ISRAEL: 1968 AND THE “67 GENERATION”

Gilad Margalit

To a large extent, Israel was left out of the protest wave in 1968. No students or young people’s demonstrations demanding reform and change were registered. It was definitely the 1967 “Six-Day War” rather than any other event that was the formative generational experience of Israelis born in the years 1938-1948 (the age group typically called the ’68 Generation elsewhere). In Israel, this generation is mainly associated with that war, and thus, tends to be called the ’67 Generation.

Before the 1967 conflict, many Israelis had feared that a new violent conflict with the Arab armies would have disastrous consequences. The unexpected military victory evoked a nationalist euphoria, accompanied by an economic boom that ended a severe economic recession. Too many Israelis, young as old, felt an exaggerated sense of national self-confidence, adored their generals, and held the defeated Arabs in contempt.

Although 1968 does not mark any dramatic shift in public opinion, it does delineate the beginning of multiple waves of deep changes in Israeli society, culture, and politics, in which the local “67 Generation” was very instrumental. These changes modernized Israeli society, turning it into an integral part of the West during the 1970s and 1980s.

The new Zionist society

Since its foundation in 1948, Israel has been a multicultural migrant society with a majority of Jews and a large Arab minority of about 20 percent. In the first decades, this heterogeneous Jewish society consolidated its identity. During the pre-state Yishuv [settlement] period (1880-1948), and up to the 1960s, the vast majority of Israeli elites consisted of Zionist immigrants from Eastern Europe. Many integrated their nationalist convictions into a socialist vision. The socialist parties, which dominated Zionist politics for decades up to 1977, constituted the backbone of the Israeli coalition governments and ran a centralized and highly regulated economy. The country had no TV, and essentially only one, government-owned radio station. Only in 1960 did it inaugurate a second station that broadcast light, foreign music. Trips abroad were rather an exception. This relative cultural isolation contributed to the comparatively late naturalization of Israeli pop and rock in local
popular music, as well as of other Western ideas and fashions. Until the late 1960s, the popular music scene was deeply influenced by Eastern European music, the French chanson, and Bedouin shepherd songs. The military entertainment units enjoyed enormous popularity in the Israeli musical scene and in the local hit parades.

Internationally, in the early 1950s, Israel became part of the Western bloc in the Cold War conflict. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Israel tried to affiliate itself with the newly liberated African countries while developing close military ties to France, which was simultaneously fighting to retain Algeria.

The Jewish community had a strong sense of mission: its goals were to “build and protect the new Zionist society,” absorb significant waves of immigration of Holocaust survivors and Jews from Arab-speaking countries, and establish a thriving economy against serious odds. The prolonged conflict with the Arab world and the economic problems produced existential fears. Consequently, the society was characterized by a high level of public consensus and identification with Zionist collectivism. It felt the necessity to socialize its youth accordingly.

Similar to other European nationalist and socialist movements, Zionism aspired to create a new type of Jewish human being in the land of Israel that was to be the antithesis and negation of the mythical “Diaspora Jew.” “New Jews,” the so-called Zabars named after a local cactus Opuntia ficus-indica to indicate their native-born status and outward toughness, would be free Hebrew speakers, healthy in body and soul, and untouched by the devastating influence of European anti-Semitism.

**Expectations about the young generation**

Israeli elites had high expectations of this young, Israeli-born generation, deeming it essential for the very survival of the Jewish society and state. Hence, the young generation had a very clear vocation in the Zionist revolution. To assure success, the Jewish society had implemented strong institutional controls on young people consisting of a formal, nationalist education system and a complementary informal system of youth movements ideologically connected to the various Zionist political parties. The common maxim for all these institutions was that young people should be deeply committed to the state and nation, even at the cost of their individual development and personal well-being.
In the same vein, the Israeli government made every effort to shield the youth from exposure to “harmful” foreign influences that might divert them from their national vocation by imposing censorship and controls on media and culture. Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion, opposed the introduction of TV broadcasting in Israel because he thought it might harm young people, spoiling their good reading habits and undermining the development of their national identity. In 1965, a government commission responsible for allocating foreign currency for inviting foreign artists prevented the Beatles (who had already enjoyed popularity in the Israeli hit parades of foreign music) from visiting Israel when it ascertained that the group did not comply with the country’s cultural and artistic standards!

The so-called 1948 Generation [Dor Tashach], a first generation of Zabars, consisting of those who fought in the 1948 “War of Independence,” seems to have conformed better to the Zionist aspirations than its successor. The members of the second generation, who had been socialized in the young state during its first decade, seemed to Zionist observers to be less committed to fulfilling their national mission. In 1960, the famous author Izhar Smilanski (1916–2006), who was also a member of the Knesset (parliament) on behalf of the dominant Mapai Party, lamented the individualistic, mediocre, petit-bourgeois aspirations of the urban youth of this generation. Citing the Jewish author Arthur Koestler, he named them the “Espresso Generation,” noting that they seemed to be wasting their time in cafés instead of engaging in national missions, as his own 1948 Generation had done. Ironically, this was the first attempt to define the Israeli generation contemporary with the so-called ‘68 Generation. After the victory of the Six-Day War of 1967, this generation had been “vindicated” and came to be known as the “67 Generation,” just as the “’48 Generation” had been named for its heroic victory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

**Political change and reform**

A gradual process of change and reform was started under the leadership of prime minister Levi Eshkol, who replaced the old patriarch David Ben-Gurion.
in 1963. Most notably, in 1966 the Eshkol government abolished
the military regime, which had controlled the lives of much of the
Israeli-Palestinian population since 1948. In 1968, the government
introduced a government-owned TV channel (broadcasting in black
and white).

Throughout the formative years of Israeli society, non-conformist
Jewish voices from the left criticized the dominant political body.
Since 1948, the Jewish members of the Israeli Communist Party
[Maki] represented such a voice, especially regarding to the Palestin-
ian question.

Another prominent oppositional voice belonged to Uri Avneri, a
member of the ’48 Generation. Avneri led a tough, non-Marxist
anti-establishment line with his controversial weekly Ha’olam
Haze [This World]. In 1965, he founded a political movement,
establishing a political party that bore the name Ha’olam Ha’ze—
Koach-Chadash [This World—New Power] and getting elected to
the Knesset. This party became an address for young radicals of
the ’67 Generation.

The Israeli Socialist Organization, better known as the Matzpen
[Compass] group in reference to its newspaper, was a tiny splinter
group that split from the Israeli Communist Party in 1962 after it had
objected to the lack of free and open discussions within the party
and protested against its ideological collectivism. This Marxist orga-
nization was always very marginal, but it started to resonate with a
wider public after 1967. Its members were—and probably still are—
regarded by the majority of Israelis as outcasts. Nevertheless, they
introduced a unique and unprecedented contribution to the Israeli
political discourse. The late Professor Ehud Sprinzak claimed that
the Matzpen people were the first to break the Israeli—and probably
Jewish—taboo on exposing Israel’s “dirty laundry” (the economic,
civil, and national discrimination against the Israeli Palestinians)
in front of the Western public, including in Germany. On June 8,
1967, in the middle of the Six-Day War, Matzpen jointly published
a political manifesto in the London Times with members of the
Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, regarded by most
Israelis then as a terrorist group aiming to destroy Israel (many still
see it this way today). This strongly anti-Zionist manifesto called for
the establishment of a binational state that would replace Zionist
Israel. However, it emphasized Jews’ right to live in this state, and
similarly opposed Arab and Jewish nationalism.
Similar to developments in other Western countries, certain splinter groups in the Israeli protest movement of the late '60s condoned the use of violence and terror by the Palestinian liberation movements as a legitimate means to achieve their goals. A small number of Jewish radicals of the '67 Generation belonging to one of Matzpen's splinters, the Chazit Aduma [Red Front], expressed their wish to participate in the armed Palestinian struggle for a socialist binational state in Palestine, and two of them even went illegally to Syria and participated in armed training there. The vast majority of Jewish society perceived this unprecedented phenomenon as severe and alarming high treason.

Between protest and consensus

The earliest, calloused voice of protest by a member of the Israeli '67 Generation was that of Hanoch Levin (1943–1999), who would later become one of Israel’s most creative playwrights and poets. At the age of twenty-four—in August 1968, in the midst of the post '67 war euphoria—he staged an anti-militaristic cabaret in Tel-Aviv: You, I and the Next War. Following Brecht, this cabaret sharply and wittily criticized Jewish-Israeli society for its sanctification of death and its militarism, mocking Israel’s most sacred values of sacrifice and heroism for the nation’s cause, and ridiculing its pompous generals. Like many creative minds of his generation, Levin seemed eager to slaughter holy cows and did not shy away from using slang and rude words in his works, thereby shocking Israelis. This cabaret and two additional political plays he wrote between 1968 and 1970 evoked fierce public debates in Israel, which usually focused not on the militaristic character of the society but on the legitimacy of expressing criticism against it.

A bit later, in 1971, a group belonging to the '67 Generation of Mizrahiim [Jews from Arab and Muslim countries] founded a protest organization named the Black Panthers under the influence of radical American Jewish students in Jerusalem (some of these American Jewish students were also members of Matzpen). This was the first radical Mizrahi protest against the Ashkenazi (Jews of European background) establishment and the discrimination of the Oriental Jewish migrants in Israel. Contrary to Matzpen, the Panthers managed to attract thousands of supporters at their demonstrations. They heightened public awareness of the social discrimination against the Mizrahi communities in Israel and augmented the resources directed to ministering to their needs.
Notwithstanding the protest movements, Zionism was still consensual in 1968 among young people, who did not challenge the old leadership either in politics or other fields, even though most Israeli politicians of the time were senior citizens. They never called the commitment to the young state into question. For example, until the Lebanon War of 1982, pacifist refusal to serve in the army (which is compulsory for three years for men, and about two years for women) was a very rare and marginal phenomenon.

While Israeli society was governed by socialist parties, and the collectivist Kibbutz Movement enjoyed extremely high standing, most Israelis perceived the communist bloc during most of the Cold War as a direct enemy of the young Jewish State. The Soviet support of the Arab world and the Soviet anti-Semitism gave rise, as well, to animosity towards the New Left in Europe, which had adopted what most Israelis viewed as pro-Soviet and anti-Israeli positions. Many young Israelis identified with the US, which had equipped the Israel Defense Forces since the French embargo on arms and ammunition to Israel of 1967. They completely misunderstood the struggle of their peers on American campuses against the war in Vietnam, a war they considered an integral part of the fight to free the world from the communist threat.

Young Israelis exhibited the same reservations about the social messages of the ’68 protest. The Israeli ’67 Generation was quite familiar—directly acquainted, even—with socialist and communal ideology and models (e.g., the Kibbutz Movement). While many Western ’68 protesters attracted to the way of life in the kibbutz came to Israel as volunteers, young, educated, urban Israelis were much less enthusiastic about the communal way of life. They wished to escape collectivism, possessing a strong urge to pursue individualistic self-fulfillment and to freely express their personal feelings.

It is also notable that feminism did not play any central role in Israel in 1968. The radical groups described here consisted mostly of young men; extremely few women had participated in their protest activities. This may have been due to the Zionist movement’s support of gender equality (manifested, for example, in the requirement that women, like men, serve in the army).

**The legacy of the ”’67 Generation”**

The generational conflict in the Israel of 1968 did not attain the dimensions it had acquired in the West. Young people did not
challenge their parents, many of whom were immigrants, among them Holocaust survivors. They perceived them as weak rather than powerful and oppressive figures who, therefore, deserved their protection instead of their belligerence.

Despite these remarkable differences between the developments in Israel and in other parts of the world, the ‘67 Generation avant-garde brought pacifist, civilian, and, above all, individualistic voices into Israeli discourse, counterbalancing its former hegemonic militarist, nationalist, and collectivist characteristics. Their efforts helped liberalize Israeli society, making it more polyphonic, pluralistic, and basically Western.

* I am very grateful to my friend and colleague, Professor Benjamin Bental, himself a member of the “67 Generation,” for his thoughtful comments on drafts of this paper.

Gilad Margalit, born in 1959, is an Israeli historian, and Deputy Director of the Haifa Center for German and European Studies (HCGES) at the University of Haifa. His research focuses on German history since 1945.