, wrote about the "bad culture" allegedly introduced, and warned: "One of the worst things that can be done is to force on Israel a foreign, American model."²⁴ The journalists Amnon Dankner and Ron Meiberg, both identified with the secular, liberal left, admitted that this critical attitude was actually hypocritical, because the critics of Netanyahu on the left had been actively involved in promoting the Americanization of Israel:

Is it a wonder that the first cry—oh, my God! he is not one of us, but really an American!—was raised against Binyamin Netanyahu by those who led the superWcial Americanization in our society? It is indeed so that the harbingers of the empty and variegated ingredients of Western culture are not the settlers or members of the national-religious party or Shas. *Those who in the last decade vigorously marketed America here were we, namely, the public that we represent.*²⁵ [my emphasis, M. A.]

The undifferentiated reference to western culture as "empty" echoed an established view in the western critical discourse of Americanization. In the mid-1990s, when the "Invasion of all things American" seemed to assume extreme proportions, there also appeared critical references to the Americanization of Israel. Allusions to Americanization as a threat to the distinctive character of traditional settings reflected the notion of their cultural incongruence with local contexts. In this vein an Israeli professor explained his concern about the "Americanization" of Jerusalem:

Residents and visitors have found renewal in this atmosphere for millennia, and now, more than in any recent time, this legacy faces a grave threat . . . With the imminent opening in midtown Jerusalem of mega-businesses such as Tower Records and Blockbuster Video, the preservation of the city's unique significance takes on a new urgency.²⁶

More generally, however, critical references to Americanization represented a concern about the distinct character of Israeli culture. Fears about cultural distinctiveness and aversion to what was considered to be cultural "self-denial" echoed earlier stages of Zionist history, when the issue of national culture figured prominently on the nation-building agenda. Ostensibly old-fashioned, this critical view became prominent in a comment

made by Ezer Weizman, the President of Israel, after the death of three youngsters in a stampede at the Arad rock festival in the Summer of 1995:

The Israeli people are infected with Americanization. We must not be concerned for culture only as culture, but understand what Israeli culture is, and Israeli religion. We must be wary of McDonald's; we must be wary of Michael Jackson; we must be wary of Madonna.²⁷

Similar to his uncle, the first president, Ezer Weizman was concerned about “cultural self-denial” and the danger posed by foreign cultures to Israel’s cultural identity. From an historical perspective, it is worth noting that, whereas in 1935 Chaim Weizmann had specifically mentioned the culture of Warsaw, Pinsk, and London, in 1995 the issue that concerned Ezer Weizman was the Americanization of society.

Amnon Rubinstein reacted to Weizman’s comments by declaring that he did not fear Michael Jackson and Madonna. He also insinuated that anti-Americanization represented conservative views and the inability to integrate into the “global village.” But Weizman’s views articulated a concern about the Jewish-Zionist character of Israel and, in particular, a sentiment that the Americanization of Israel challenged a central tenet of the Zionist creed; namely, cultural independence from foreign influences.

Critical comments about the Americanization of Israel reflected different concerns. For some, therefore, Americanization posed a threat to Israel’s cultural distinctiveness and national character, local cultural traditions. In this view, the popular culture of the United States, its entertainment media, its fast-food chains seemed to be overwhelming Israel’s unique national character.²⁸ Others associated Americanization with commercialization as a condition of ethical degradation.

THE GOLDEN ARCHES OF McDONALD’S

“Last year they came. This year they conquered. There is American junk food as far as the eye can see. Checked out the Dizengoff Center mall lately? The Hard Rock Cafe, McDonald’s, Burger King, Sbarro’s, Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken. At this rate, another American chain is certain to flourish. Its name? Weight Watchers.”²⁹

In the mid-1990s, shortly after their introduction into the Israeli market, the proliferation of the golden arches of McDonald’s epitomized the Americanization of Israel and the creation of the “new Israel” as a McIsrael. In this

capacity, McDonald's was more than a hamburger restaurant. It was identified as a cultural institution, and the golden arches became a symbolic statement of cultural reorientation. With this, McDonald's became an important feature of the public discourse on Americanization.

McDonald's was first introduced into Israel in October 1993. As an Israeli-operated franchise chain, McDonald's-Israel represented local business interests. The public fascination with it was not so much with hamburgers (an Israeli fast food chain had already been operating successfully for several years), but mainly with its long-established reputation as an icon of the "American way of life." At the same time, McDonald's represented globalization. In this context, the golden arches and their proliferation in the Israeli landscape signified that, even if relatively late, Israel was integrated into a homogenized, global consumer culture. Asked in an interview about the Americanization of Israel, the American ambassador in Israel maintained:

I think if one wants to focus more on the more popular culture aspect, as in the proliferation of fast food outlets here, I've always felt that this side of it is particularly appropriate for Israel— you know, fast food for a fast nation. In fact, I was amazed that McDonald's had never made it here earlier, and I am not surprised at its great success.³⁰

Unlike other American fast-food chains in Israel, McDonald's-Israel developed an obtrusive image that was an important aspect of its public personality, including a reputation for disregarding long-established national traditions and conventions (for example, *kosher*). As the result of this, and in its capacity as a contemporary icon of Americanization, McDonald's enjoyed a special symbolic status among other American fast food chains in Israel. While the activities of Burger King or Subway were considered to be economic news, issues pertaining to McDonald's operations were reported in the general news sections of Israeli newspapers. The language of reporting emphasized conflict and confrontation, thus reinforcing the public image of McDonald's as a challenge to local, Israeli cultural traditions. In the mid-1990s, "the invasion of the golden arches" epitomized the Americanization of Israel, which also explains the attention given to the controversies that attended its introduction into Israel and at the same time contributed to its prominence as a public issue.

For Orthodox Jews, McDonald's represented a secular Israel which, by openly repudiating Jewish dietary laws, became increasingly "un-Jewish" if not "anti-Jewish." Ultra-Orthodox demonstrators protested against the

opening of non-kosher restaurants in Jerusalem and Netanya.³¹ A kashrut inspector, worried about the consequences of Jews eating non-kosher food in a McDonald's restaurant opened in Jerusalem, commented that "... McDonald's is contaminating all of Israel and all of the Jewish people."³² From a different perspective, McDonald's and all it represented meant disregard for Jewish values and the special character of Israel. One commentator asked, "Do we not have our own criteria, our own standards of culture? Is everything Western automatically good, and everything Jewish automatically bad?" He mockingly compared McDonald's golden arches to the holy tablets of the Ten Commandments: "Ah, but one must examine the arches objectively, with an eye to their full potential, to their hidden value. Do they not bear the configuration of the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments? Look at them: the classic parabolic contour of the holy Decalogue transmogrified into the convex arches of McDonald's."³³ In his view, the crux of the cultural incongruity represented by the golden arches in Jerusalem was the confusion between consumer culture and progress.

As an icon of American capitalist culture, McDonald's represented the opposite of the socialist values the kibbutz embodied. Accordingly, opening a McDonald's in the commercial premises of Kibbutz Alonim in the north of Israel was provocative in the sense that it juxtaposed the Americanization of Israel with the decline of pioneering Israel. A reporter interested in knowing "what veteran members of the kibbutz think about the 'terrible danger' of Americanization," discovered acceptance and understanding.³⁴ In their view, the restaurant represented an adjustment to changing circumstances: "The greatness of the kibbutz is that it lives with two legs on the ground . . . It is only a natural development."³⁵ Not surprising under the circumstances, those asked did not agree that McDonald's represented Americanization. In the view of one of those interviewed, it was a feature of the rising standard of living in Israel and further, for children not able to afford a trip abroad, it provided a piece of abroad close to home. Another suggested a different argument: "I think that our president gave McDonald's an undue compliment when he said that the chain symbolizes America. In my view, what symbolizes America is Coca-Cola, which Ben-Gurion considered as the symbol of American aggressiveness."³⁶

Opening a McDonald's restaurant in December 1994 in the immediate vicinity of the Golani memorial at the Golani Junction in lower Galilee created a conflict of cultural meanings. The notion of a McDonald's and a national shrine of remembrance as culturally incompatible transformed the Golani Junction into a contested place. For those committed to the Golani memorial and to the patriotic values it represented, the restaurant defied the

sacred tone of the place. The notion of cultural incongruence was enhanced by a prevalent impression that, because of their height, the golden arches overpowered the Golani memorial and trivialized its profound meanings.

For those concerned about the cultural consequences of the “Americanization of Israel,” the contiguity of a McDonald’s restaurant and a national shrine reinforced the argument that Americanization threatened traditional Israeli values. In this interpretative framework, the new personality of Golani Junction was more than a case of a commercial activity located close to a sacred site; it suggested that the “Americanization” of Israeli society and culture had assumed excessive proportions:

McDonald’s and a memorial site are two symbols. The memorial site represents concepts such as bereavement, wars, spiritual struggle, solidarity, survival, whereas McDonald’s [is associated with] commercial gastronomy, fast food . . . McDonald’s is a name like Coca-Cola, Ford and Michael Jackson.³⁷

Bereaved parents felt that the restaurant marginalized and profaned the memorial site. In particular, the Americanized character of the place provoked a sense of indignation. A bereaved parent complained: “It is a shame, to let us pass by McDonald’s in order to get to the memorial . . . why should [we] see a carnival near the site? It doesn’t honor the place and is certainly not respectable.”³⁸ A representative of the bereaved families explained: “We are not opposed to a restaurant as such or a place that provides services. The place is clean and well organized. Our opposition is to a kind of place which has an Americanized Hollywood or circus character . . .”³⁹ A mother noted that it was the culmination of a long process:

I have a problem with the commercialization of memorial sites. On the one hand, it is advantageous that the site not be isolated. On the other hand, we should be cautious so that it will not become another shopping mall. . . . We introduce America into the guest room, the kitchen, into bed, and one should not be amazed to find it in a memorial site.⁴⁰

The main offense was the visual prominence of the chain’s logo: “In stark contrast [to the memorial] stands the loud and colorful McDonald’s, its huge neon signs presenting a gaudy and smiling facade to what is effectively a place of deep historical significance and national bereavement.”⁴¹ The action committee of the bereaved parents appealed to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. His intervention in autumn 1995 paved the way for

a compromise solution that took into account the concerns of the bereaved parents. This entailed a few architectural changes to reduce the prominence of McDonald's in the local landscape.

In principle, the changes focused on drawing attention away from the restaurant and directing it to the Golani site. Since the issue was visibility, the signposts and the golden arches figured prominently in there-structuring of the landscape. McDonald's declared its willingness to donate one signpost to advertise the memorial. The second and lower signpost remained the property of the chain and the logo was significantly reduced in size. This new configuration of the signs advertised the Golani site as the main feature of the place. In addition, a line of trees was planted in front of the restaurant's facade so that visitors to the memorial could avoid a direct view of the restaurant.

When the changes were implemented in August 1996, the bereaved parents achieved their goal to alter the impression of the restaurant's marginalizing and even obscuring the Golani site. These relatively simple architectural alterations were meant to enhance, at least visually, the status of the Golani site as the primary aspect of the Golani Junction. Altogether, the cost of the changes to the local architecture was estimated to be 17,000 NIS (\$5,300), which seemed enough to reformulate the visual composition and subsequently the symbolic structure of the Junction.

In 1999, when it seemed that McDonald's had already become a permanent feature of contemporary Israel, the intention to open a McDonald's on Sheinkin Street in Tel-Aviv encountered fierce resistance by local residents. The symbolic meaning of this confrontation was that Sheinkin Street was not an ordinary street but a cultural symbol of an urban lifestyle associated with the image of "enlightened" and westernized Israel that emerged in the 1980s. In the popular mind, Sheinkin Street, Israel's version of New York's Greenwich Village, connoted enlightenment, sophistication, trendiness, and post-modern cultural pluralism. In this capacity it represented an aspect of the cultural Americanization of Israel. Accordingly, the conflict between Sheinkin and McDonald's could be interpreted as representing a discrepancy between two versions of Americanization. Actually, the local residents who protested against the opening of a McDonald's considered the restaurant to be a threat to their quality of life. The issue was noise, frying smells, and parking places, rather than a conflict of cultural meanings. This context notwithstanding, the controversy, and especially the impression that McDonald's showed little respect for local sensitivities, resonated with a prevalent notion of McDonald's as an agent of "cultural imperialism."⁴²

McISRAEL?

"I am becoming convinced that Israel is not a western, but a mid-eastern country. The American influence is superficial and external. If you drink Coca-Cola, wear Levi's and smoke Kent, this does not make you American."⁴³

In his essay "Mimicry and Assimilation," Ahad Ha'am distinguished between "imitation as self-denial" and "imitation as emulation."⁴⁴ Applied to the dynamic relationship between societies, the former led to assimilation of the culturally weaker society into the culturally stronger one, while "imitation as emulation," on the other hand, could eventually lead to the cultural invigoration of the society engaged in such a cultural practice. Ahad Ha'am's essay was not meant as a mere theoretical contribution to the study of the development of civilizations, but as a discursive framework for the conclusion that the main Zionist objective should be making Eretz Israel a "spiritual center" of the Jewish people. According to Ahad Ha'am, in this capacity, Eretz Israel could serve as a pan-Jewish focus and a model of imitation for the entire Jewish people. With such an "imitation center," there was a possibility of averting the danger of the cultural disintegration of a people dispersed and hence subject to the influences of different cultures.

Ahad Ha'am's essay was part of the curriculum of the Zionist education system. This indicated the importance assigned to his ideas by Zionist educators. In addition, the expression "imitation of self-denial" was imprinted on Zionist consciousness as a fundamental threat facing the Jewish people in the modern age. Cultural self-denial was a Zionist anathema. The need to establish an independent and self-sustaining Jewish/Hebrew culture permeated Zionist thought and practice in the nation-building phase of Zionist history, and the cultural persistence of Zionist society was a major concern for those committed to the cultural aspect of the Zionist revolution.

The chimera of "imitation of self-denial" explains some of the uneasiness caused by the apparent "Americanization of Israel." "Cultural self-denial" was applied to the Americanization of the language of advertisement and the proliferation of American words in spoken and written Hebrew. The "deterioration" of Hebrew was a common complaint, visually evinced by the abundance of foreign names on the signs of shops in the streets and shopping malls. This entailed the danger of Hebrew losing ground to ostensibly more fashionable foreign words and names. For the poet Natan Zach, the foreign "takeover" was a statement about the condi-

tion of Israeli culture in general.⁴⁵ The writer Amos Keinan recognized the inclination to translate American expressions into Hebrew and he expressed his uncertainty about the perpetuation of Hebrew in the global village.⁴⁶ A veteran journalist recalled early Zionist struggles to secure the dominant position of Hebrew and, complaining about the proliferation of foreign words, mostly English, wondered whether the struggle had to be renewed.⁴⁷

The issue of language elicited critical reactions mainly from intellectuals who belonged to the older generation of Hebrew literature. In spite of the notion of Americanization as modernization, and hence a necessary price to be paid to keep the "enlightened" character of Israel, the critical remarks made by members of this élite since the mid-1990s has evinced a growing sense of unease. This concerned the apparently excessive form that the Americanization had assumed. Publicly articulated reservations were not about mercantile development or advanced modes of consumption, but the increasing commercialization of Israeli society and culture.

When it celebrated its jubilee in 1998, contemporary Israel seemed very different from that of the vision that had guided the founding fathers when independence had been proclaimed in 1948. The pioneering ethos had declined to the extent that, at best, it had become a matter of nostalgia for a heroic past. The Hebrew culture promoted in the course of the Zionist revolution had been transformed. The rise of *Mizrah* culture and its growing legitimatization within the framework of mainstream Israeli culture was one important issue, the other being the revival of traditional Judaism. The mass immigration from the former Soviet Union created, at least temporarily, a "cultural ghetto" that was separated from mainstream Israeli culture, and the impact of the trans-cultural encounter is still unknown.

The Americanization of Israel, therefore, should not be construed in terms of a "takeover" of Israeli culture by foreign culture. Actually, when examined in the broader framework of the cultural transformation of Israel, it becomes apparent that the Americanization was yet another feature in a period of redefinition of cultural and ideological orientations. The dynamism of the changes that occurred in the 1990s seem to suggest that Americanization was just another factor of Israeli cultural self-determination and not the final outcome of a process of cultural self-denial. The importance of Americanization was also a result of its being accelerated in a period when traditional values, most notably those pertaining to the pioneering ethos, were challenged and rendered obsolete. Identified with materialism and consumerism, Americanization was not the reason for the end of the cultural and political hegemony of this ethos, but a symptom of

the process. In fact, it was the accelerated erosion of the ethos that rendered Israeli society susceptible to Americanization.

According to common wisdom, "Israelis are crazy about everything American." However, the failure to convince Israelis about the merits of Budweiser and Miller in the 1980s demonstrated that the appropriation of American products was, at least to some extent, selective. Actually, the Americanization of Israel has entailed a dynamic process of adjustment of American models to local conditions. The taste of Coca-Cola was adjusted to Israeli demands, and the famous logo was transcribed in Hebrew letters. When introduced into the Israeli market, McDonald's cultivated the aura of Americanness. This was emphasized by using American TV commercials and imported potatoes, the latter being allegedly indispensable for the chain's standards of American quality. Yet, in addition to the special Pesach versions of Big Macs and the kosher restaurant it opened to cater for religious customers, the chain also developed a new type of hamburger to conform with Israeli preferences and tastes. As advertised, the McRoyal *was more of* anything: bigger, spicier, and more juicy.⁴⁸ Accordingly, even if the idiom appeared to be American, both content and accent were unmistakably Israeli.

NOTES

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3. On the "New Israel," see Eliot A. Cohen, "Israel after Heroism," *Foreign Affairs*, 77(6)(1998) 112–28; Maoz Azaryahu, "Israel at 50: It Is No Fairytale," *Political Geography*, 18(2) (1999) 131–47.
4. *Ma'ariv*, 16 March 1997.
5. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image* (Harmondsworth, UK, 1963) 193.
6. *Ibid.*, 215.
7. Donald Ritzer, *The McDonaldization Thesis. Explorations and Extensions* (London 1998) 84.
8. On this aspect see Mel van Elteren, "Conceptualizing the Impact of US Popular Culture Globally," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30(1) (1996) 47–89.
9. See p. 827 in Joseph Judge, "Israel—The Seventh Day," *National Geographic*, 6(142) (1972) 817–855.
10. Cf. L. Fischer, *Chaim Weizmann, The First President* (Jerusalem, 1995) 314–16.

11. Judge, "Israel—The Seventh Day," 844.
12. *Ibid.*, 854.
13. Yoel Markus, "Five comments on the situation," *Ha'Aretz*, 13 June 1999, B1.
14. *Hadashot*, Independence Day Supplement, 17 April 1991. This special supplement was edited by Amnon Lord and Hani Kim.
15. Haim Nagid, "The Americanization of Israel's Culture. The Israeli Village," *Skira Hodshit*, Nos. 8–9 (1993) 20–39 [Hebrew].
16. *The Jerusalem Report*, Special Issue, 18 May 1995.
17. Sawicki, "Fast-food Invasion," 14.
18. Gerald M. Steinberg, "Dangerous American Misfits," *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 June 1999, A5.
19. See Stuart Shoffman, "The Americanization of Israel," *The Jerusalem Report*, 18 May 1995, 13.
20. Zvi Gilat, "The Israelis. Here Is the Dream. Stretch Your Hand and Touch It. Rishon Lezion, the Golden Mall. America Is So Near, Is It Then a Wonder That Moshe Dayan Avenue Is Congested?" *Ma'ariv*, Weekly Supplement, 12 January 1996, 1 (Hebrew).
21. See Richard H. Pells, "Cinema Verité in Europe: Rejecting United States Culture," *International Herald Tribune*, 16 December 1997.
22. "World's Citizen," an interview with Amos Elon, *Ha'Aretz* Supplement, 13 February 1998, 38.
23. Yosi Abadi, "Pictures from the Third World," *Iton Tel-Aviv*, 31 October 1997 [Hebrew].
24. Shulamith Hareven, "Bad Culture," *Yedi'ot Ahronot*, 28 July 1996, 5 [Hebrew].
25. Ron Meiberg and Amnon Dankner, "The Subjects of Netanyahu," *Ma'ariv* Shabbat Supplement, 26 December 1997, 2 [Hebrew].
26. John Lancaster, "Jerusalem Beef: Is McDonald's One Americanization Too Many?" *Washington Post*, 1 August 1995, A:14.
27. *Idem.*
28. See the question directed to Martin Indyk, US Ambassador to Israel, in Calev Ben-David and Jay Bushinsky, "Mr. America," *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 4 July 1997, 14.
29. "Invasion of the Golden Arches," *The Jerusalem Post*, Weekly Supplement, 22 September 1995, 21.
30. Ben-David and Bushinsky, "Mr. America."
31. On the violent demonstration in Netanya see "Gun Drawn at McDonald's," *The Jerusalem Post/City Lights*, 5(96), 17 November 1995.
32. Lancaster, "Jerusalem Beef."
33. Emanuel Feldman, "The Newest Commandment: Think Twice," *The Jerusalem Report*, 7 December 1998, 54.
34. Y. Meridor, "Money—This is the Whole Story," *Kol HaEmek vahaGalil*, 28 July 1995, 34 [Hebrew].

35. *Idem.*
36. *Idem.*
37. Orna Yosef, "Private Big Mac Defeated Golani," *HaEmek veHaGalil*, 13 January 1995, 12 [Hebrew].
38. *Ibid.*, 14.
39. David Rudge, "Sarid Mediating Golani Junction Dispute," *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 November 1995.
40. Yosef. "Private Big Mac Defeated Golani," 12.
41. Letter, Y. Lang (the Golani Committee) to Mike Gordon, McDonald's International Communications, USA, March 1995 (personal communication).
42. See Yossi Wolfsohn, "Cultural Imperialism is Violence," Letter to the Editor, *Iton Tel-Aviv*, 16 July 1999 (Hebrew).
43. An observation made in 1991 by an American journalist living and working in Israel; see Ron Meiberg, "Catcher in the Rye," *Hadashot*, Independence Day Supplement, 17 April 1991, 7.
44. Ahad Ha'am, "Mimicry and Assimilation," in *Kol Kitvei Achad Ha'am* (Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, 1950) 86–9 [Hebrew].
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47. Shmuel Shnitzer, "Where Are the Defenders of Language?," *Ma'ariv*, 23 March 1999, 7 [Hebrew].
48. Nili Arad, "McDonald's Surrendered. It Will Sell a Hamburger in Israeli Taste," *Yedi'ot Ahronot*, 6 October 1995.