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Tribes in Modern Israel and the Matriarchal Possibilities

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In June 2015, Reuven (Rubi) Rivlin, the former president of Israel, delivered what is commonly referred to as the “Four Tribes” speech. He addressed the socio-demographic transformation that is remaking Israel's society, now composed of four increasingly equal-sized “tribes” – secular, national-religious, ultra-orthodox (“Haredi”), and Arab. Rivlin expressed his concern that two of these groups are not Zionist and that all the groups are characterized by fear and hostility towards the others. This transformation, he further said, mandates the formulation of “a new concept of partnership” among the tribes, while preserving and safeguarding the unique identity of each.

Rivlin, in fact, touches upon a central issue in Zionist thought and Israeli social history: the search for a unified nationalist identity. However, in the early years of Israeli history and even later, it meant the drive by Ashkenazi, western Zionists to adopt the values and practices of the dominant group and erase other ethnic Jewish traditions. In a way, it says “unity despite difference.” the erasure of differences for the sake of unity and strengthening the state. However, the splits among the various subcultures and identities within the country have played a major role in society and culture, and have been used in politics to gain power. They became even more noticeable under the reign of Netanyahu, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. It seems to me that President Rivlin,

wishes to re-strengthen the state over group identities and bolster the “togetherness” of Israeli society.

Add to these crucial developments: Thus, I believe that a new kind of relationship and partnership among the different groups is necessary. A matriarchal perspective provides one way to cope with this complex issue.

Rivlin’s speech provoked criticism and a public debate. I wish to emphasize, in particular, that his approach ignores many social and political features of Israeli society such as the many subgroups of the Orthodox, the ethnic and sexual diversity among the Jews – especially those who are Mizrahi, Ethiopian, Russian-speaking, white, women, and LGBTQ – the oppression of Palestinians inside and outside the Israeli borders – each group with its own specificities and needs – and his approach also fails to emphasize localism, zoning, neighborliness, and community building, all on the rise in Israel. This means that the sense of belonging is shifting from state and global levels to local entities.

It means that the search for a unified nationalist identity is no longer acceptable in an age of multiculturalism and identity politics.

The multiplicity of groups – ethnic, religious, gender, local, communal – also offers the possibility of developing a sense of belonging and identity beyond nationalism.

Such developments seem, I suggest, to open the door to an alternative social order, one that recognizes and respects the multiplicity of groups that comprise our society.

Thus, Israeli society is characterized by intersecting conflicts between groups with different needs and interests, groups that compete with each other for control, economy, resources, culture, and values, making it difficult to achieve equity. The concept of “common good” seems to me not only a reduction of

needs and conflicts, but also blind to the social complexity in Israel. Moreover, these intersecting conflicts revolve on at least two levels: the relationships of each group with the State and between themselves.

I suggest that the matriarchal social order may be the right way to achieve this new Israel as it is built on local communes, regionalism, balance, the gift economy, sharing, and consensual decision-making, to name a few of its main principles.

As a first step, the evolving new multiplicity of structures, groups, and collectives that strive for autonomy and for their share in decision-making in Israel will be granted autonomy to define their identity, culture, and faith, while not denying or oppressing any other group, having equal representation, and sharing sovereignty on the state and federation level.

Such a multiplicity of groups, different from and conflicting with each other, make it necessary to construct inclusive, just, and responsible relationships among them. Issues of ethics, conflict resolution, economic and political balance become more crucial. To deal with these issues, I suggest – instead of looking for shared identity or togetherness, such as President Rivlin suggests – that the Indigenous, matriarchal and maternal gift philosophy be applied.

I am referring especially (but not exclusively) to the following arrangements:

First, Ethics of Gift Giving and Ubuntu – Instead of the ethics of self-interest, individualism, and competition, this system of ethics views human beings as “Homo Donans” and recognizes the interconnectedness among all human beings.

Second, Regionalism – Region, a network of local communities, becomes a central element of society. No wonder that the Israeli government is promoting it too under the zoning plan that began to be established in the north of the country. “Bigger is not necessarily better,” says Heide and she goes on to say:

The smaller units of society, responsible for engendering person-to-person and transparent politics, are given preference. But they must be big enough to safeguard their self-sufficiency and the diversity of their handiwork, services, technologies, and arts. The ideal dimension is that of the region...

The necessity of the central government may therefore be reconsidered. The State may, at least, be restructured: it will no longer be an institution with its own interests and ideology; its only role will be the implementation of consensual decision-making at the communal and regional levels.

Third, Transparent, Consensual, Decision-Making on all Levels – This will provide enhanced democracy, superior to the Western perception of democracy, which relies on voting and numbers. (Today, internet allows for relatively easy implementation of this.)

Fourth, Resource and Relationship Balance – Society will be layered with relationships linking all communities through, for instance, multiple affiliations, the gift economy, and knowledge production that may be developed by various collectives and individuals and shared with other communities and regions. An agreed-upon, centralized control over natural resources is also optional. Joint control over resources combined with decision-making by consensus guarantee that [electrical, water, etc.] power is cooperatively shared.

And fifth, Economic Balance – Multiple economies will be conducted with different segments implementing diverse economic rationales. This practice will emphasize sustainability and sharing: Every community will live within its means, refrain from overexploiting its human and natural resources, refrain from the accumulation of wealth or goods, ensure the maximal fulfillment of its residents' human needs, act to produce food locally, and work to establish a local collective economy that maintains mutual help, partnership, communal

life, and cooperatives. It will be a non-capitalist economy that includes economies of generosity, nonprofit businesses, worker collectives, and alternative capitalist enterprises impelled by a social or environmental ethic.

I am well aware that such practices are not common in a western-style society like Israel. However, it is possible for at least three reasons:

First, a growing number of activists, scholars, liberal politicians, and ordinary people understand and are engaged in advancing new ways of thinking, being, and doing. Sharing, giving, spirituality, other-orientation and ecological imperatives are among the values that are most important for them. The perspective suggested here might suit their aims.

Second, indigenous cultures and practices permeate our lives in the west as a real alternative such as Restorative justice, truth commissions, spirituality, and alternative healing

And, *third*, many activists seem to have stopped fighting the system; rather, they prefer to build new institutions from below, including gift economy practices, cooperatives, familial communities, ecovillages, independent knowledge centers, and so on.

Yes, the transition is not yet here, but it is on the way.