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Israelis without borders

Sixty-eight years ago, a baby boy named Daniel was born in Tel Aviv. This week Prof. Daniel Kahneman went to Stockholm and donned a tuxedo to receive the Nobel Prize in Economics from the king of Sweden. He shared the prize with Vernon L. Smith. Kahneman is only the second Israeli to be awarded the Nobel Prize; the first was S. Y. Agnon, who shared the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature with poet Nelly Sachs. But the Israeli press did not highlight the prize ceremony this week - as if this was a humdrum occurrence, or as if Kahneman was somehow not a real Israeli. He holds dual Israeli and American citizenship and has close family and professional ties in Israel. The mass-circulation daily Yedioth Ahronoth called him an "Israeli-American."

The relatively new term "Israeli-American," an echo of designations such as "Italian-American" or "Irish-American," which reflect the immigrant backgrounds of their bearers, is becoming increasingly common in the United States. Israeli-Americans often insist on this definition of their identity, as a way of distinguishing themselves from American Jews. They have their own way of life, practically their own culture. The majority are young, the children of parents who immigrated to America. It's uncertain whether this designation will last beyond their generation.

Israelis used to be disparaging of those of their number who decided to settle abroad. They were called "yordim" ("ones who go down," as opposed to those "who go up" by making aliyah), viewed as deserters or even traitors, and Yitzhak Rabin once referred to them as "weakling dreck." Today the stigma is gone because as part of their maturation process, Israelis have come to feel ever more secure about their identity. Israelis who live abroad are no longer required to apologize for it.

Channel 10 is currently airing a series produced by Micha Shagrir called "Israelis Without Borders." In one episode, Yehuda Litani tells the story of Miko Peled, proprietor of a martial arts academy in Coronado, California. The son of the late General Matti Peled is thoroughly Israeli. Though he's living in America with his family, he still thinks in Hebrew. And most likely, he'll stay put. Life is good; he probably couldn't have achieved all that he has, had he remained in Israel. Another episode directed by Litani that has not yet been aired tells the story of an Israeli-Arab (or, as they confusingly say in America these days - a Palestinian-Israeli) biologist. Though he has been living in America for 15 years, he, too, is still utterly Israeli.

Daniel Kahneman is a psychology professor at Princeton University. It's tempting to speculate about whether his discovery that people make irrational decisions that run counter to economic logic would have earned him the Nobel Prize were he still living in Israel. By the same token, it's tempting to speculate about whether Albert Einstein, who was also on the Princeton faculty, would have won the same accolades had he accepted Hebrew University's offer to join its faculty back in the 1930s, or David Ben-Gurion's offer to serve as president of Israel in the 1950s.

The Israeli historian Shmuel Ettinger once said that it's harder to define a Zionist than it is to define a Jew. It's also not easy to define an Israeli, as was apparent this week in a discussion held at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem following a lecture by University of Miami law professor David Abraham. One of the topics discussed was the relative importance of citizenship among the factors that make up a person's national identity. The prevailing assumption was that the significance of citizenship is on the decline. "Today, an international credit card is more important than a passport," said one of the participants.

Israeli identity is so hard to define because it is shared by extremely different people who together constitute a very multifaceted, multiethnic and multicultural mosaic. Perhaps the main criterion is the use of the Hebrew or Arabic language for thinking. If that's so, then as long as a person has not stopped thinking in Hebrew or Arabic, and still feels Israeli - he or she has not stopped being Israeli. This is true whether that person is, say, selling oil paintings on the outskirts of Tokyo or lecturing in economics at Princeton.

By Tom Segev

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