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## Israelis Tell How (Other) Israelis Behave Abroad: Negotiating Group-Identity in Everyday Stories<sup>1</sup>

Stories of personal experience and anecdotes are vital rhetorical components of everyday talk. They help focalize the arguments, creating cooperation among the participants in the exchange and framing their meaning-production (Labov 1966, 1972, Polanyi 1981, 1989, Blum-Kulka 1993, 1998). Although these stories take shape in real-time situations, like other everyday behavior patterns, they reveal a high degree of regularity in applying a repertoire of events and figures of speech, which we can assume are at the speakers' disposal, and are easily identifiable by their audience. Assuming that everyday talk is an important social activity through which people construct and negotiate their agreements about their world (Davis 1994, Gee 1996, 1999, Mishler 1999, Erickson 2004), and claim or confirm their sense of identity, belonging or exclusion (Katriel 1985, 1999), the study of such abundant mini-narratives which are interwoven in trivial everyday exchange should be highly revealing with regard to how these identity negotiations work.

In this paper I will examine the use of such everyday stories in contemporary Israeli popular discourse of identity. My analysis of these stories is part of a broader project in which I explore the accelerated dynamics of identity struggles in contemporary Israeli culture. (In view of the complexity of this issue, I have to limit the scope of discussion in this paper to questions of identity of Israeli secular Jewish population alone, leaving aside other segments of this society). Since Israeli society can be considered to be an unsettled society, with a relatively high degree of conflicts and shifting power balance between ascending and descending social groups, the contest for cultural identity and group status in this society is very intense and highly politicized. Yet – as assumedly is also the case in many other cultural settings – the formation and negotiation of various identity options in real life everyday interactions

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turns out to be more versatile and context-dependent than the presupposed categories, such as class, ethnicity, nationality, or religion, established by the official political and academic discourse. Moreover, in contrast to these explicitly ideological categories, it appears that the notion of identity negotiated in everyday discourse is less pointedly political and more societal, in that it centers around a “pursuit of culturedness,” so to speak, where the possession of good manners and “genuine culture” stands out as the crucial resource on which people draw for their group-identification and self-esteem (Sela-Sheffy 2004).

My present analysis focuses on stories Israelis tell each other about how Israelis (in general) behave abroad. For all their diversity, versions of similar such stories are repeatedly reproduced in various occasions so as to create a stock of familiar folkloric commonplaces, the use of which makes a discursive routine that has “a life of its own.” This discourse permeates Israeli everyday life to the point that every person in this culture is practically pressured to take part in it, one way or another. Focusing on eye-witnessed stories intended for Israeli ears and eyes only and not for outsiders, I examine how telling these stories create solidarity or demarcation within the Israeli cultural space.

My analysis is based on a sample of over 1700 talk-backs to 14 Internet reports (Anonymous 2001, Eichner 2002, Limon 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2001e, 2001f, 2000g, 2003, Magal 2002, Palter 2002, Sade 2001, 2002) which appeared between 2001 and 2003 on the Internet site of *Ynet* (<http://www.ynet.co.il>), an on-line newspaper affiliated to *Yediot Aharonot*, the largest Israeli daily newspaper (For a thorough analysis of such talk-backs, 2001-2002, see Ribke 2004).<sup>2</sup> This sample is only a small selection from a myriad of similar such talk-backs to Internet reports in the different on-line newspapers available today. These large amounts of talk-backs usually create spontaneous discussions, in highly colloquial language, incited as a reaction to stories told by the Internet reporters on various subjects. The talk-backs are addressed to the reporter or to other respondents, often creating a direct dialogue between different individual back-talkers. We have no information about the

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speakers' background; or, if such information is sporadically offered by the talk-backs it is in any case not verifiable. My analysis is therefore based solely on the verbal material of the talk-backs.

In this particular case, the 14 internet reports I discuss here tell about the bad behavior of Israeli tourists abroad. The reporters express their concern and assume the position of "ambassadors of good will," calling for a change of attitude on the part of Israelis in order to rectify their bad reputation. By doing so, they mobilize a prevalent *negative* image of a "collective Israeli person," which portrays the "average Israeli" as basically lacking manners, vulgar and rude, self-centered and lacking integrity.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this image is faithful to reality, it has long been established by Israeli popular discourse (through the mediation of the press), to the point of becoming a central point of reference against which people form their attitudes, either by way of consensus or by way of contention. Against such a negative image, a counter ideal-type of a "good Israeli" has also emerged, and is also always mobilized as a measure of judgment. This positive image is basically modeled on two main cultural resources: that of "the good old European civilized culture" and that of the mythological "authentic" Native Israeli archetype.

Wavering between these two polar models of identity, this internet discourse elicits a heated dispute of highly emotional, often quite offensive conflicting reactions by the readers. It creates a tension among different attitude-groups, who struggle for the right either to condemn or to defend the collective image of "the Israeli person." To make their point, the speakers often use short stories of personal experience as powerful means of persuasion. In what follows I would therefore like to briefly describe the use of such stories in the internet talk-backs I examined, with respect to both their content as well as the ways they contribute to the rhetorical structure of these messages, thereby helping to construct the emotional attitudes of the speakers.

The stories narrated in these talk-backs are usually restricted in terms of their "reportability" (Linde 1993), in that they are not intended as stand-alone narratives

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<sup>3</sup> This negative image is often labeled as "the Ugly Israeli," an expression borrowed by Israeli press during the 1960s from the "The Ugly American" expression coined by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick (1959).

but are rather specifically instrumental to framing the points the speakers wish to make. Therefore, they are usually very short and simply structured. They usually report an event of breaking normative codes of behavior or violation of public order, which has been eye-witnessed by the speaker. They also include an explicit account of the negative reaction of the speaker to this event, and conclude with a general moral lesson. Most of these stories sound as follows:

Two weeks ago I went to Corfu [...] an island which belongs to Greece [...] There are not so many Israelis there, and fortunately I was not in the hotel with them [...]but] on the aircraft on the flight back there they were [,] like in a [children's] camp [. They] stood there [and] jumped [,] yelled and what not. I was absolutely repulsed [.] Even during landing the stewardess begged them to sit down and fasten seat-belts. I could not believe there were people like that, and this is all because of [lack of] education. (Limon 2001e, #22).

Such stories are used either to support the argument made by the reporter or by other respondents or to contest it and challenge its validity. Given the argumentative nature of this discourse as a whole, introducing a story of personal experience has the effect of lending the argument a sense of reliability and sincerity, in shifting from a rhetorical mode of banal generalizations to a dramatizing description of a specific real-life event from the private perspective of the individual speaker. In this respect, such mini narrative-units in themselves function as what William Labov (1972) called "markers of evaluation," in that they intensify attention to the point of the whole message and provide it with a "proof" so to speak. Sometimes, this intension is explicitly formulated through an introductory note, such as, for instance: "Let me tell you a little story that happened to me last summer and then you may understand where I got my sarcasm from" (Palter 2002, #69). But very often stories may be simply inserted as an illustration to the point just made, without any such introductions. For instance: "I am sorry to disappoint you, but ugly Israelis still exist. [...] in the town Karlovy Vary [Karlsbad] in Czechoslovakia [...] I saw with my own

eyes an Israeli tourist [...] smoking a cigarette while standing by a sign which forbids smoking [...]” (Palter 2002, #64).<sup>4</sup>

To enhance the rhetorical impact of these stories, the speakers often formulate their authority as narrators to contest or support a given argument. Such authority may derive from personal qualifications, such as professional standing or long experience. For example: “As part of my job I go to European countries 10 to 20 times a year, [...] and believe me [I know what I am talking about] when I say ‘trouble’ [since] I have seen things [that are] beyond all the stories you [can] read here” (Limon 2001a, #105).<sup>5</sup> In other cases, the narrators draw their authority from the immediacy of their experience, for instance: “By the way, I just came back from Europe a week ago. In a pub in Holland, there were only Dutch people [...]” (Eichner 2002, #32). Some time, however, the claim for authority goes deeper to the very meaning-structure of the story itself. The following story, for instance, told by way of rejecting the claim that Israelis are ill-behaved, turns out to be actually about the speaker’s own claim for reliability as a “man of culture”:

I am a respectable person [, I] work in the bank all year long [,] I dress carefully and neatly as appropriate to my job and standing. Last summer I was on vacation in Crete in a five-stars hotel [and] the name is not important [,] Since I am on vacation, I naturally go around in a bathing suit the whole day long [,] and one evening I am walking in to dinner wearing shorts [,] but tidy and with a buttoned shirt [,] not a T-shirt [,] The hotel manager approached me rudely and told me I was lowering the level of his hotel and threw me shamefully out of the dining room. I am already approaching fifty [,] and never since I was a boy have I ever been insulted the way I was that day [,] I felt like a boy scolded by a school

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<sup>4</sup> In yet other cases, the story may be immediately told as a stand-alone counter-argument, even without being preceded by any theoretical statement at all. The following talk-back, for example, is directed to the reporter by way of dispute: “Dear Mr. Limon. I invite you to a personal conversation about how I have been treated in Cyprus in 1993, in Hilton Nicosia. I went there to marry my English fiancé [...]” (Limon 2001a, #6)

<sup>5</sup> Other examples would be: “Last summer I went twice to the United States – I have participated in a technological conference, where I spoke a lot with participants from different countries [...]” (Limon 2001a, #45); “As someone who visited in New Zealand in 1995 I can tell you that the kind of hospitality we got there [...]” (Eichner 2002, #41); or: “I live in Spain and work in the tourism industry, but [...] I try to ignore Israeli [tourists] since I know from former experience that everything that comes out of their mouth will be complaints, complaints and complaints [...]” (Limon 2001e, #7).

headmaster. [...] By the way, I go abroad an awful lot every year and have never encountered such a brutal way of behaving. (Palter 2002, #89).

Typically, this story, which ostensibly also reports a case of an Israeli lack of manners, in fact turns the argument upside down, denying the speaker's own undeserving behavior and accusing instead the local host with rudeness. To build this inverted argument, heavy rhetorical artillery is invested aiming to support the credibility of the speaker and to undermine the prevalent negative judgment of Israeli behavior, which in this case is represented by the attitude of the hotel manager; it aims to present it as a sheer prejudice and mobilize the audience against it. As emerges from this and many other cases, the function of such stories is thus twofold: they are constructed to say something about "the Israeli person" in general, but at the same time, and not less importantly, they are also used to characterize the speakers' own identity, which is defined through the attitude they take vis-à-vis this generalized collective portrait. In this way, such stories help forming different attitude-groups and create a dynamics of contest among them, which makes this whole identity discourse going.

Roughly, these attitudes range between two poles: a total personal alienation from the Israeli collective identity on the one hand, and a strong sense of identifying with it, on the other. As mentioned, these opposed attitudes, and their various combinations in the different stories narrated, mobilize two scales of valuation respectively, that of "universal (European) civilizedness" (an outside perspective), and that of "local patriotism" (an inside perspective). By and large, these stories reveal that the strategy of self-distancing and an outside-glance are the dominant stances in this discourse.

Let me now briefly outline the three main attitudes that are recurrently produced by this kind of stories:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Individual respondents do not necessarily employ consistent strategies. There may be incongruities in the stances expressed by one and the same person, or their stance may be contextually revised in response to provocations by other back-talkers. However, these strategies seem to constitute, in general, four recognized options of claiming status which are available to insiders of this culture as participants in the "negotiating of identity" game that determines the Israeli experience.

(a) *Alienation*: stories expressing this stance totally embrace and confirm the argument of Israelis' bad behavior, and construct the position of the narrator as absolutely keeping apart, denying any common cultural grounds with those who they present as the "other Israelis," and complaining that they suffer from a collective stigma because of "those others." These stories convey sentiments of extreme repulsion and demoralization, often using very offensive terms such as "animals," "baboons," "barbarians," and the like, and usually concluding with a defensive, pessimistic moral. For instance:

To my regret, there's nothing one can do about it [...]. If I, on an airplane, see 2 Israeli friends who did not get to be seated together and are determined to sit next to one another without regard for a married elderly couple (and all that without getting permission from anyone), disregarding requests by the married man who shows them that they have taken his and his wife's seats, and he is getting scorn and rejection from them, and I am talking about young people 25-26 years old; what else remains to be said? If at that age there's no respect for elderly people and basic rules [of behavior] between one person and another, how can one teach these animals to behave politely? How? Absolutely disgusting." (Limon 2001a, #117).

Often these stories conclude with recommendation of individual solutions of hiding the narrators' personal ties to this collectivity. For example, "[...] until dinner was over I did not say a word in order to avoid being heard talking Hebrew [...]" (Sade 2001, #32); or: "The situation is so severe that I forbid my daughter to travel with an Israeli passport and she travels around using a foreign passport! I recommend it to every parent to do the same" (Sade 2001, # 46).

(b) *Reproach combined with deep concern*. This is a very common attitude, and a very politically correct one, constructed by many everyday stories about Israeli bad behavior. These stories, too, convey the narrators' harsh criticism of this behavior, yet at the same time they also express a sense of collective responsibility on their part. In this way they show engagement without identification. They speak about "us" but in a patronizing way that implies their being more "civilized" and "cosmopolitan" than the "average Israeli" that is being portrayed. Their typical emotional message includes

shame and embarrassment on behalf of their compatriots, and calling for responsibility in spreading norms of civilized behavior. For instance:

I have just come back from a vacation in Eilat, and more than anything else I was disturbed by those parents who, when their kids are instructed that “feeding the fish is forbidden” in the coral reserve, they not only not apologize, but [actually] take the piece of bread from the kid’s hand and feed [the fish] themselves. Ill-mannered adults grow up from kids who are raised with bad manners! Parents: take responsibility!!! (Palter 2002, #94).

The demand that propriety would be taught and imposed, either by parents or by the educational system, is a central lesson offered by this line of stories. Often the moral conclusion is lengthier than the narrative segment itself, as in the following example:

In all our travels abroad and vacations in the land we are ashamed, time and again, for the way the average Israeli behaves, for their rudeness, [and] the lacking methods with which parents bring up their children, who [for instance] do not want [to eat] piles of food but rather just a little bit [, and] the average parent would yell: “take, take some more [food], maybe for later.” What a shame and disgrace!! [...] It would be highly advisable that our self-righteous minister of education take care of introducing compulsory courses in manners and etiquette and civilized respectable behavior. This may perhaps help our children in the future generations and improve a little our reputation in the world. (Limon 2001a, #31).

(c) *Denial*. Stories presenting this attitude are often ambivalent and evasive, in oscillating between totally contesting the argument of bad behavior, and admitting it but trying to trivialize and belittle it. The narrators of this kind of stories feel obliged to restore their prestige as a cultural group. Apparently unwilling, or not in the position to straightforwardly condemn the collective Israeli identity, they speak in its defense and overstress national pride as their most valuable cultural resource, while at the same time they also acknowledge the importance of being civilized. Their stories therefore convey several forms of denial. One such form is absolutely disputing the argument of bad behavior, and blaming with bad intentions, self-hatred or self-



flagellation those who complain about it. “I just came back from Croatia 6 hours ago,” says one back-talker, “There were 200 Israelis on the aircraft, [but] I did not encounter [any] undeserving behavior, even after people were dried out for 4 extra hours because of difficulties during landing. [...] With one thing Jews are certainly blessed [, and that is] a great deal of self-hatred” (Palter 2002, #65). This attitude is also often manifest in stories which tend to universalize the problem of bad behavior, so as to minimize its effect when it comes to Israelis, by comparing their behavior with that of other national groups. For example “Not long ago I was in Budapest and ran into a large group of tourists from Spain. A noisy, screaming bunch, that made the Israelis look like well behaved children in comparison them. But lo and behold, I didn’t see any Hungarians getting angry or becoming hostile [towards those Spaniards]. Nor did I see Spaniards from the group trying to hush them [...]” (Limon 2001a, # 84). However, this attitude finds its boldest expression in stories which totally reverse the argument, portraying the Israelis as the good behaved, and those who suffer from the rudeness of others:

Two months ago I was on vacation in Milan with my wife, my sister-in-law and a friend. [...] We decided to go on a day trip to Venice. We came in the morning to the central train station, [and] waited politely in the line. We paid about 200 sheqels for a first class return ticket. Second class is only 150 sheqels. When the train arrived, on time, all the people who were standing there chased it like animals, just like that. We, by contrast, did not push, nor galloped, nothing of the sort; after all we paid the maximum price. What do you know? We had to stand [on our feet] the whole ride (3 hours, just opposite the bathroom door), yes, yes, first class. Wouldn’t you explode??! We wanted to file in a complaint and get a refund, [so] we stood again in the line. Every minute there is someone else pushing the queue, “just one question,” sounds familiar? Most of them [the Italians] are talking on cellular [phones] on the streets, always loudly, and often cursing (a personal testimony). Now tell me, who are more shit? (Limon 2001a, #88).

To conclude, the abundant mini-stories about how Israelis behave abroad, which the Israelis tell themselves so often, make a sophisticated use of the accepted notions of “good manners” and “civilizedness,” thereby challenging the interpretation and

applicability of these notions for the definition and evaluation of “an average Israeli person.” In this way, such stories serve as very useful tools in creating a struggle dynamics between different attitude groups, who vary in their respective degrees of distancing themselves from or identifying themselves with this generalized collective person, and fight over the right to condemn or justify it. While the stories of *alienation* mark their narrators as “deserters” who deliberately step out of the Israeli communality, the stories of *denial* mark their narrators as patriots who openly identify with this collectivity and speak on its behalf. Naturally, each one of these attitudes is formed as response to the other. Neither of them, however, aims at absolutely disputing the very idea of a “civilized behavior” as the grounds on which a collective social identity may be defined. The high degree of repetitiveness both in the reported events and in the style patterns, and the intensity of emotions invested in these stories attest to their effectiveness in shaping this dynamics of identity negotiations in Israeli society.

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