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Creating a new Israeli language

• By ALIZA LAVIE

The finest minds are presently working and laboring over the development of a vaccine for COVID-19, which is caused by the coronavirus. The virus will, in due time, vanish from our lives, yet the divisiveness and social scars the pandemic has left within Israeli society may well continue to bleed and fester.

Our major area of concern should be that there is no one presently engaged in the development of a vaccine for the social malaise contaminating public dialogue and forums in Israel. We have sunk, instead, into apathetic mode. People prefer to focus on the space adjacent to themselves, shrinking from engaging with others, hoping that everything will work out just fine, somehow or other.

We should not be lulled into imagining that calm will be restored once the cause of the pandemic is resolved. Such optimism is misguided. Instead, we should be working to shake off our somnolent state and address the pivotal task of building social immunity.

Any culture begins its growth from certain consensual symbols and concepts, through the creation of a common language, enabling members of that society to communicate with each other effectively. More than 70 years after the State of Israel's independence, however, a considerable proportion of our original, shared language has been eroded, while the remainder is insufficiently robust to offer a platform for meaningful cultural and social collaboration.

Over the course of the past year, in particular, we have witnessed an escalating cultural conflict that is not solely attributable to COVID-19. While the pandemic has undoubtedly contributed significantly to escalating tensions and aggravation of the virulent tones of debate, the ongoing state of crisis essentially overlays unresolved, prior issues. Equally, rising unemployment, enforced collective leave and ordinary people's hardship in making ends meet, as well as mental distress and the restrictions of social distancing, have combined to exacerbate the pre-existing state of discord and polarize dialogue.

In fact, however, the fundamental cause of these tensions, together with the difficulty Israelis experience in creating agreed frameworks, date back to core social concerns that have been deferred



A DEMONSTRATOR takes part in a protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu amid Israel's second nationwide lockdown, in Jerusalem on October 10.
(Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

repeatedly. These factors may well have been sidestepped or ignored in favor of addressing "urgent" problems of the day. Tragically, this relegation has proved to be at the expense of overlooking their crucial and existential nature in relation to the welfare and resilience of Israeli society.

Within Israel, numerous sectors claim they have been deprived of a platform. Their self-perception is that they have been as objects of repression, excommunication and alienation; their status has been undermined, or they have been victimized. This definition is not unique to a particular group, nor is it associated with the political Right or Left; it is not related to whether they are new immigrants or veteran Israelis, secular or religious; nor is it a matter of whether they are Jewish or Arab. In fact, these distressing convictions cut right across all social groups and belie any preconceived stigmas.

The upshot has created fertile soil for those seeking to disseminate hatred and sow social discord – through exploitation of the inadequacies of the education system, by targeting spheres of tension and existing schisms – seeking to enlarge the chasm in order to further their own personal agendas. Israel's leadership is unable to find a common language and reconcile itself internally. The end-result is that vital systems are grinding to a halt, while Israel's citizens are flagging under the continual strain.

ISRAEL'S LANGUAGE of communica-

tion requires a makeover. It is time to create a new linguistic medium, one that will resonate with all Israelis and elicit their respect. Israel is in need of a communication environment that will allow people to discard hatred, contempt, ignorance and incitement to polarization, relegating these tendencies to the ostracized fringes of society. This idea is not some facile cliché, although the task itself should not be underestimated. It will take guts, determination and hard sweat to transform it into reality.

In a hypothetical research laboratory developing a "vaccine" against social divisiveness, immunologists would be seeking to identify the values Israelis share, and to clarify why we are unable to pinpoint a single consensus event that has ever unified everyone residing in the State of Israel.

Please do not misinterpret my drift. The Land of Israel is truly very good, as is the society dwelling within it. The roots binding us run deep; they are healthy and sturdy, with the capacity to launch us upward and outward at an immense velocity. The much-needed makeover to which I refer envisages, rather, a return to the key figures who breathed life and soul into modern Israel, as well as an adaptation of the Zionist dream and vision to the present social reality.

In particular, I am suggesting we return to the somewhat overlooked persona of Theodor Herzl. As the visionary of the state, Herzl was and remains the national "dream master," the modern-day figure who inculcated the idea that we are per-

mitted to dream and can strive to implement our ideals. The regeneration of a language shared by all Israelis would also jump-start that dream.

The task has never been easy. Herzl himself lived in a divided and dispersed Jewish world. Opinions have always been divided among proponents and opponents. External factors and complications have always existed. Yet Herzl possessed the ability to offer profound insights, together with the tools to move forward.

In Herzl's conceptualization of a "society of excellence," the secret of its success lies in one's sensitivity to the wishes of others. Thus, ignoring something that causes pain to another is deemed detrimental to the fabric of society. Herzl similarly envisaged equality for women, respect for the stranger residing within, and mutual respect for all. He praised the value of labor, integrity, free thought and wrote of the importance of "togetherness."

Obviously, slogans and clichés are easily articulated and readily accepted. We are all susceptible to their charm. A dream, however, can only take on true significance when it ceases to be a cliché and becomes an objective toward a goal. Our challenge is to transform the vision into everyday concepts and allow each individual to translate those into practicalities, rather than merely putting them on verbal display.

We need to acknowledge our failure to develop a common Israeli language in order for communication to move on. It may well be that we are the generation wandering in the Sinai Desert. If so, the key to transformation lies in the hands of the younger generation, our amazing children and grandchildren.

Around me I can see a new generation, eager to volunteer. They are insightful young people, with a thirst for knowledge and new skills, seeking to affect change and create a new reality. We must not stand in their way or destroy their dreams. We have to offer them access to our toolbox, in the hope they can fulfill that vision and aspiration eloquently articulated by Herzl, "All you have sown will be devoid of value and wither if freedom of thought and expression, generosity, and the love of others do not flourish among you."

From the writer's comments on conclusion of her term of office as chair of the Herzl Center.