



# Toward the Revitalization of Civics

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## Abstract

During his four years as Minister of Education, Gideon Sa'ar led an unprecedented process of politicization of the Israeli education system. Inter alia, Sa'ar turned the study of civics into a political battleground. Dr. Zvi Zameret, Sa'ar's appointee to chair the pedagogical secretariat, was his instrument in making these changes. Zameret was responsible for failing to renew the appointment of the civics supervisor at the Ministry of Education, replacing the members of the civics curriculum committee and directing the re-writing of the curriculum.

In recent years, education about democracy, or civic education, has come to be identified with the left, and thus has been marked as an arena for political struggle. Zameret's new curriculum reflects this, and introduces a discussion that goes well beyond the scope of civics. It focuses heavily on the justifications for a Jewish nation state, with a special focus on boosting national pride and fostering identification with the Zionist project.

In this way, civics has become yet another branch of history, Bible and geography studies, abandoning its original purpose: to introduce students to the democratic mechanisms upon which their state is founded and to encourage independent and critical thinking about the way these mechanisms function.

The new curriculum reflects a deep fear that students' national-Zionist identity is eroding, and sends the mistaken and problematic message to Israeli youth that there is a fundamental contradiction between the state's national character and the democratic system of government. This approach forces pupils to face a rigid dichotomy of national-Jewish identity versus democratic-Israeli identity, and worse, choose one or the other.

This dangerous dichotomous worldview makes the study of civics superficial, abandons the emphasis on critical thinking, downplays the importance of learning about Israel's minorities and –most egregiously– frees the students from contending with the complexity of the reality in Israel.

Civics has long suffered an inferior status relative to other subjects in the humanities and social sciences. The scant hours that had been devoted to discussing democratic values in the previous curriculum have been converted into additional time for discussion of justifications of Israel's existence. In its current constellation, the civic education Israeli youth receive is more diminished than ever.

The new Minister of Education should initiate a process to renew the study of civics as soon as possible. This should be done by first appointing a new supervisor and by replacing the members of the civics curriculum committee with educators and academic personnel who represent a broad range of fields of knowledge, worldviews and communities. In addition, the Minister should pull out of storage and implement the report of the Public Committee on Education for shared life between Jews and Arabs in Israel (2009). He should redirect the curriculum's emphasis towards civics itself – i.e. the system of democratic government, its objectives and principles.

## Toward the revitalization of civics

Pedahzur and Perliger claim that civic education has always been conceived in Israel as an arena for political struggle:

In light of the fact that all of the political streams in Israel have salient interests in everything that shapes the nature of civic education in Israel, the conflict over content was linked to the political conflict... The fact that civic education (in fact, its ineffectiveness) strikes at the root of the political dispute within Israeli society and both affects and is influenced by the fundamental values related to shaping the character of Israel, has made it a central instrument in the ongoing struggle between two political streams with opposing views on the future character of the state.<sup>1</sup>

But the public discourse in Israel has become further polarized in recent years. In some circles, commitment to democracy is perceived as treason or post-Zionist. Education geared towards engaged citizenship and fostering an understanding of the democratic systems are identified with the left and immediately marked as a battleground. During Gideon Sa'ar's term, the Ministry of Education underwent an explicit turn to the right. This was expressed through a range of measures: rejecting a dual narrative history textbook, conducting inquiries into teachers and principals who expressed leftist political views, and organizing class trips to Hebron. Revising the civics curriculum was clearly part and parcel to this broader agenda.

The previous chairman of the pedagogical secretariat, Dr. Zvi Zameret, made the battle over civics a central issue during his term at the Ministry of Education: He spearheaded changes in the curriculum and replaced the members of the civics curriculum committee. He also failed to renew the appointment of the civics supervisor at the Ministry of Education, Adar Cohen. Dr. Zameret's campaign against the subject of civics was based on the contention that there should be less emphasis on critical thinking and more focus on the history of the State of Israel and, in particular, on bolstering the national and Zionist dimension of the subject matter.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit, the civics curriculum was revised. The new Minister of Education has an opportunity to restore the emphasis on the study of democracy and invest in the renewal of the subject of civics.

This paper describes the main changes that have occurred in the civics curriculum and in the textbooks composed in accordance with it. It argues that the new curriculum focuses on justifying the national-Jewish aspect of the State of Israel rather than the democratic system of government, as should be the case in teaching civics. In doing so, the program does damage to the very subject of civics, which already suffers from a dearth of attention and

hours of instruction. Moreover, the emphasis on justifying the national-Jewish aspect conveys a message that being a Jewish nation state is inconsistent with the democratic system of government, and that they must choose between their Jewish-national identity and their democratic-Israeli identity.

## The process of changing the curriculum

Committees comprised of academics, content experts and educators determine Israeli curricula. Each curriculum committee formulates "a vision, goals, and specific topics of study for each specific subject area – from math to literature. It is customary to update these curricula once every few years. The previous curriculum in civics was last updated in 2002. Consequently, in 2009, Dr. Zameret decided to convene a committee and to update and revise the civics curriculum. Dr. Zameret replaced the former committee and appointed Prof. Asher Cohen in place of Prof. Yedidia Stern as chairmen. Prof. Asher Cohen subsequently revised the curriculum which went into effect in the 2010–2011 school year though the new curriculum was only included in the matriculation exam in the 2012–2013 school year. It is worth noting that during the course of the curriculum revision, all Arab members of the committee resigned.

After the curriculum was approved, it was possible to advance to the next stage – developing textbooks. In recent decades, textbooks have primarily been developed by private publishers. However, civics is one of the only subjects whose curriculum is common to all state schools – religious, non-religious, Jews and Arabs. As a result, all Israeli educational tracks shared one central textbook written by the Ministry of Education itself in 2001 ("To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State"<sup>3</sup>). In the wake of the curriculum change, the Ministry of Education published an update to the book.<sup>4</sup> In addition, textbooks were published by private publishers (only in Hebrew).<sup>5</sup>

## Central changes to the curriculum

The changes imposed by Dr. Zameret were based on a position paper by the Institute for Zionist Strategies,<sup>6</sup> which reviewed the civics curriculum in April 2009. The IZS position paper reflects a fear of an erosion of the pupils' national-Zionist identity.<sup>7</sup> The fear was that the previous curriculum portrayed the state's national-Jewish character as clashing with democracy and even harming it. The paper claimed that change was necessary to create balance between patriotic education and democracy education in the civics curriculum.<sup>8</sup> The curriculum changes that were ultimately introduced were designed to show that a Jewish nation-state is justified and desirable, to deepen Jewish identity and boost students' national pride and identification with the Zionist project. The result is that today the study of civics has shifted

its emphasis from learning about the principles of democracy to another lesson in history cementing Jewish-national identity.

An examination of the changes made to the curriculum, reveals that they match the IZS position paper's recommendations exactly. As part of the effort to persuade students of the justice of the Zionist nation-state, two topics were added to the curriculum:

An historical introduction: A chapter of historical background reviewing the creation of the State of Israel from the Balfour Declaration to the establishment of the state. The development of the Zionist movement is described parallel to the Arab refusal of partition in 1947 and Arab violence against the Jewish pre-state community. The chapter concludes with the War of Independence. The chapter's goal is to emphasize the international recognition of the right of the Jews to a nation-state, while making it clear that the Arabs never joined in this recognition.<sup>9</sup>

The justifications for the nation-state in general and for the Jewish nation-state in particular: According to the new curriculum, teachers should explain why nation-states are justified from an historical and theoretical perspective. In addition, they should address the contention that ethno-cultural nation-states are liable to harm minority groups. The update presents what it claims to be liberal and democratic justifications for the Jewish nation-state. For example, it is argued that Israel is justified in being a Jewish ethnic nation-state because this identity reflects the cultural preference of the majority, strengthens the social solidarity of its members and protects their personal security. This is a narrow and dangerous view of democracy that focuses only on its formal (majority rule) and unessential aspects as a form of government.

The chapters that were added seek to convince students that the State of Israel's existence is justified by arguing that Israel is a nation-state like all others, and that the state's preferential treatment for the Jewish nation is an expression of democratic and liberal principles.

## Jewish identity versus civic identity

The Ministry of Education, the Institute for Zionist Strategies and the authors of the new textbooks expressed concern regarding the claim that a Jewish nation-state is inconsistent with a democratic system of government.<sup>10</sup> This fear indicates the confusion of two different levels of discussion. Ethno-cultural nationalism – i.e. allegiance to a Jewish nation-state – is a characteristic of identity and affiliation. Democracy is a system of government. As Prof. Gans explains in his book *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State*:<sup>11</sup>

Cultural nationalism has had a variety of forms. Inter alia, these include

liberal and fascist, socialist and conservative, humanist and anti-humanist versions, as well as chauvinist and egalitarian, collectivist and individualist, ethnocentric and non-ethnocentric, state-seeking and non-state-seeking forms of nationalism. Just as ethno-cultural nationalism has come in all of these forms, so too has Zionism.

The Zionist nation-state can be democratic, liberal, humanist and egalitarian or, conversely, fascist, anti-humanist, chauvinist and ethnocentric. The concern that an ethno-cultural nation-state will not be fully democratic is a real one, especially when there are ethnic, religious and cultural minorities present in the state. Precisely for this reason, civic education must concentrate on an in-depth discussion of the characteristics of the democratic form of government in order to ensure that the fulfillment of Jewish nationalism will be simultaneously democratic and humanist. Civic education should emphasize the possibility of integration of identity and government, and present the democratic version of an ethno-cultural nation-state. Instead, the new curriculum is focused on "patriotic education" seeks to refute claims that Zionism is not democratic.

The new curriculum's effort to justify the ethno-cultural state suggests to pupils that there is a contradiction between these two foundational elements of the state — the national-Jewish versus the democratic. In doing so, *the curriculum presents (Jewish) pupils with a choice between their national-Jewish identity and their democratic-civic identity.*

A central goal of civic education is to present the complex reality and encourage pupils to think critically.<sup>12</sup> Democracy is inherently complex, and only rarely yields absolute answers that can be drawn in black or white. An ethno-cultural nation-state can be democratic only if it maintains a proper balance between majority rule and minority rights, between pluralism and stability.

The previous curriculum, as well as its main textbook, addressed principles such as the separation of powers, the rule of law, pluralism, and protection of human rights. By addressing the rifts in Israeli society, the curriculum introduced students to the social diversity and multiplicity of voices in Israel. These things were studied in light of Israel's existence as the national home of the Jewish people. The pupils were required to contend with the complex reality: They learned that while preferential treatment for the Jewish majority on issues like the character and identity of the state, expressed through such legal mechanisms as the Law of Return, do indeed infringe on minority rights, such transgressions might be justified in light of the Jewish character of the state. Separation of powers, the protection of human rights, the commitment to pluralism – all these were explained as measures that can allow the state's national character to remain consistent with a democratic form of government and its values. The understanding that the democratic system of government requires a delicate and ongoing balancing of conflicting desires, values and principles teaches the pupils that

expressing the will of the majority is not the ultimate goal of democracy. This essential and complex discernment of the functions of a democratic system enables students to understand how Jewish nationalism is compatible with democracy.

The new curriculum is dangerous because it makes the study of civics superficial. It frees it from contending with the complexity of the Israeli reality and portrays the state's Jewishness and democracy as contradictory, giving the impression that there is an inherent and irresolvable tension between the two. It is true that this rendering characterizes the Israeli discourse in recent years, but this is neither necessary nor desirable; it leads to a perception liberals, by definition, as non-Zionists. The tendency to view education for universal values of citizenship and democracy as necessarily at odds with national and cultural values is false and can be corrected.

## Revitalizing the study of civics

Over the years, civics has suffered relative to other subjects in the humanities and social sciences. While subjects like literature and history are studied from second grade through twelfth grade, civics is only studied for three years: one year in middle school (usually in ninth grade) and two years in high school, in preparation for the matriculation exam. This means that the State of Israel devotes a mere quarter of a student's time in the years of their formal education to preparing them for their adult life as citizens.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, eleven years are devoted to Jewish and national education within the Jewish state education system.<sup>14</sup> These include Bible studies (beginning in second grade and continuing through twelfth), six years of "Jewish Culture and Tradition," and the study of Talmudic literature. In addition, a considerable measure of the time designated for general history is devoted to chapters in Jewish history.

Moreover, "Jewish" and national content and values are also conveyed via field trips, and the Shelah and Masa Israeli programs of study, as well as various events throughout the school year (Jewish holidays, Memorial Days, Independence Day, Jerusalem Day).<sup>15</sup> On top of that, the Ministry of Religious Affairs recently created the Jewish Identity Administration. Compared with the education system's extensive engagement in Jewish identity and Jewish values, the Administration does very little to expose its pupils to the system of government in Israel and to the existence of minorities in Israeli society.

The few hours the previous curriculum devoted to exposing pupils to democratic values were converted in the new curriculum to explaining the historical background to the founding of the State of Israel (also taught in history class) and justifying Israel's existence as a Jewish nation-state. In this way, the Jewish identity of the state is reinforced while the civic identity is blurred. It is not only the non-Jewish citizens of Israel who are excluded from the collective in the absence of a civic identity,<sup>16</sup> but it is all Israelis who become captive to a dogmatic and one-dimensional system. If we do not educate our youth to think critically, to understand the

complexity of the reality in which we live, and to appreciate pluralism, the next generation of citizens will be ill-equipped to manage their future. To be sure, they will be instilled with national and religious values, but they will be ignorant of their own form of government, indifferent to democratic principles and oblivious to others who are not Jews.

The new Minister of Education brings with him a promise to change the priorities of Israel's education system. He has already expressed his intention to fight racism among youth and to mandate meetings between Jewish and Arab schools in Israel. These directions are important and welcome. In this context, the minister should pull out of storage and implement the 2009 report of the public committee on education for shared life between Jews and Arabs in Israel. He should embark on a revitalization of civics: appoint a new, professional supervisor for civics, and replace the members of the curriculum committee with respected educators and academics who represent a broad range of fields of knowledge, worldviews and communities. He should redirect the emphasis in this field of study to civics itself – the system of government, its objectives and principles.





## Summary of policy measures:

- Replace the members of the civics curriculum committee
- Update the civics curriculum
- Appoint a suitable chief supervisor for civics
- Implement the report of the Public Committee on Education for Shared Life Between Jews and Arabs in Israel

## Notes

1 Pedahzur and Perliger (2004), "The Inherent Paradox of Civics Education in Israel" *Migamot* 43:1, pp. 64-83, p. 73.

2 For example, see: <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4089113,00.html>

3 Adan, Ashkenazi, Alperson (2001), "To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State" (Ma'alot).

4 Ashkenazi, Alperson, Dubi, Starkman (2012), "To Be Citizens in Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State (Part 1 – A Jewish State)" (Experimental Edition), Ministry of Education, Pedagogical Secretariat. The update was published in full at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, but was translated into Arabic only at the end of the year.

5 Diskin, "Government and Politics in Israel" Maggie Publishers, Ltd.; Shahar, Israel: A Jewish and Democratic State" (Kineret) and the book Gildi, Naveh, Motzkin, "Embarking on a Civic Path" (Reches). This book was rejected by the Ministry of Education following a campaign by the Institute for Zionist Strategies, and the prior approval of the book was the official cause for firing the supervisor of civics education.

6 The Institute for Zionist Strategies is a right-wing research institute that aims to "influence the public discourse and decision-making processes in the State of Israel in order to fulfill the Zionist vision." One of its stated missions is "to deepen the Jewish and Zionist identity in the programs of study." In 2009, the Institute published a position paper entitled: "Civics Studies – Education or Unidirectional Indoctrination?" The Institute's extensive involvement in the new civics curriculum is clearly evident given those who participated in redesigning it. For example, Prof. Asher Cohen, who replaced Prof. Yedidia Stern as chairman of the curriculum committee, is a research fellow at the Institute for Zionist Strategies; Prof. Diskin, who wrote a textbook for the new curriculum, is a team leader at the Institute; and Dr. Aviad Bakshi, the scientific advisor for the Ministry of Education's update, is a member of the Institute's staff.

7 For an opposing view of the old curriculum, see: Pinson (2005), "Between a Jewish and Democratic State: Contradictions and Tensions in the Civics Curriculum" *Politika* 14, p. 9. Pinson analyzes the civics curriculum (prior to the latest changes) and reaches the conclusion that the curriculum contributes to instilling a hierarchical civic structure that favors Jewish national values over universal values.

8 Additional recommendations by the Institute for Zionist Strategies position paper include:

1. Discarding the report of the Kremnitzer Committee (1996)
2. Discontinuing uniformity in teaching civics so that Arabic-speaking schools, state Jewish schools and state-religious Jewish schools will teach separate curricula. [In this author's opinion, the desire to discard uniformity among these schools derives from the state-religious track's wish to be exclusively responsible for the civic education of its pupils without subordination to the state's secular education system, as well as from the aspiration to separate national, Zionist content for Jews from content that is appropriate for Arabs and Druze (who would be given separate curricula).
3. Updating the curriculum and textbook.

9 Prof. Diskin's book includes an explicit discussion that compares the exodus (flight or expulsion) of the Israeli Arabs during the 1948 war to the exodus of Jews from the Arab states following the War of Independence.

10 In the update, the authors explain why it is essential to justify the nation-state – with liberal justifications:

Moreover, there is concern that a state's activity in promoting one ethno-cultural group is liable to violate individual rights of members of minority groups among the citizenry. Therefore, the justification of a nation-state in accordance with a liberal worldview requires the presentation of arguments demonstrating that the nation-state can exist without violating human rights and that the nation-state actually fosters the protection of human rights. (p. 53)

11 Ganz, *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.23. (Hebrew translation forthcoming from Molad)

12 This is how the objective of civics education is described in the "Guide to Teaching Civics" (Division for Curricula, 2001) published by the Ministry of Education:

Civic education in the framework of civics lessons is designed to nurture autonomous citizens who have values and are capable of exercising judgment; who act in a rational way, using critical thinking; who are able to make judgments and decisions on social and political questions according to agreed rules of the game, based on values that express the character of the state. (p. 6).

13 In elementary school, civics-related content is taught in the framework of "Homeland, Society and Citizenship" (as part of the curriculum in third grade). Beginning in the 2009-2010 school

year, there has been a requirement to teach civics for one year (two hours per week) in middle schools. Since the 2006-2007 school year, there has been a requirement to teach two units of civics (three hours per week) for two years in high school.

14 The basic programs in the education system appear in directives issued by the director-general. The updated directives (in Hebrew) can be found below:

<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Applications/Mankal/EtsMedorim/3/3-1/HoraotKeva/K-2009-8a-3-1-36.htm> (middle schools)

<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Applications/Mankal/EtsMedorim/3/3-1/HoraotKeva/K-2008-3a-3-1-30.htm> (This directive is the last one that specifies the required curriculum in high schools. It was canceled and has yet to be replaced by a new directive.)

<http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/Applications/Mankal/EtsMedorim/3/3-1/HoraotKeva/K-2006-3a-3-1-25.htm> (elementary schools)

15 Lemish (2003), *"Civic and Citizenship Education in Israel"* Cambridge Journal of Education, Vol. 33 (1), p. 53

16 It is hard to imagine how it is possible to teach the new curriculum in Arab schools, whose pupils are also required to memorize the justifications for the Jewish state in terms of Jewish solidarity. See, for example, Neshet, Talila. "Arab teachers: It's impossible to teach the material in civics" *Haaretz* [Hebrew], 7.04.2013, available at [www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1986800](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1986800)



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