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President Reuven Rivlin Address to the 15th Annual Herzliya Conference

“Israeli Hope: Towards a New Israeli Order”

7 June 2015 / 20 Sivan 5775

Ladies and Gentlemen, Israeli society is undergoing a far-reaching transformation. This is not a trivial change, it is a transformation that will restructure our very identity as ‘Israelis’, and will have a profound impact on the way we understand ourselves and our national home; there is no escape from this change. These changes may well stir up, for some of us, nostalgia for ‘the old and much loved Israel’, but those experiences of togetherness sitting around an imaginary Israeli camp-fire will not return.

In Israel, there is a word which has long since turned into a weapon: ‘Demography’. This word is generally used when someone wants to validate a particular claim. However, those with a good ear understand that this usage is generally nothing but an ostensibly polite way of describing one or other population group as a ‘threat’, or a ‘danger’. As unwanted, as illegitimate. Sometimes the finger is pointed at the Arabs, sometimes at the religious Israeli Jews, or at the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) - depending on the context. For this reason, over the years, I have developed a profound distaste for that concept. But today, here I am standing before you, one year into my presidency, and asking to speak to you about demography. And that is because significant demographic changes speak to, and indeed even dictate, the very essence of reality. I have never regarded, nor will I ever regard any persons or groups comprising Israeli society as a danger, or, God forbid, as a threat.

But, I am standing here today, because I have identified a very real threat in our collective suppression of the transformations that Israeli society has been undergoing in recent decades; in neglecting to confront what I call the ‘new Israeli order’, the significance of which I want to deal with today.

Ladies and gentlemen, the ‘new Israeli order’ is not an apocalyptic prophecy. It is the reality. A reality, that can already be seen in the composition of the first grade classes in the Israeli education system. In the 1990s (as can be seen in the slide behind me), Israeli society comprised a clear and firm majority, with minority groups alongside it.

A large secular Zionist majority, and beside it three minority groups: a national-religious minority, an Arab minority, and a Haredi minority. Although this pattern remains frozen in



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the minds of much of the Israeli public, in the press, in the political system, all the while, the reality has totally changed.

Today, the first grade classes are composed of about 38% secular Jews, about 15% national religious, about one quarter Arabs, and close to a quarter Haredim. While it is true that numbers and definitions are dynamic, neither identities nor birth-rates remain static over time. But one thing is clear, the demographic processes that are restructuring or redesigning the shape of Israeli society, have, in fact, created a 'new Israeli order'. A reality in which there is no longer a clear majority, nor clear minority groups. A reality in which Israeli society is comprised of four population sectors, or, if you will, four principal 'tribes', essentially different from each other, and growing closer in size. Whether we like it or not, the make-up of the 'stakeholders' of Israeli society, and of the State of Israel, is changing before our eyes.

Whenever I describe this distribution, I am always asked: 'and what about the distribution between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews?' Between Left and Right? Periphery and center? Rich and poor? Are these not dividing lines that segment and tear apart Israeli society? And the answer is, of course they are. Those dividing lines unfortunately exist – within each of the population sectors, and through all of them together – and they must be addressed and dealt with. However, in contrast to those divisions, it is the distribution into four principal tribes that make up Israeli society, that reveals its basic structure; a structure that we shall never have the ability or the power to blur or erase; a structure, that for many of us, is perceived as a threat – to the secular-liberal character of the State of Israel on the one hand; and to the Zionist enterprise on the other. This serious division of Israeli society finds expression primarily in the distribution between the different and separate education systems. While in the main, Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, from Right and Left, do go to school together – in general, children born in the State of Israel are sent to one of four separate education systems. To a system whose purpose is to educate the child and form their worldview into a different ethos or culture, religious belief or even national identity.

A child from Beth El, a child from Rahat, a child from Herzliya and a child from Beitar Ilit – not only do they not meet each other, but they are educated toward a totally different outlook regarding the basic values and desired character of the State of Israel. Will this be a secular, liberal state, Jewish and democratic? Will it be a state based on Jewish religious



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law? Or a religious democratic state? Will it be a state of all its citizens, of all its national ethnic groups? Tribe, by tribe, by tribe, by tribe.

Similarly, each tribe has its own media platforms, newspapers they read, the television channels they watch. Each tribe also has its own towns, Tel Aviv is the town of one tribe, just as Umm el Fahm is the town of another, as is Efrat, and Bnei Brak. Each represents the town of a different tribe. In the State of Israel the basic systems that form people's consciousness are tribal and separate, and will most likely remain so. I do not want to oversimplify with rough generalizations. Obviously, this division is neither absolute nor all-embracing. No population sector is in itself a single element, but rather comprises a varied range of members; and there are of course, also common areas between the sectors. However, it is also important we do not ignore, whether through blindness or denial, that it is not the marginal elements of each sector that create the huge gaps between them.

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— We are not dealing here with the gaps between extreme Jewish nationalists on one side, and radical anarchists, or Islamist fundamentalists on the other. We are dealing here with a cultural and religious identity gap and sometimes an abyss between the mainstreams of each of the camps; between four different and rich engines of identity. The 'new Israeli order' is not a creative sociological differentiation; it is, rather, a reality with far-reaching consequences for our national strength, for the future of us all. From an economic viewpoint, the current reality is not viable. The mathematics is simple, any child can see it. If we do not reduce the current gaps in the rate of participation in the work force and in the salary levels of the Arab and Haredi populations - who are soon to become one half of the work force - Israel will not be able to continue to be a developed economy.

The severe and painful epidemic of poverty that is already having a major effect in Israel, will only expand and worsen. From a political viewpoint, Israeli politics to a great extent is built as an inter-tribal zero sum game. One tribe, the Arabs, whether or not by its own choice, is not really a partner in the game. The other three, it seems, are absorbed by a struggle for survival, a struggle over budgets and resources for education, housing, or infrastructure, each on behalf of their own sector. In the 'new Israeli order' in which each sector experiences itself as a minority, this dynamic will be infinitely more destructive. But, beyond all this, we must examine the social and moral implications of the 'new Israeli order'. We must ask ourselves honestly, what is common to all these population sectors?



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Do we have a shared civil language, a shared ethos? Do we share a common denominator of values with the power to link all these sectors together in the Jewish and democratic State of Israel? In the past, the IDF served as a central tool for fashioning the Israeli character. In the military, Israeli society would confront itself, would consolidate, and shape itself morally, socially and in many ways economically.

However, in the emerging Israeli order, more than half of the population does not serve in the military. So the Israelis will meet for the first time, if at all, only in the work place. In any case, the mutual ignorance and lack of a common language between these four populations, that are becoming ever more similar in size, merely increase the tension, fear, hostility and the competitiveness between them.

Some will say that I am only stating opinion, but first and foremost these are the facts. In order to create hope, we must recognize the facts. Ignoring, denying and suppressing the changes Israeli society is undergoing, or an inability to recognize them – will not help.

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Recently, I met with a forum of young CEOs, among them a Vice CEO for marketing, working for a large advertising company in Tel Aviv. I presented them with the data (on this slide here behind me). He let out a shriek. A man such as this, whose livelihood is probably dependent on an ability to understand us, the Israelis, found it difficult to believe that this is the society in which he is living. He is not the only one. This outlook is shared by the average viewer of the commercial TV channels, who does not see Haredi, or Arab, towns on the weather-forecast map, and so gets into the habit of thinking that they do not exist. On the other hand, there are those who clearly see these changes, but refuse to accept the facts. So too, there are those who call out in public against what they call the ‘religionization’ of the IDF.

Conversely, there are those who simply propose territorial exchanges, since it is not possible to change the demography, but it is possible to play around with the geography. Indeed, it has already been said that if the Haredim and the Arabs did not exist, our situation would be excellent.

Ladies and Gentlemen, neither suppressing nor fighting this situation will help. We are all here to stay - Haredim and secular Jews, Orthodox Jews and Arabs. Now, if we truly want to deal with the significance of the ‘new Israeli order’, then we must bravely face the issue, and ask ourselves some tough questions. Are we, the members of the Zionist



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population, able to accept the fact that two significant groups, a half of the future population of Israel, do not define themselves as Zionists? They do not watch the torch-lighting ceremony on Mount Herzl on Independence Day. They do not sing the national anthem with eyes glistening. Are we willing to give up military service, as an entry ticket into Israeli society and economy, and settle for civilian or community service? And on the other hand, are the Arab and Haredi publics willing to commit to contributing their share in molding Israeli identity and the Israeli economy, and to participating in civil national and community service, with a sense of responsibility and commitment? Whoever is not willing to ask these questions today is not more or less of a Zionist or a Nationalist, but one who is ignoring the most significant challenge put before the Zionist enterprise today. If we desire to live with the vision of a Jewish and democratic state as our life's dream and our heart's desire, then we need to look bravely at this reality. This should be done together, out of a deep commitment to find the answers to these questions, out of a readiness to draw together all the tribes of Israel, with a shared vision of Israeli hope.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 'new Israeli order' now requires us to abandon the accepted view of a majority and minorities, and move to a new concept of partnership between the various population sectors in our society. Clarification of the essence of that partnership is the task of all of Israeli society. Even if it is not my role, as President of the State of Israel, to dictate the answers to these important questions, it is my duty and obligation to ask them, and demand they be debated and answered. And I will continue to do so from every platform, everywhere, before every tribe amongst us, and before the whole people.

I believe that there are four pillars on which this partnership must stand. The first is a sense of security for each sector, that entry into this partnership does not require giving up basic elements of their identity. The Haredi, the secular, the religious, or the Arab individual must not feel that the issues most sensitive to them are in danger or under threat. Whether this be the Haredi way of education in the Yeshivot; the national religious concept of redemption; the liberal lifestyle of a secular Jew, or the Arab-Palestinian identity.

The sense of security that my basic identity is not threatened is a fundamental prerequisite for the ability of each one of us to hold out a hand to the other. To understand their pain and fears. The ability of us all, to establish a partnership here between the various sectors. We cannot do this unless we can learn to know each other, unless we gain an



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understanding of the most sensitive issues of each sector, and learn how to respect and safeguard them – even when this is difficult or even frustrating.

The second pillar is shared responsibility. When no tribe is a minority, no side can escape bearing responsibility for the destiny and the future of the State of Israel, and of Israeli society in general. So, no tribe is exempt from proposing solutions to deal with the challenge of defending the security of the State; from facing the economic challenges, or maintaining the international status of Israel as a member of the family of nations. Partnership demands responsibility.

The third pillar, is equity and equality. In order to ensure the partnership between us, we must ensure that no citizen is discriminated against, nor favoured, simply because they belong to a specific sector. The current situation of structural gaps between the partners, whether in budgets, infrastructures or land, is intolerable. There are clear tribal aspects to poverty in Israel, and the majority of senior positions in the economy are held by the members of one or two sectors. In such a situation it is not possible to build a shared future here. In order to create a strong basis for the partnership between us, we will have to ensure an accessible 'Israeli dream' that can be realized by each and every young person, judged only on the basis of their talents, and not according to their ethnic or social origins.

The fourth, and the most challenging pillar, is the creation of a shared Israeli character - a shared 'Israeliness'. Despite the challenges the 'new Israeli order' poses, we must recognize that we are not condemned to be punished by the developing Israeli mosaic – but rather it offers a tremendous opportunity. It encompasses cultural richness, inspiration, humanity and sensitivity. We must not allow the 'new Israeli order' to cajole us into sectarianism and separation. We must not give up on the concept of 'Israeliness'; we should rather open up its gates and expand its language.

There is a long and difficult path to the establishment of these pillars. But, if we believe that we were not doomed, but destined to live together, we shall overcome the challenge.

Dear friends, we shall need to implement the partnership demanded by the 'new Israeli order' in each and every area of our lives. We shall be required to be familiar with education for partnership – given the separate education systems. To learn how to manage an economy and a public sector that excels at employment diversity. To learn the nature of media that succeeds in serving as a joint platform, an academic world that does not



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compromise on quality, but also knows how to create a sensitive cultural environment. A world of politics and political discourse that takes into account the sensitivities and foundations of partnership.

The establishment of this partnership is an enormous task. It is a task which I have taken upon myself, but far from a task that is mine alone. It demands from all of us a great collective effort.

During my first year in office, I have worked to rouse each sector among us, to see the other sector - even when difficult - to hear the other sector, even when it grates on ones ears. To hold out a hand to them. At the end of that year, I now stand here before you, seeking to say these things openly and clearly, feeling deeply that Israeli society is today in need of a wake-up call.

I call on you all today to join me in facing this challenge. I am a partner to anyone ready and willing to play their part in this task. I am here at your service, at the service of all of Israeli society. Only in this way, together and in partnership, shall we be able to rekindle the Israeli hope.

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I would like to thank the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center and its leaders, and the members of the Steering Committee who are sitting here with us, who have taken on themselves the task of investigating their role and contribution to the establishment of this partnership.

Bless you all.

For further details:

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