

Israel's DNA

by

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Tucked away inside the summary of a recent mathematics examination administered to eighth-graders around the world, is a small hint of the State of Israel's DNA. It is not a particularly flattering finding, but it captures such a basic element of the Israeli essence that it is hard to believe that the country could have ever arisen or existed without it.

In that exam from 2003, countries were ranked according to the achievements of their pupils. The children of Israel, as they have been wont to do in recent years, were ranked at the bottom of the Western world. But in that same exam, there was an additional ranking of countries, this time based on the percentage of pupils expressing high self-confidence in learning math.

Ironically enough, at the bottom of this ladder was Japan, whose children have consistently ranked among the top countries in achievement. Only 17 percent of the Japanese pupils were highly confident of their ability to learn math, compared with 59 percent of the Israeli pupils – who came in first place.

Self-confidence is a vital asset that money cannot buy, and we are bursting at the seams with it. But the distance between self-confidence and over-confidence is small, and the accompanying arrogance and bluster, the culture of "everything will be OK" and "don't worry, trust me" prevent treatment at the source of problems while constantly propelling us from one predicament to another. It is no coincidence that our word "chutzpah" has entered everyday language in other countries. Thinking outside the box is not a trait that we need to strive for but is in fact a central feature of the Israeli character. Our boxes have no sides to restrain us, few rules and fewer laws that we feel compelled to obey.

This is how we behave and this is how others see us – but it is possible that this is also an integral part of our secret to success. After being subject to a half century of bloody pogroms and an unspeakable Holocaust, how else might it be possible to explain the decision by 650,000 Jews to declare Independence in their new-old home, in the face of a swelling tide of threats promising a second holocaust from the neighboring millions, and in the face of a seemingly rational international community that did not believe such a fledgling country had a chance of surviving physically, economically or socially under these circumstances – and in some cases, even did what it could to further reduce these prospects?

The severe security and economic limitations, beginning in the pre-State days and continuing after Independence, gave birth to the idea of creating kibbutzim and moshavim that served the dual purpose of rejuvenating the land in economic agriculturally-based units while providing human shields along the country's borders. The Israeli sabra and "Jaffa Oranges" became Israeli trademarks, and with good reason. About half of all the country's exports in 1950 were agricultural.

The pre-State Jewish community and the country-in-making did not focus only on defense and survival. They had a vision. On the top of Jerusalem's Mount Scopus, on the slopes of Mount Carmel and between the orchards of Rehovot, they created the foundations of Israel's higher education system. Within two decades of the country's birth, there were already seven

research universities that reached the frontier of human knowledge, and even broke through it. From this academia emerged the people and the ideas that enabled the country to establish itself, to strengthen its defenses and to take off economically. While agricultural exports today are nine times what they were in 1950 (after discounting for inflation), their share in Israel's total exports fell to just 2% – since, in the meantime, other sectors planted their roots and began to grow.

The high-tech boom was born as though it had been custom-made for Israel's can-do spirit and highly-skilled workforce. It grew out of nowhere to comprise 30 percent of the country's industrial exports (excluding diamonds) in 1990. By 2007, it had already risen to 46 percent.

We are not willing to be held up by the likes of Ahmadinajad, the Hamas or the Hezbollah, and our confidence in ourselves has infected many of those who are willing to invest a good deal of their money in the companies and the people who grew up here. In 1990, foreign direct investments in Israel reached 200 million dollars (in 2007 prices). These investments rose to 6,000 million dollars in 2000 and to 10,000 million dollars in 2007.

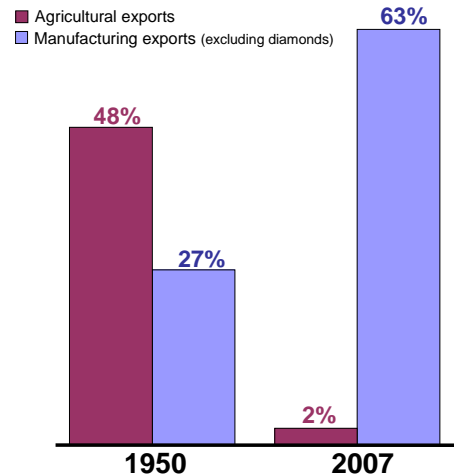
The national ability to set and attain goals without letting reality interfere underlies our chutzpah to exist against all odds and to thrive against all expectations. But on the road to the promised land, we leapt over serious problems in the realms of society, education and governance – existential domestic problems that have steadily deteriorated, and may yet overwhelm and defeat the dream if left untreated.

Like DNA, which undergoes an evolutionary process to acclimate the body to changing realities, the time has come to recalibrate the Israeli character, to add to the nation's conviction of purpose and self-confidence a healthy dose of consideration for our fellow men and women, for the quality of their education, for the health services available to them, for their basic rights and for their personal safety and welfare.

We have journeyed down a long road together, and when the entire assortment of our successes and failures is taken into account, these have been 60 incredible years.

Israel Exports Then and Now

each branch as a percent of total exports



Source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University
Data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics