# THE NATIONAL PERCEPTION OF PALESTINIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE WEST BANK WITH JEWISH ROOTS

**Ziad Abu-Hamed**

Department of Education, Beit Berl College, Israel.

**Abstract**

*This paper deals with the issue of the religious and national identities of a group of Palestinian high school students who claimed to be of Jewish background. Although already well documented as a recognized social phenomenon, this issue remains highly charged among Palestinians and most of those Palestinians who have Jewish family roots prefer to keep this secret from their social surroundings.*

*This group was discovered during the writing of a doctoral dissertation on the influences of schools over the national identities of high school students in Ramallah.*

*We found 14 cases that defined themselves differently from all other subjects. Although they never thought about defining themselves as strangers, we gathered them under that concept and analyzed them separately as a group. Among this group, eight cases defined themselves as Jewish, Zionist, Arab Jew or Palestinian Jew. Another defined himself as Buddhist*

***Keywords*** *– Israel/Palestine, Palestinian identity, National identity, Ramallah, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jewish History*

**Introduction**

The sociologist George Simmel in one of his main articles referred to the "foreigner" that we all have inside (Simmel, 1971). According to Simmel, no much we are a part of the majority group, we will always remain "foreigners". This point of view of the individuals as a "foreigner" gives them the ability to look at their society from a "bird's eye view" and therefore to have a more objective and a positive perceptive at the same time. That view allows them to see the weaknesses and negative features of their society.

According to social scientist, as the world is becoming more mobile, global and open, societies become more plural, multi-faceted and multicultural. Therefore, it is no surprise that more often than not, social scientists find themselves in need of dealing with the issues of the relationships between locals and not locals in a society, while trying to build a unified and solidarity society in the context of diverse societies.

**Methodology**

In the research on a doctorial dissertation on the influences of the schools over the national identities of high school students in Ramallah, the writer gave an questionnaire to 400 eleventh and twelve grade students of a public school and the "Friends" (Quaker) private school in Ramallah.

When asked about their personal definition, a group of 14 students, rather then defin themselves as Muslims or Palestianians, they defin themselves as Americans, Europians or Turkish.

The remaining students define themselves as Palestinian – Jewish, Jewish or Zionist. The identities of these students are analyzed both by quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.

**Historical approach – A documentary on the Israeli TV of Palestinian population's Jewish roots.**

A television documentary report by Nissim Mossek aired on the 12 of March, 2009 on IBA channel one dealt with the Jewishness of some Palestinians.

According to the documentary at the times of the destruction of the first and second temples, while the Jewish elite was exiled from Palestine, apparently the general Jewish population remained here and integrated with others.

Most of their descendants, at a later stage either converted to Islam by conviction or were forced to do so, especially under Ottoman rule. Nevertheless, many kept Jewish traditions, mainly at home and the family, such as the circumcision after the seventh day of birth (contrary to the Muslim tradition), morning traditions such as the *chalitza* (the ceremony through which a childless widow and the brother of his deceased husband avoid getting married) and others. Throughout the documentary, several Palestinian families who keep hidden *mezuzot* or *phylacteries* are shown. While the vast majority of these Palestinians of Jewish decent keep the fact as secretly as possible, some speak about it freely and openly.

A Palestinian interviewee, for example, told the reporter that when his father was in the hospital and about to die, and confessed to his son to have a secret. After swearing the sun not to tell anyone he confessed to be Jewish.

Many Palestinians are well aware of their Jewish family background but not more than a few are willing to be identified as such and be exposed. Until this day, this subject is considered to be taboo.

Notwithstanding, the issue is not new, in a book publicized already at the beginning of the 20th century by David Ben-Gurion and Itzhak Ben-Tzvi they write that if we would come to research the roots of the fellahin, there is no doubt that a lot of Jewish blood runs through their veins.

In the Southern area of Mount Hebron half of the Palestinians are aware of their Jewish roots (according the documentary); in the past they even spoke about it openly.

The documentary claimed that also among Bedouins, there were Jewish roots found. The Sawarka tribe for example, who are scattered between the Sinai Dessert and the prairies of Moab, because of their Jewish background, refrain until this day to lit fire on Satudays and women tend to take ritual baths (mikveh).

In order to strengthen the validity of the claims, the documentary refers to an international research headed by Prof. Ariella Openhaim of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem which compared the DNA of Jewish and Palestinian populations, and substantial similarities were found. Two particularly striking findings of the research were the fact that in spite their lifelong geographical scattering, Jews maintained the genetic continuity throughout the ages and their genetics were found to be very similar to that of the Palestinian population. A second surprising finding was that among the Palestinians, the high priest (cohanim) chromosome was also found. According to the research, both Jews and Palestinians are descendents of the Kurds who lived in Aram-Naharaim, the supposedly homeland of Abraham the patriarch.

According the documentary, in the Yata village, located in the Southern Mount Hebron area, there are Palestinians who wish to return to their Judaism. About half of the residents of the village descend from the Makhamra clan which means "the makers of the wine".

Since the consumption and or production of wine is forbidden in Islam, this is consider to be a symbol of their Jewish roots.

**Theoretical Discussion**

There are two possible explanations for the answers of the group of Jews among the interviewees. One possible explanation leans in the psycho-social realm

4

and might be define in terms of the dynamics between an internalized oppression, an internalized domination and the ideological developing process of the Palestinian students. The second explanation draws from the historical realm that explain the answers by these student's Jewish family origin.

**Tappan theory on Internalized oppression, domination and ideological awareness in the process of identity formation**

Internalized oppression is a concept that describes the experiences of subordinated, marginalized or minority groups that are powerless, and many times, victimized either intentionally or unintentionally by members of dominant groups in the society and have adopted the dominant group's ideology and think that their subordinate status are well deserved, natural and / or inevitable (Tappan, 2006).

Internalized domination deals with the experience and attitudes of members of the dominant, privileged or powerful identity groups. These members accept the group's socially superior status as normal and deserved.

According to Tappan (Idem), neither one of these concepts are internal, deep, unchanging psychological qualities or characteristics of either oppressed or the privileged. Rather, he finds limitations to the common overemphasis placed on the personal, individual, psychological dimensions of both phenomena (internalized oppression and domination).

Privilege and oppression do not reflect sets of psychological problems or personal psychological shortcomings which do not take in account the play of systematic, structural or institutionalized forces within the process of reproduction of oppression and privilege.

According to Tappan, Social, cultural, institutional and historical forces produce racism, sexism, homophobia etc… and become systematically embedded in our social lives. This realization is needed in order to bring a change in the status quo.

At the end, any solution to the problems of privilege and oppression must focus as much on structural / systematic change as it does on personal transformation (Tappan, 2006 p. 2117).

Meaning, Tappan believes that internalized oppression as well as internalized domination is to be understood as forms of *mediated action*, socio-cultural phenomena rather than purely psychological phenomena.

**Different approaches of the concept of mediated action and the realm of identity**

When the concept of mediated action is extended to the realm of identity we might come to distinguished between three different approaches: the first one is that of Erikson who defined identity as "…a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity (Erikson, 1968 p. 19) emphasizing the individual functioning in the process of identity formation. On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasized the socio-cultural characteristics of the process. Panuel and Wertsch (1995) called for an integration individual functioning and socio-cultural processes into a single coherent approach to identity formation.

From the "mediated action approach" to identity formation rise two core claims: mediated-action represents the basic unit of analysis when exploring identity development and cultural and historical resources serve as either empowering or constraining tools for identity formation (Cote and Levine, 2014).

If we were to adopt the mediated action approach to identity formation then we ought to focus less into what interviewees say about their own sense of self understanding in favor of what they actually do on specific situations and circumstances.

Tappan describes the process of identity formation in terms of appropriation rather than internalization in order to emphasize the active role of the individual and he point out two dimensions of the process of appropriation: mastery i.e.

knowing how to use a cultural tool (such as an ideology) skillfully and with facility. The second dimension is that of the sense of ownership i.e. the way someone adopts a cultural tool than belongs to others and makes it his / her own.

Based on the work of Bakhtin (1981) Tappan adopts the term "ideological becoming" which he understands as entailing "gradually coming to authorize and claim authority for one's own voice, while remaining in constant dialogue with other voices (Tappan, 2005 p. 55). This brings Tappan to conclude that "the force that drives development [of identity] …is clearly the experience of dialogue" (Idem, p. 56). From my point of view, dialogue is an inherent quality of the Friends school – both from the fact that it involves more heterogeneous populations and from the point of view of the school policies.

Tappan recognizes that the dialogue could be easy or difficult. According to him, there is a huge importance and marked influence to the struggle with another's discourse over the history of a person coming to ideological consciousness:

*"One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse…a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within the individual's consciousness"* (Bakhtin, 1981 p. 348).

From Bakhtin's point of view, identity will be never defined exclusively in terms of individual characteristics, qualities or properties but from the beginning is a function of dialogue and will include acting; enacting; performing one's identity while utilizing cultural tools and resources; positioning and re-positioning oneself in relation to others (Bakhtin, 2010). .

The question would then be how available the "others" are within the social surrounding of a particular individual. I argue here that the Friends school milieu makes the encounters between one and others much more available, desirable and

simple thanks to encouraging the students to be dialectical and by the fact that its constituency is much more heterogeneous in comparison to the public school.

Tappan calls for an approach to understanding the dialectical self that takes in account the social, cultural and institutional forces / dynamics of domination / subordination and structures of power of privilege which are played in the development of identity.

Tappan talks about a "moral identity" which might be understood as "a function of the ongoing dialogical interchange between self and others" (Tappan, 2005 p. 49) which might be emphasized in the context of ethnically or gender mixed settings.

**Findings**

The study found 14 cases that defined themselves differently from all other subjects. Although they never considered defining themselves as strangers to the society, we analyzed them separately as a group. Among this group, eight cases defined themselves as Jewish, Zionist, Arab Jew or Palestinian Jew. Another defined himself as Buddhist, a female student defined herself a European, two as Turkish, one as American and the last one defined herself in terms of her sexual orientation (LGBT).

According to their socio-demographic profile, half of the "foreigners" are female and half are male; ten of them study at the public school and the rest at the "Friends" school. Moreover, all of the students who defined themselves as Jewish / Zionist / Arab Jew or Palestinian Jew study at the public school while the "foreigners" from the "Friends" school defined themselves as Turkish, American and by sexual orientation.

The vast majority (9) of this group define themselves as Muslims, while only two describe themselves as atheists, and one as Christian. In terms of their

religion we find a mixed group through the whole spectrum of religiosity, from two very religious, five religious, two secular, and three non-practitioners.

The patterns of their residence shows a clear majority (9) of urban students who live in the city, while a minority reside on villages.

The most interesting finding is that this particular group comes from a house with very educated parents: in seven cases both parents have academic degree; in other three cases one of the parents have higher (academic) education and for the four remaining cases, none of the parents have academic education. In the case of the students of the public school this is particular sticking since in the case of four of them both parents have academic education, two more one parent has and the rest none of the parents has academic degrees. Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic profile of the "strangers", including how did they defined themselves.

| Table 1 Socio-demographic profile of the "strangers" | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identification | Gender | School | Place of residence | Parents' education | Religion | Religiosity | Self definition |
| European | Female | Public | City | None | Muslim | Very religious | Depressed. I have anxiety and want to get treatment. Complains about the ignorance of the society |
| Palestinian Jew | Male | Public | Village | One | Muslim | Secular | Wants to find his own self and wishes to have a better relationship |

| | | | | | | | with his family |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Buddhist | Male | Public | Village | One | Muslim | None-practicant | Different |
| Jewish | Male | Public | City | Both | Muslim | Religious | Active and organized |
| Arab Jew | Male | Public | City | Both | Muslim | Very religious | I define myself through the things I do, things that happen to me and I experience every day |
| Zionist | Male | Public | Village | Both | Muslim | Religious | Eleventh grade student. I study to become educated |
| Jewish | Female | Public | City | None | Muslim | Non practicant | Loves life and its enjoyments. I see myself becoming an outstanding nurse with high grades |
| Jewish | Female | Public | City | None | Muslim | Religious | I am an important figure at school and the society. When I preach morals to my friends they listen to me and |

| | | | | | | | they are influenced by me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jewish | Female | Public | City | None | Muslim | Religious | |
| Jewish | Female | Public | City | Both | Muslim | Religious | I am a girl with ambitions and a desire to fulfill them. My father is a role model for me. I am proud of Islam, aware of the Palestinian problem and I am against the occupation |
| Turk | Male | Friends | City | Both | Atheist | -------- | |
| Turk | Male | Friends | City | One | Atheist | -------- | Palestinian student |
| American | Female | Friends | City | Both | Muslim | Non practicant | I don't like Palestine. I am not proud of being Palestinian. I am a quite person who enjoys observing deeply and has wide aspirations |

| LGBTG | Female | Friends | City | Both | Christian | Secular | I love sciences. I want to travel for studies abroad and get to know other cultures |
|-------|--------|---------|------|------|-----------|---------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|       |        |         |      |      |           |         |                                                                                   |

Regarding the self-definitions of the "Foreigners," one might reach and important conclusion: The vast majority of respondents do not define themselves in ethno-national-religious terms. In fact, only two out of fourteen "Foreigners" used those terms in order to define themselves and actually one of the two used them to show his estrangement and alienation from them. Since the usage of ethno-national-religious terms are found in about 40 percent of the general study population, it is striking to learn that the usage is substantially less common among the "Foreigners".

We shall further divide the "Foreigners" group into two different groups, one of them, is more straight forward and or understandable while the second one is more surprising or perplexed.

The first one is the one composed by the European, American, Turkish and LGBTG. This group is to be understood in terms of nationality or sexual preference. The second group is formed by those students identifying themselves in Jewish-Zionist terms. This groups deserves further explanation.

**Conclusion**

During the data gathering process for a PhD dissertation we came across a group of students who see themselves as strangers within Palestinian society. Interestingly enough, according their feelings at school, this group of students don't feel marginalized from their fellow students or rejected by their teachers.

Therefore, we might assume their identity is not a product of an internalized oppression, an internalized domination nor a process of "ideological developing". If our conclusion is right, these students have indeed Jewish roots and might be able to function as bridges of dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.

Although their feelings about their school climates assert they are not marginalized from the rest of the population, it might be reasonable to assume these students keep their identities secret and withheld from the rest of their friends, producing some degree of feeling of alienation.

However, since the majority of Palestinians living in the occupied territories of the West Bank desire and expect a just peace, this ought to be corrected. It is not healthy, especially for young adults to have to renegade their inner selves. A healthy society is one that allows differences and is solidified while celebrating diversity.

**Bibliography**

1.      Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination.* M. Hoquist (Ed.). Austin: Unversity of Taxas Press.

2.      Bakhtin, M. M. (2010). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Vol. 1). University of Texas Press.

3.      Cote, J. E., & Levine, C. G. (2014). *Identity, formation, agency, and culture: A social psychological synthesis*. Psychology Press.

4.      Erikson, E. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. New York: Norton.

5.      Galily, Daniel & Schwartz, David & Gurstein, Benjamin, (2019), Education and the labor Market In Israel (An Anthology of Articles), *University of World and National Economy Press*, Bulgaria.

6.      Penuel, W., & Wertsch, J. (1995). Vygotsky and identity formation: A sociocultural approach. Educational Psychologist, 30, 83–92.

7.      Simmel, G. (1971). The stranger. *On individuality and social forms*, 143-149.

8.      Tappan, M. B. (2005). Domination, subordination and the dialogical self: Identity development and the politics of 'ideological becoming'. *Culture & Psychology*, *11*(1), 47-75.

9.      Tappan, M. B. (2006). Reframing internalized oppression and internalized domination: From the psychological to the sociocultural. *Teachers College Record*, *108*(10), 2115.