

ISRAELI CULTURE: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

By NISSIM REJWAN

THE use of the word "culture" has undergone several mutations during the past 150 years. Before the nineteenth century it used to mean the tending of natural growth, and, by analogy, a process of human training. Later on, it came to mean "a general state or habit of mind," and then "the general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole" or "the general body of the arts." It is in these particular senses, current as far back as the middle of the last century, that Israeli intellectuals continue to use the term — or its Hebrew equivalent "tarbut" — and it was obviously in such sense that the Israeli writer and playwright Benjamin Tammuz wrote his article "Israel in Search of a Culture" which appeared in the "Jewish Chronicle."

I propose to deal with Israeli culture in the post-nineteenth century sense denoting "a whole way of life — material, intellectual and spiritual," and also in its more recent connotation as being the sum total of a people's way of life, habits of behaviour and thought and the whole social legacy which the individual acquires from his group. Clearly, used in this sense, a specific Israeli culture can be said to be non-existent — or at best to be in a process of formation. In a country of immigration, where dozens of ways of life rub shoulders with

each other, it would be unrealistic to speak of a well-defined, coherent "culture." Yet this seemingly elementary proposition is generally, sometimes stubbornly, ignored by veteran Israelis of European origin. The majority of them seem to imply

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that, the variety of cultures brought by new immigrants notwithstanding, there is so to speak a "hard core" of an Israeli culture whose general lines were already well drawn before the establishment of the State. According to this estimate new immigrants, including those coming from the Orient, can and will be "absorbed" into the culture of the old Yishuv.

As the Prime Minister, Mr. Eshkol, recently told a group of youth instructors, he had estimated that "we would, within ten to fifteen years, succeed in changing the face of Israeli society after we have processed the young generation through the educational melting pot — the kindergarten, the elementary school and the post-elementary classes." "Now," Mr. Eshkol added, "I have come to realize that this is a long process and a matter of generations." It could be fairly said that Mr. Eshkol's former optimism was characteristic of the whole Yishuv.

It is significant to note that the disillusionment has come just where it was not expected — the education of immigrant children. The so-called educational "melting pot" has failed to mould even the children — many of them sabras — into anything like a uniform type of Israeli youth. On the contrary, it has served only to create an educational gap whose dimensions tend to become broader rather than nar-

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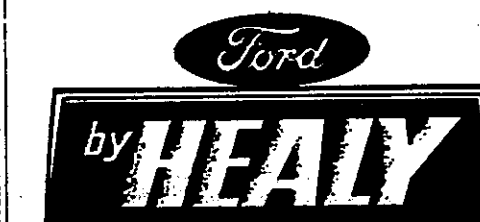


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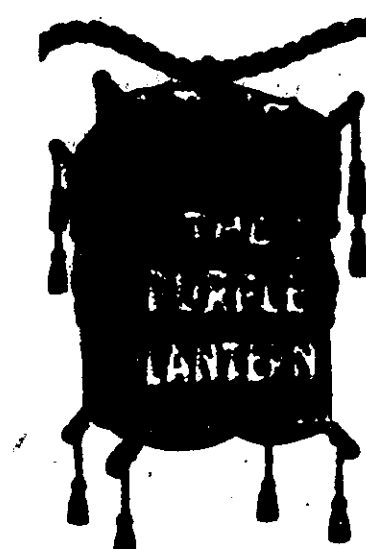
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