When I arrived at Kiryat Moriah, earlier than we had arranged to meet, former Chief of Staff Moshe (Bogie) Yaalon was already there. Coming early is built into his personality, like his serious demeanor, simple and unpretentious. Yaalon’s sandals and manner of dress immediately position him far from the world of senior management where most former Chiefs of Staff end up and much closer to the youth movements in which he was raised. He also talks about Zionism unapologetically, without quotation marks, and at length, focusing on one thing: the creation of a firm foundation of values for a society that has made the mistake of dreaming that it is free from the struggle for existence. This issue already concerned Yaalon...
five years ago, when he prepared for his role as Chief of Staff, and it was the impetus for the creation of the ‘Identity and Purpose’ program described below.

“I was not always satisfied with the products of the Israeli school system that I encountered in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces)” said Yaalon. “They were ignorant of the history of the Jewish People, of Jewish tradition. In the army, we teach the values of purity of arms and the sanctity of human life. Where do these values come from? When we speak about willingness to sacrifice one’s life for the State of Israel, it is not an empty slogan; it rests on a profound basis. In the army, I found many examples of youth whom I can only describe as ‘water sprouts’. Like water sprouts, these young people have no roots. They have no clue where they come from and have never engaged in clarifying their values. Some Israeli schools do not deal with values education at all. Some young people begin their army service without ever having been to Jerusalem. They are not familiar with the land for which they are supposed to sacrifice their lives, let alone acquainted with its history.”

“I once had a driver from the south. He saw Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem and the Galilee for the first time with me. He had never gone on his annual school trip because his family couldn’t afford it. Until his army service, the furthest north he had ever been was to the home of relatives in Dimona. And he had no Jewish background to speak of – in his home they didn’t bother with that. This is what I mean by ‘water sprouts’.”

A BERET IS NOT ENOUGH

Yaalon cites another example from his time as commander of Paratrooper Battalion 890. “I once accepted a highly motivated group of ‘Rafial Youth’ [a reference to soldiers from Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan’s project that incorporated at-risk youth into the IDF and provided them with professional training] without the required screening process. I believed that they could be integrated successfully. Six of the ten soldiers completed their service in the battalion, but out of the four who dropped out, only one made it to the final week of basic training. I asked him why. ‘It’s hard. Sir, to get up early every morning, to train...’ he replied. ‘Then why did you volunteer?’ I asked, since there are easier assignments than combat service in the Paratroopers. ‘My girlfriend said that a red beret suits me,’ he replied. Now that is a reason to volunteer for a unit that ultimately expects you to lay your life on the line? This is an example of a ‘water sprout’ – a plant without roots that is overturned in the very first storm. Now, when a platoon commander has a discussion with a soldier, it is about ethical issues.”

“I saw Identity and Purpose not only as an opportunity to receive professional guidance in imbuing their units with Jewish values content, and are guided by educational advisors in creating programs that are tailored to the specific needs of their units.

“I saw Identity and Purpose not only as an opportunity to fill in gaps of knowledge,” explains Yaalon, “but also as an opportunity to stimulate discussions of values. Luckily, I had experienced these kinds of discussions in my youth movement, but many people never have this experience until they get to the army. In contrast to Rafial [former Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan], who sought to advance weaker populations in society, I am talking about young men from good homes who are ‘water sprouts’ – they do not know anything and are not equipped with values.”

Does this program provide the response that you wanted?

“Absolutely. The program exposes participants to important knowledge. It also legitimizes the discussion of values for those soldiers who already possess a firm grounding in values and equips them with tools that enable them to transmit those values to the soldiers under their command. Now, when a platoon commander has a discussion with a soldier, it is about ethical issues.”

Are there more discussions about values in the IDF today than in the 1990’s?

“Yes. The discussions of commanders, platoon leaders, and soldiers who attend this program are not academic. The program raises ethical issues that are translated into practical matters – such as rules of engagement, conduct in the field, and combat. It enables them to understand the concerns underlying these regulations.

Isn’t it problematic for the army, as a government institution, to engage in discussions of values, when there is such deep discord surrounding issues related to values?

“There are issues that are subject to controversy – in certain cases, I might add, to my regret. I tried to find issues that are not controversial, such as the sanctity of human life. While there may be disagreement about the practical details of this subject, there is no disagreement regarding the general ethical issue. I hope that we never reach a time when there are arguments about the legitimacy of the existence of an independent Jewish state. This matter is subject to debate abroad, but fortunately there is still consensus regarding it in Israel.”

Younger soldiers must have deep roots to know what they are fighting for.”

“Before I assumed the office of Chief of Staff, I decided that I must deal with this issue. I appointed a team to examine the matter, led by then Brig. Gen. Elazar Stern. He brought me Benny Ish-Shalom and we have been working together ever since.”

The program that Ish-Shalom introduced to the IDF is called ‘Identity and Purpose’. Its Hebrew name, ‘Yisrael V’Techud’, paraphrases the title of an essay written by Ben-Gurion that was distributed to IDF officers in the 1950’s. Identity and Purpose is designed for all IDF commanders, from junior to senior commanders, and is still being implemented successfully today. The program assumes that every commander is an educator, and therefore tries to equip them with tools and content that they may not have received at home. Ish-Shalom emphasizes that in addition to acquiring these tools, Identity and Purpose graduates

In Israeli society today there is indeed debate about this matter, with tension between the idea of a Jewish state and the idea of a state for all its citizens. But within the framework of identity and purpose you can clearly rule in favor of a Jewish state. That is not exactly a neutral decision.

“I am perfectly comfortable saying this. Absolutely. The idea of the Jewish State is our Declaration of Independence and is the foundation of the IDF. As far as I’m concerned, there is consensus regarding this matter. Just because there are some fringe elements who don’t believe in the right to an independent Jewish State, should I refrain from educating soldiers towards this idea when I myself am sending them to fight in defense of the independent Jewish State?! This is not something that I can obscure in any way.”

Yaalon’s Zionism refuses to succumb to the haze that has allegedly clouded Zionist discourse in recent years. He again emphasizes the extent to which we have an existential need for the resilience of a moral society that engages in a struggle based on its belief in the justness of its cause. “Our war today is less a war of planes and tanks, of overwhelming force,” says Yaalon. “How many reserves did we call up in the last war? How many did we call up in Operation Defensive Shield? Today’s war tests the strength and stamina of Israeli society – a society that is in reality at the height of an existential struggle, even if it does not want to recognize this fact, even if it has obscured this fact during the past few years and has developed a culture of affluence.”

“…We are indeed an affluent society with economic growth, but we are first and foremost a society of struggle. The enemy is not trying to destroy the IDF, all it has to do is wound a few soldiers so that their mothers begin to cry out... This is not a military objective; it is a civilian objective aimed at damaging the resilience of civilians. The suicide bombers and Qassam rockets play a similar
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Did you encounter criticism from soldiers during the course of implementing the Identity and Purpose program in the IDF?

"The project has already been in existence for four years and I have never heard any criticism – neither from outside the army nor from the soldiers themselves. On the contrary: the demand for the program is far greater than the supply. Commanders who have participated in the program are eager for their soldiers to participate in it as well. We are aware of the sensitivities of the soldiers. In the past, there were complaints that the army was going into areas that were beyond its mandate. For this reason, I chose content that could be shared by youth groups from different sectors of Israeli society – Hashomer Hatzair [the socialist Zionist youth movement of the Kibbutz movement], Hanoar HaOved V’Halomed [the ‘working and learning youth’ affiliated with the Israeli labor movement], and Bnei Akiva [the religious Zionist youth movement]. These organizations have plenty of shared values."

That entire spectrum of youth movements is still a very small part of Israeli society.

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What about Russian immigrants?

“They came from an environment that is far removed from Jewish heritage. That is why we developed a program ['Nativ'] that gives them an opportunity to be exposed to this type of content. But they also accepted the program happily, without any resistance. These immigrants also long to connect to the community and its history."

When Yaalon presented Identity and Purpose to the General Staff, he spoke about “a broad common denominator of shared mission, determination of will, belief in the justness of the cause, and willingness to fight for it.” I ask him if this is not the common denominator of a camp that is becoming progressively smaller, for this outlook, which could be called ‘Secular Zionism with a commitment to values,’ does not characterize many populations in Israel. "I do not agree," returns Yaalon. “As Chief of Staff, I participated in the Forum for National Responsibility, which culminated in the formulation of the Kinneret Covenant. The Forum included people from across the entire Jewish spectrum in Israel. The amazing thing that emerged from the Forum was that there was complete agreement regarding 95% of the topics raised for discussion, one of which, for example, was the Jewish and democratic state. The remaining 5% of topics were marginal. But we have a tendency to intensify the disagreements, the polarization."

But sociologically, when we look at a society that carries these banners, don’t you feel isolated?

"Not at all. Because in the end, we are all fighting together. What are we fighting for? For the things that we have in common. When you peel off the external shell that our culture creates, which is produced by a race for ratings that fans the flames of disagreement, you can see that on the whole, we agree more than we disagree."

"Research and public opinion surveys indicate," adds Benny Ish-Shalom, “that from the 1970’s until the last few years, despite the arrival of a million immigrants, the general picture in Israel has remained intact: Israeli society is a traditional society. This is not only evidenced by research. Consider the commitment and identification that were evident in the last war – the response of the reserve forces, the strength of the home front, the willingness of the residents of the North to pay the price, and the way in which Israelis welcomed complete strangers from the North into their homes with open arms. This is a very significant phenomenon that we tend to ignore."

A STATE IN SEARCH OF MEANING

In its early days, Beit Morasha was located in the Yeshurun synagogue in Jerusalem, where it enjoyed the prestigious atmosphere of the center of Mandatory Jerusalem. This aristocratic environment suited Beit Morasha, and matched its image as an academic-religious center intended to serve as a home for an enlightened and levelheaded religious Zionism that believes in the longstanding ideals of ‘Torah im Derekh Erez’ [Torah with Universal Culture] and of religious Zionism as a bridge between worlds. Since that time, religious Zionism underwent significant upheavals, but Beit Morasha continued to develop patiently, establishing a Beit Midrash for women, a program for doctoral students, joint programs with Bar-Ilan University, and an academic journal called ‘Akdamot’ that has become an important forum for heated debate that tests the boundaries of religious Zionist discourse.

The man who established Beit Morasha with his own hands is Prof. Benjamin Ish-Shalom, a yeshiva graduate who did his doctoral dissertation on Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and irritated traditional followers of Rabbi Kook’s teachings but successfully found its place on the enlightened Israel’s bookshelf, in a small, black book published by Am Oved. Ish-Shalom has two distinct personalities: on the one hand, he is the quintessential academican, a man in a tie who expresses himself in a respectable, intellectual manner that could be, at times, wearying. On the other hand, he is a man who has no interest in the ivory tower. What drives him is the challenge of creating innovative social and educational projects. That is what led him to give up his conventional academic career and to establish Beit Morasha 16 years ago and has motivated him to continue creating ever since. And there seems to be a great deal to do, even when you are apparently in the center of consensus. As a result, Ish-Shalom reached an exciting partnership with the IDF, and former Chief of Staff Yaalon recently joined Beit Morasha as a strategic partner in its Center for Jewish Culture.

Today, Beit Morasha is no longer situated on King George Street. It has not distanced itself from the heart of the nation, but has settled in the heart of a much broader entity: the general Zionist establishment. The Jewish Agency’s expansive Kiryat Moriah campus is located between exclusive new building projects adjacent to the promenade in Arnon HaNatziv. The campus is enveloped in the somewhat anachronistic aura of – well – the Sochnut (the Jewish Agency). Students at Beit Morasha find themselves among soldiers from the Nativ training program for immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, among groups of youth from abroad, and among the active leadership of Jewish Education in the Diaspora – who are all engaged the old kind of Zionism: Zionism without the quotation marks.

This is the story in a nutshell: Beit Morasha’s activities within the religious Zionist community, from its Beit Midrash programs through its Akdamot journal, are just one side of the coin. Parallel to this, the institution branches out with activities for a completely different cultural milieu, through some of the most central bodies in Israel: the IDF, the Jewish Agency, and the Ministry of Education. The Identity and Purpose program is still operating in the IDF and is being adapted for civilian settings as well, as part of the new center that is being established at Beit Morasha. Says Ish-Shalom: “The Center for Jewish – and I add: Zionist – Culture is an initiative that has emerged in response to our loss of the compass of ideology, Zionism, and values that guided the founders of the state. Classical Zionism is no longer seen as relevant, because there is a perception that it has succeeded, that it has been realized. The State of Israel’s achievements are impressive, but the question is what’s next. We believe that Zionism is far from realizing its potential.”

“Yaalon says that we have become confused and have forgotten that we are a society struggling for our existence. Disregarding the dangers stems not only from a natural tendency to avoid distress, but also from the fact that we have distanced ourselves from our roots as a nation. Now the question is: what are the ethical and cultural significance of a sovereign and powerful Jewish state? What new type of responsibility does this type of state impose upon us? As we see it, the attempt to answer this question is the new definition of Zionism. The State of Israel is the product
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of Jewish culture, of Jewish society. Its founding laws defined Jewishness and democratic state. What does this demand? How does the State of Israel realize Jewish civilization? Which Jewish values are actualized by means of the State? Beyond this, the State must be a springboard for the growth and development of Jewish, Zionist culture. I emphasize ‘Zionist’ because the establishment of the state was a significant change in Jewish civilization.”

But how is this done? How is it possible to deal with forces that are working at cross-purposes?

“We operate in three distinct areas that I see as interdependent: education, culture and public affairs. In the realm of education, we do not want to replace the existing systems or the youth movements. We want to assist in strengthening values education, which has been cut back in Israel in order to promote achievement in other areas. Achievements in science and technology are very important, but without an ethical infrastructure, the essence of the textbook is missing and the educational system is simply not providing the most basic education. We have acquired knowledge and tools in the process of implementing our Identity and Purpose program in the IDF. We want to transmit what we have learned to the education system, to empower youth movements by providing them with content and resources, and to initiate cooperative efforts between youth movements that will promote values education – because these groups have far more in common than what divides them.”

“Culture must rehabilitate the awareness of nationhood, of Jewish peoplehood. Peoplehood is a matter of culture, of awareness of history and the connection between Israel and the Diaspora. The anguish and hopes of a people are reflected in its culture, and this is where there is a great void. We must support, for example, immigrant authors who write in Russian about their Jewish-Israeli experience and whose writing is only published in Russia because they have nowhere else to publish their work here in Israel. We must strengthen Jewish-Israeli literary creativity, translate it, intensify it. This is why we are organizing an international conference of Jewish writers and poets from all over the world – the first of its kind – that will take place in Jerusalem next year. This conference will deal with the Jewish experience, with our common destiny, and with the awareness of our peoplehood.”

“If we deal with forces that are working at cross-purposes, we are not trying to promote a specific position, but to create discourse that is based on Jewish values and that recognizes that Jewish sovereignty demands a new type of responsibility. We want to bring questions of social justice to center stage, as we are already doing in cooperation with BeMagen Tzedek [a social justice organization]. We have established an Institute for Ethics, Judaism and State and we would like to create a framework in which these issues will be discussed.”

THE KIBBUTZ RETURNS TO TRADITION

Ish-Shalom emphasizes that Beit Morasha is not solely an academic institution. “We do not purport to be only that. Our goals are not just academic; our goal is to be involved in social change. We believe that change must come from a profound ideological, cultural, and intellectual place. For this reason, the source of inspiration at Beit Morasha and the heart of our enterprise is the Beit Midrash [traditional house of study]. Today, Beit Morasha is far more than an educational institution, and that was our central goal at the outset.”

Nevertheless, the Center for Jewish Culture is a new concept.

“Correct. This is a new initiative, which digresses somewhat from the natural range of activities of Beit Morasha. It calls for true partnership between Zionist Jews and Israelis, from the entire political and social spectrum, and is not a product of religious Zionism. The very fact that Binyi Yaalon and I have joined together as leaders of this institution itself embodies a partnership between Jews from different sectors – which are actually not as different as we originally thought – who have come together to establish a framework that can serve as an ideological home for all Jews who see Israel’s future as a Jewish and Zionist state as an ideal.”

The two of you say that the voice of the moderate center is not heard. But this is a problematic statement, because we were in the center in the past and we failed, and that’s why the extremes are heard so loudly today. Secular Zionist society failed in its attempt to create a society with a Jewish commitment that is not based on the observance of mitzvot, and the religious Zionist community failed in its attempt to create a new type of religious Judaism, some kind of ‘Torat Eretz Yisrael’ [Torah of the Land of Israel]. Neither stream has been successful in creating a new Jewish culture.

Ish-Shalom: “What you are describing failed, and that’s why the extremes are heard so loudly today. Secular Zionist society failed in its attempt to create a society with a Jewish commitment that is not based on the observance of mitzvot, and the religious Zionist community failed in its attempt to create a new type of religious Judaism, some kind of ‘Torat Eretz Yisrael’ [Torah of the Land of Israel]. Neither stream has been successful in creating a new Jewish culture.”

SABRAS NEED IT TOO

Zionism did not fail, thinks Yaalon, but the approach, in a sense, simply exhausted itself. “This is a changing world and you must adapt yourself to be relevant. How is equality possible in a global village? How is it possible to integrate a free market economy, the prevailing model today, with social justice? These clarifications must take place here in the present, in a dynamic manner. As I see it, this is the idea behind the Center for Jewish Culture: to renew the discussion of values and adapt it to today’s cultural reality. For we are always moving forwards, and it’s no wonder that the previous model is no longer effective today.”

The majority, however, spurned religion not because they wanted to embrace Zionism, but as part of processes of sweeping rejection. Perhaps you are trying to heal a rift that is too great in a manner that is too simple? After all, we had a unique culture that...
of Jewish culture, of Jewish society. Its founding laws define it. It was to be a national and democratic state. What does this demand? How does the State of Israel realize Jewish civilization? Which Jewish values are actualized by means of the State? Beyond this, the State must be a springboard for the growth and development of Jewish, Zionist culture. I emphasize ‘Zionist’ because the establishment of the state was a significant change in Jewish civilization.”

But how is this done? How is it possible to deal with forces that are working at cross-purposes?

“We operate in three distinct areas that I see as interdependent: education, culture, and public affairs. In the realm of education, we do not want to replace the existing systems or the youth movements. We want to assist in strengthening values education, which has been cut back in Israel in order to promote achievement in other areas. Achievements in science and technology are very important, but without an ethical infrastructure, the essence of the textbook is missing and the educational system is simply not providing the most basic education. We have acquired knowledge and tools in the process of implementing our Identity and Purpose program in the IDF. We want to transmit what we have learned to the education system, to empower youth movements by providing them with content and resources, and to initiate cooperative efforts between youth movements that will promote values education – because these groups have far more in common than what divides them.”

“Culture must rehabilitate the awareness of nationhood, of Jewish peoplehood. Peoplehood is a matter of culture, of awareness of history and the connection between Israel and the Diaspora. The anguish and hopes of a people are reflected in its culture, and this is where there is a great void. We must support, for example, immigrant authors who write in Russian about their Jewish-Israeli experience and whose writing is only published in Russia because they have neither a forum nor funds to publish their work. Those who write in Russian about their Jewish-Israeli experience are a part of the immigration from the former Soviet Union. The young people who come from Russia, from the former Soviet Union, want to transmit what we have learned to the youth movements. We do not want to replace the existing systems or the youth movements. We want to assist and strengthen values education, which has been cut back in Israel in order to promote achievement in other areas. Achievements in science and technology are very important, but without an ethical infrastructure, the essence of the textbook is missing and the educational system is simply not providing the most basic education. We have acquired knowledge and tools in the process of implementing our Identity and Purpose program in the IDF. We want to transmit what we have learned to the education system, to empower youth movements by providing them with content and resources, and to initiate cooperative efforts between youth movements that will promote values education – because these groups have far more in common than what divides them.”

“The Kibbutz Returns to Tradition

Ish-Shalom emphasizes that Beit Morasha is not solely an academic institution. “We do not purport to be only that. Our goal is not just academic; our goal is to be involved in social change. We believe that change must come from a profound ideological, cultural, and intellectual place. For this reason, the source of inspiration at Beit Morasha and the heart of our enterprise is the Beit Midrash [traditional house of study]. Today, Beit Morasha is far more than an educational institution, and that was our central goal at the outset.”

Nevertheless, the Center for Jewish Culture is a new concept.

“Correct. This is a new initiative, which digresses somewhat from the natural range of activities of Beit Morasha. It calls for true partnership between Zionist Jews in Israel, from the entire political and social spectrum, and is not a product of religious Zionism. The very fact that Bogie Yaalon and I have joined together as leaders of this institution itself embodies a partnership between Jews from different sectors – which are actually not as different as we originally thought – who have come together to establish a framework that can serve as an ideological home for all Jews who see Israel’s future as a Jewish and Zionist state as an ideal.”

The two of you that the voice of the moderate center is not heard. But this is a problematic statement, because we were in the center in the past and we failed, and that’s why the extremes are heard so loudly today. Secular Zionist society failed in its attempt to create a society with a Jewish commitment that is not based on the observance of mitzvot, and the religious Zionist community failed in its attempt to create a new type of religious Judaism, some kind of ‘Torat Eretz Yisrael’ [Torah of the Land of Israel]. Neither stream has been successful in creating a new Jewish culture.

Ish-Shalom: “What you are describing failed, and that’s why we are initiating this plan. We do not want to replicate the approaches of previous attempts. Zalmun Aran’s talk of Jewish consciousness and Limor Livnat’s curriculum of a hundred basic concepts approached this matter in an external, technical manner that cannot revive the spirit of Zionism.”

“The division between religious and secular is not a clear-cut, real distinction. It does have social-political significance, but that only hinders meaningful Israeli dialogue. In the last few decades, a process has been taking place that I see as praiseworthy: On the one hand, non-religious Jews are exploring the heart of Jewishness; on the other hand, there is a significant process of ‘Israelization’ within the national-religious community. People have stepped seeing themselves as automatically belonging to that sector, and sometimes put their kippot in their pockets so that others don’t automatically attribute them to that sector. There is more and more integration of sectors in Israeli society.”

“When we ask ourselves how it is that the Jewish people survived throughout history,” adds Yaalon, “I found that one of the answers is our capacity for renewal. Every generation clarifies again where we have come from and where we are headed. We are currently in the midst of an event: the establishment of the state and the renewal of sovereignty. This event is, all things considered, a young event. If you look at the various components of the Jewish people today, you will find that part of the nation is still living according to the pro-Zionist model, part of the nation has found a way of implementing religion within a Zionist framework, and part of it has rejected religion as part of its process of casting off the Diaspora. In its early days, the movement in which I grew up, the United Kibbutz Movement, rejected Jewish tradition to a great extent. But for many years now, my movement has been involved in renewing its relationship with tradition. Shabbat, for example, exists on Kibbutz, and this is part of a process that is getting stronger.”

Sabras Need It Too

Zionism did not fail, thinks Yaalon, but the approach, in a sense, simply exhausted itself. “This is a changing world and you must adapt yourself to be relevant. How is equality possible in a global village? How is it possible to integrate a free market economy, the prevailing model today, with social justice? These clarifications must take place in the present, in a dynamic manner. As I see it, this is the idea behind the Center for Jewish Culture: to renew the discussion of values and adapt it to today’s cultural reality. For we are always moving forwards, and it’s no wonder that the previous model is no longer effective today.”

The majority, however, spurned religion not because they wanted to embrace Zionism, but as part of processes of sweeping rejection. Perhaps you are trying to heal a rift that is too great in a manner that is too simple? After all, we had a unique culture that
was built on personal commitment, on mitzvot. Is there a substitute for this that can be effective beyond intellectually elite circles?

Ish-Shalom: “We are not trying to replace the Torah and mitzvot with another system or theory or to argue that the commandments are irrelevant. On a personal level, anyone who feels more connected to Torah and mitzvot will continue to feel more connected. But those who feel less connected and are searching for a relevant language that will connect them to the ancient wellsprings of the Jewish heritage will search for a different path. We are proposing dialogue about the public domain, where Jewish heritage becomes a relevant source of inspiration in the modern Jewish state. The institutes that deal with ‘Torah and State’ primarily address specific questions. We are asking more fundamental questions about how a state can conduct itself according to codes of Jewish values.”

In other words, you are not purporting to deal with popular culture, in a way that builds a committed society. And perhaps that is the source of the problem. For we did have a committed pioneering society here, but it did not succeed in passing its values on to future generations.

Ish-Shalom: “At the conclusion of the Nativ training program, an immigrant soldier from Russia said to me: ‘Now I understand that holding onto my roots is more important than holding on to my weapon.’ This young man, who had immigrated to Israel two years earlier without any Jewish background, said this after an intensive seven week course in Jewish Zionist identity – a course that participating soldiers often say should be mandatory for every IDF soldier and Israeli citizen. The commanders who participate in this program, who are generally native-born Israelis, often say that they learned more while accompanying their soldiers during the course than in 12 years in the Israeli education system.”

Yaalon: “I rely on what we did in the IDF. There the basic principle was to understand the path, and from there emerged a belief in its justness. When I left the army, at my farewell from the personnel department, they brought representatives from various initiatives that I had introduced in the realm of manpower. One of these representatives was a young immigrant woman who had participated in the Nativ program. She explained what she had gained from the program, and closed by saying: ‘Mr. Chief of Staff, I recommend that you send the sabras [native Israelis] to the course as well.’”

But courses on awareness and about the Jewish bookshelf cannot build a lasting national culture. Long-term culture is built on the folk level. That is the power of the mitzvot: It is possible to be a simple person and keep the commandments. And on the other hand, perhaps caution and the desire to stay within the confines of Orthodox Judaism actually prevent us from truly solving the problem?

Ish-Shalom: “Indeed, our approach is far less pretentious than what you are describing. That is a function of the tremendous respect that we have for the concept of ‘national culture.’ National culture cannot be built by a variety of projects nor can it emerge from a council of sages. We are making our contribution by challenging rabbinic leadership with questions that are raised by a modern Jewish society that is insistent and demands a response. At the same time, we are also challenging the non-religious public to take responsibility for its Judaism and not to abandon it. And this is actually beginning to happen, as evidenced by institutions such as Oranim, Alma, Elul and Tehuda [secular and/or pluralistic study centers that focus on classical Jewish texts]. Wondrous flowers bloom when people take responsibility for their Jewish identity, speak about commitment, and even talk about secular commandments. We are talking about a Renaissance of Israeli Judaism that goes beyond conventional definitions of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’.”