BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

Religious Sanctity and Civil Sanctity:

A Comparative Study of National

Commemoration Days in the Israeli Junior High

School

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the way teachers' beliefs about sacredness are reflected in educational practices and how they are linked to the educational stream they work in. Teachers from state religious and state secular junior high schools were interviewed and ceremonies were observed. Two memorial ceremonies were examined: Holocaust Remembrance Day and Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day.

The study focused on teachers' beliefs about sacredness. A thing is sacred when it is transcendental, remote, and inviolable. There is a tendency not to criticize, question (Olsen, 1989) or change anything which is defined as sacred (Hargrove, 1979). The main feature of sacredness is its distinction from the ordinary (Eliade, 1969).

We examined the teachers' attitudes towards days designated as sacred in civil religion. Civil religion is a value system which sanctifies a political-social reality following human decisions and a particular social order. Civil religion does not draw its validity from the transcendent. As with any religious system, civil religion sanctifies, dignifies, and elevates those values, norms and deeds to which a society grants special status. There is less criticism of these values and symbols and their representation.

Holocaust Remembrance Day and Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day were chosen to examine teachers' beliefs about "civil sacredness" relating to memorial days with different characteristics: we focused on the consensus over Holocaust Day and on Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day which arouses debate over the internal conflict in Israel society, a debate about such issues as law and order and the substance of democracy (Kimmerling, 1999; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009).

The study explored three questions: first, how do teachers conceive sacredness and how is this conception expressed in educational practice? One important finding, which continually surfaced in all the categories examined, was the similarity between the teachers' beliefs in both sectors as to the aspects of sacredness that we examined. All of the teachers be they secular or religious, tied the notion of sacredness to Jewish tradition. They rejected the idea of civil sacredness and conceived sacredness as an intrinsically religious conception. Both sectors used Jewish symbols and prayers to mark sacredness.

Another example of the similarity between two sectors concerns the teachers' views about criticizing the sacred content. Most teachers said they allowed students to express different views in class even if those views opposed / contradicted the school's position. The teachers felt that their educational duty was to enable and respect different opinions..

The schools studied all had more or less similar, fixed models for marking the sacred days. These models are a part of school life and of the tradition that each school develops over time. The schools also had their own unique traditional, educational, and social activities for marking the remembrance day on the day itself and during the days leading up to it. The educational program for Remembrance Day starts a few days before the actual date in lessons taught in the classroom and in the school atmosphere. The climax is on memorial ceremony with the school ceremonies.

The second question dealt with the differences in the way Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day are treated in terms of three factors: personal and emotional involvement, time, and social consensus.

The central reason is personal and emotional involvement—a national calamity, which affects many of the country's citizens in some way, is treated differently from the murder of one person, albeit a leader who was killed for ideological reasons. The reason is that a national tragedy creates a feeling of belonging, closeness, and identification. Social consensus also gives the event a feeling of sacredness. Thus, on Holocaust Remembrance Day there is a feeling of consensus in the air. On the other hand, Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day arouses controversy in the public discourse. Time—in order for particular days in the calendar to be recognized as sacred national days they need to become slowly and gradually fixed in the public consciousness.

The third question dealt with the various ways the sectors mark sacredness.

As noted earlier, the findings show that both sectors represent sacredness the same way —with one difference: the findings reveal a difference in the values on which the religious and secular schools choose to focus.

The Discussion examines at the similarities and differences in how the two sectors mark sacredness. The first issue it examines is the use of religious symbols on the sacred day. Secular schools are required to use religious symbols on a memorial day. The Ministry of Education Circular about the events calls for the inclusion of prayers in school ceremonies for state remembrance days. Also, the use of Jewish symbols in the ceremonies is a habit the teachers have from their earliest childhood, and so it is natural for them to use religious symbols to express sacredness on remembrance days. Another reason is that Jewish symbols are a part of Israeli national identity and so it is appropriate to use them on days that reinforce Israeli national identity (Susser, 1993; Krimling, 1994).

The second issue discusses the three key factors responsible for the different attitudes towards Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day:

The findings suggest that three main factors affected the teachers' attitudes towards the sacredness of a particular event: a. Personal and emotional involvement—a national calamity arouses feelings of belonging, closeness, and solidarity; b. Time — the passage of time provides a more objective, reasoned view of the event, c. Social consensus—social consensus is key prerequisite for including an event in the nation's collective memory. These considerations require that a distinction be made between a sacred event and an important event. A sacred event has elements that identify it as sacred, such as ceremonies, appropriate dress, and so on. For an important event, however, teachers use different pedagogical techniques and tools borrowed from informal education in order to convey the message to the students.

Regarding the third issue, the teachers mentioned the pedagogical implications of the similarities between the two sectors. The fact that the sectors represent the sacred similarly can open the window to joint activities. Informal education offers multiple opportunities for encounters between religious and secular people (Jonah & Goodman, 2004), and the present finding implies that formal education can also facilitate such meetings and help to reduce the distance between the religious and secular sectors in Israeli society.