Autistic community and culture – the Israeli case

Preface

The autistic community started in international context, when autistic people began to find each other and explore together their experience and identity. The Internet has played an important role in the emergence of the autistic community and culture, because it enabled many of the autistic people, who have been a small minority and therefore isolated from each other, to come together and communicate with each other through a medium that fits their social and communicational style.

Learning about the international autistic community and connecting with it through the Internet has played an important role in our personal journey of discovering our place on the autistic spectrum and developing an identity of an AC. On the other hand, as Israeli people who value their connection to their homeland, language and heritage, we want to express and nurture the varied aspects of our identity – being both Israeli and an AC – in a context of a local autistic community. In addition, we want to spread the ideas and paradigms we have learnt from the international autistic community, among AC Israelis and the Israeli society at large. Our mission is to bring social change towards better quality of life and equality of rights for Israeli ACs. These needs motivated us to reach out to other Israelis on the autistic spectrum. As our group developed, a few activist members founded our organization: ACI - the Autistic Community of Israel.

This article is aimed to explore the interplay between the international autistic community and culture, the Israeli society and culture, and how they have both influenced the emerging Israeli autistic community and culture. We will list some aspects and characteristics of the Israeli society and culture which are relevant to disability and other weakened minority groups in general and to the autistic spectrum in particular. We will describe the (very short) history of the autistic community in Israel: its early stages, when Israeli AC people participated in the international autistic community as individuals; the need for a local community and the process of coming together; the beginnings of ACI. Some implications of language: a barrier separating some of us from the international autistic community and the need to develop a Hebrew jargon to discuss autistic experiences will be described. We will briefly describe the relation of the autistic community and the surrounding society - disability community organizations, autism society and the general society, mainly in terms of ACI's advocacy activities, among: parents and parents-organizations, professionals, service providers, and the media (mainly newspapers).

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What is a Culture?

"Human beings, unlike other animals, are not born with rigid complex, behavior patterns that enable them to survive in specific habitat. Instead, we must learn and invent cultural means of adapting to different environments... These learnt ways of life, which are modified and passed on... are basic to the understanding of human society...

Culture consists of all the shared products of human society. These products are of two basic kinds, material and nonmaterial. Material culture consists of all the artifacts, or physical objects, human beings create and give meaning to – wheels, clothing, schools, factories, cities, books, spacecraft and totem poles. Nonmaterial culture consists of abstract human creations – languages, ideas, beliefs, rules, customs, myths, skills, family patterns and political systems." [1]

A culture is the way human beings adapt to their environment and thus has to be adapted according to the characteristics (biological, physiological and mental) of the participants of a given culture. Human cultures differ from one another in the way they adapt to different environments according to these characteristics.

Meanings: There is no culture without meaning – no material and no nonmaterial. A culture gives meanings to both artifacts and abstract human creations. When a cultural meaning contradicts the characteristics of a human being there would be no meaning and thus – no culture. In that case an alternative cultural meaning is needed. This is true for material culture – the meaning of a wheel and to nonmaterial culture – values, norms, rules of conduct, language and symbols.

"A subculture is a group that shares in the overall culture of the society but also has its own distinctive values, norms, and lifestyle... People of these subcultures tend to be ethnocentric in relation to other subcultures, for a membership in a subculture colors one's view of reality. If the differences between subcultures are sufficiently great, the results may be social tension and conflict.

It is important... to adopt a position of cultural relativism toward subcultures as well as toward other cultures. It is all too easy... to adopt ethnocentric attitudes toward different subcultures, arbitrarily judging other groups by

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the standards of the dominant culture. The practices of any subculture can be fully understood only by reference to its own norms and values.

A counterculture is a subculture whose values, norms, and lifestyle are fundamentally at odds with the dominant culture. Such a group consciously rejects some of the most important norms of the wider society, and is usually proud of it." [2]

Subcultures differ from one another in the extent of acceptance of the material and nonmaterial aspects of the dominant culture. These differences can occur even between groups within a given subculture (i.e. radical and non radical portions of an extremist political group) and can change over time.

When talking about cultures and subcultures a cultural relativism approach is crucial.

What is a Community?

"A community is a social group with a common territorial base and a sense of shared interests and 'belonging'." [3]

A Social group: A community is a group of (i.e. more then one) people that has long term interaction with one another. Not all community members have to have interaction with one another (in fact one doesn't have to know all community members to belong to that community) but the nature of the interaction and its unique characteristics are the same in a given community.

Common territorial base: This part of the definition has been long argued. The "common territory" can be physical or virtual. There are known communities that have all the aspects of community but lack physical common territory.

A sense of shared interests and "belonging": This is a part of the cultural nature of community. Community can not exist without a sense of shared interests, for that would make a simple social group. The sense of shared interests, coupled with a sense of "belonging" is what makes communities different from other kinds of social groups and what enables communities to last over time. If and when the sense of shared interests and "belonging" fades, the community will not maintain its culture and therefore will not last.

The connection between community, society and culture

There is no community without a culture and no culture without community(s). The basis of a community is a shared culture. A culture develops in the context of a community. Community, society and culture co-exist and develop together. None of them can exist without the other two.

An important shared interest of community members is to nurture and maintain its culture. A community can exist without a common territorial base only if it manages to maintain its culture.

Part II: **The international autistic community and culture**

The autistic community

The term "autistic community" may sound self-contradictory from the point of view of the medical definition of autism. According to this definition [4], social communication and interpersonal relationships are the core areas of impairment. However, many autistic people want to connect with each other and find these connections important and rewarding. Autistics who consider themselves as a part of the autistic community, view others who share this sense of belonging not just as a random collection of autistic individuals, but as a social group which meets the essential criteria of a community.

The autistic community does not have a common territorial base. Autistics are spread apart from each other not only in the international sense, but also in each country, city or even the smallest social unit – the family. Because autism is a neurological difference rather than an ethnic or religious one, an autistic person usually grows up in a family of mostly NT (i.e. neurotypical, non-autistic) members. However, autistic people do find a space where they come together as a community.

The Internet has played a major role in the development of the autistic community, because it enabled autistics that lived far apart from each other to communicate in a way that suited their natural style of relating, better than conventional social communication. However, the autistic community started before the Internet was widely used. In the early 1990's, a few autistic individuals found each other through a pen-pal list maintained by a parents' organization. Autism Network International (ANI) was founded in 1992 by three autistics who met through that pen-pal list, and issued a printed newsletter [5]. A few autobiographies by autistic authors which were published in these years inspired un-diagnosed autistics to realize they were autistic and to look for others like them. Back then, there were very few online resources on autism, and almost none by autistic people.

Nowadays there is a plethora of online ways for autistics to find and to interact with each other. In addition to the traditional discussion email lists and newsgroups, there are other forms of online forums and social networks [6]. Autistic people express themselves on websites, blogs and other platforms e.g. YouTube. The Internet is therefore the main factor in spreading the autistic culture and enlarging the autistic community, but it is not the only place where autistic culture manifests. Autistic culture is wherever autistic people are together, acting in ways that are natural to autistic people. There are local support groups in many countries, and some of them hold their retreat or conferences (e.g. Finland [7]) and engage in self-advocacy activities. The international community learns about local groups from members of these groups, who participate in international forums,

but some groups are less involved with the international community, because of language barriers [7] or because of difficulties accessing the Internet. But even those who use the Internet as a regular basis for ongoing involvement in the international community, value face-to-face encounters enough to travel to international events such as Autreat [8] and Autscape [9]. One may therefore consider the Internet as partially playing the role of a shared territory and the main, but not sole, platform for the autistic culture. The autistic culture, its core beliefs and advocacy goals are the shared interests that make the social group of autistic individuals an autistic community.

Autistic way of life: cultural and social aspects

Autistic people form their own community, because they are intrinsically different from NTs. If culture is the manifestation of a community, then the unique ways autistic people communicate and relate to each other determine the nature of autistic culture.

The autistic communication style includes social motives, cultural gestures and internal experiences which are different from those of the general society. Some of these characteristics were described by Martijn Dekker in 1999, from an insider's viewpoint [10]: turn-taking in conversation are less frequent, silences are an integral part of interaction, and subtext, either in nonverbal communication or reading between the lines, is not abundant. In addition, many autistics prefer written communication to spoken language, and consider their online connections at least as socially meaningful as conventional social interaction.

Many autistics who fail to use conventional social style or don't enjoy it, find relationships of autistic style to be rewarding and meaningful for them. Some characteristics of this style [11] are: Relationships start as a result of a shared area of interest rather than shared socio-economic or educational status, they can last for a long time and survive periods of breaks, and they must allow for enough time and space for each party to be alone when they need to. This does not mean that autistics are more capable of meaningful relationships than NTs are; It means that while NTs may want to have relationships of varying degrees of depth, autistic people often lose interest if a relationship is not significant enough for them. For autistic people, relationships are optional [12], and total alone-ness is equally legitimate. Group behavior is also different among autistics [10]. We do not do well with authority, therefore we prefer distributed, "egalitarian" structure rather than centralized, hierarchical organization.

Autistic people are different not only in the areas most identified with autism: communication and relationships. Autism colors all experiences [13]. Temple Grandin's "Thinking in Pictures" [14] is well known, but in fact there are many other non-verbal, non-linear thinking styles among autistics [15], including spatial, branching and helical thinking, the latter related to what is seen from the outside

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as repetitive thinking or perseveration. Other areas of difference are the role of emotions in our experiencing, learning and connecting, and response to sensory stimuli.

All of these neurological differences manifest in unique traditions and habits of the developing autistic culture. A common social activity is sharing of interests [16], as has become a traditional evening activity in Autreat. The autistic culture is tolerant to and even encourages behaviors like lack of eye contact, repetitions (both in written and in spoken communication) or stimming (see section about language). Our need for clarity and predictability is accommodated using the interaction control badges, which started at Autreat [5] and are now used in other autistic gatherings and even at homes. Our need for a clear focus of interaction motivates organizers of social encounters and support group meetings to prepare agenda and an activity plans for occasions when NT parallel situations will be left to "spontaneity" and "just mingling".

In addition to the international events, Autreat and Autscape, the Autistic Pride Day [17] is celebrated every year on June 18 by autistics wherever they are, in any way they choose to celebrate autistic culture.

Belief system in the autistic community

Autistics who consider themselves as part of the autistic community view autism not as a disease but as an alternative way of living and an important part of their identity [18]. We maintain that autistics should be helped to cope in society as the autistic persons they are, not to make them more normal [19].

The autistic community embraces all people who share characteristics of autism. The division according to professional labels [20]: "classic" (Kanner) autism, Asperger Syndrome or PDD-NOS (Pervasive Development Disorder Not Otherwise Specified), does not mean much to us. We acknowledge the variety among us, as there is in any group of human beings, but we don't find the medical labels as instrumental to describing this variety. We include people who have other neurological differences which make them "compatible" with autistic style, and those with autistic characteristic which do not fully qualify for a professional label, as Cousins [21], rather than excluding them as non-autistic. Nor do we accept the distinction according to "functioning levels", as this may vary in the same person across functioning areas and over time (either on short or long terms). We believe that all autistic lives are worth, and even those who face more difficulties may lead a meaningful life, if given appropriate supports. We therefore oppose efforts to "cure" autistics out of being themselves or to prevent autistic babies from being born.

The autistic community is a part of the neurodiversity movement and the general disability community, sharing their values and advocacy goals [22]. We therefore use the language of social justice and human rights for autistic people and for disabled people in general. An important goal

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is to educate the surrounding cultural society to accept disabled people for who they are and to accommodate their special needs, rather than try to adjust them to the mainstream culture.

Language and symbols – to describe autistic experience and beliefs

Language reflects personal and cultural experiences. Similar to the many words Eskimos have for describing various kinds of snow, the autistics use different words for various degrees of sensory processing [23]: from "simply be" (the "ground state") to "zone out", "spaced", "overloaded", "automatic pilot" , "shutdown" and "crash". Some words are borrowed from professional jargon, and used in a playful manner, rather than the original derogatory connotation: Aspie (for a person with Asperger Syndrome), Autie (a person with classical autism), perseveration and fixation, and stimming – a short-hand for self-stiumlation. Pride, rather than shame, in being autistic is reflected in the word autly (autistically, a way natural for an autistic) and ausome (a word-game for awesome).

Some terms have been coined to describe status of people relative to the autistic community [21]: Autistic (all those who qualify for any label on the autism, spectrum), Cousin (someone who has enough autistic characteristics to relate comfortably with autistics), and AC – all Autistics and Cousins, making up the autistic community. Someone who is not AC is neurotypical, abbreviated NT. Politically-related terms [24] are Curebie (someone keen on curing or "preventing" autism) and neurodiversity, reflecting solidarity with other neurological differences.

The rainbow symbol, used in various designs e.g. the ANI website [25] represents the autistic spectrum, promotes diversity, and besides is just a nice visual stimulus. Opposition to curebie rhetoric manifests [26] in the "I am not a puzzle" symbol and in alternatives to the puzzle tie, like Oddizms' Moebius ring [27] and the infinity symbol (e.g. the autistic culture website [28]).

Cultivation and creations in the autistic community

A culture is usually thought of in terms of literary and artistic expression. A comprehensive bibliographic list of books by autistic authors was compiled by Amanda Baggs [29]. Many web-sites carry writings of autistic people, including poetry (e.g. Finnish poetry, translated to English [30]), prose (e.g. Kim Tucker [31]), articles (e.g. Jane Meyerding [32]) and blogs (e.g. Autism Hub [33]).

It is a cliché that "autistics are good at music and drawing", and some of them, e.g. Donna Williams [34], do both. Samples of TR Kelley's music can be downloaded at the Raventones' website [35]. Autistics create various forms of visual art: traditional drawing [36], photography (e.g. Larry Arnold [37]) and digital art and films (e.g. Daina Krumins [38] who designed the cover of the book "Women From Another Planet" [39]). Another form of visual art, graphic design, is very instrumental in conveying political messages (e.g. Bev Harp, [40] and oddizms [27]).

Gravitation to computers is manifested in programming and web design. The main web-sites of the autistic movement are maintained by autistics, who also run the physical server which hosts them (e. g. AFF [41], autistics.org [42] and ANI [25]). One can also view the choice of colors and page design of web pages as an expression of cultural and personal fixation on specific colors [43], or animals [44].

The autistic culture as a subculture

We have shown how autistic culture is different from any culture shared by NTs. One can thus consider local autistic communities as sub-cultures of the dominant local culture. Autistics are spread and immersed in the general (surrounding) society, and there is no reason why their being autistic should prevent them from identifying with **some** of the values and habits of their national culture. The international autistic community may be seen as a sub-culture of the Western culture at large, accepting and fostering Internet usage, one of the means of globalization.

On the other hand, the autistic culture is a distinct sub-culture, even a counter-culture, because communication barrier (and other cultural barriers such as values, norms and almost any aspect of experience) separates them from the surrounding society and prevents the autistic culture from merging with the dominant culture. The same difference in communication style which separates autistics from the surrounding society is shared by autistics in distant locations.

One can also consider a local autistic culture as a sub-culture of the international autistic culture. While autistics around the globe share common innate characteristics, they are rooted in different local environments. If a culture is a manifestation of adapting to the environment, then an autistic community in each country will produce its own flavor, or "dialect", of autistic culture. Moreover, national characteristics like language and degree of access to the Internet may separate local autistic communities from the international community, thus preventing them from merging.

Autistic self-advocacy: some goals and controversies

Most autistic groups serve mainly for social purposes. A few organizations, some are officially incorporated some not, engage in organized self-advocacy actions (e.g. Aspies For Freedom [41] and Autistic Self Advocacy Network [45]), with the following goals:

Getting ourselves heard by professionals, policymakers and the media: Achievement of this goal is essential to any self-advocacy goal, but it is extremely important in the context of autism. Because the hallmark of autism is communication difficulties, some non-autistic steak-holders tend to take advantage of this and claim to represent all autistic people, or, at least all those who are perceived to have "poor communicational skills". Self-determination is one of the main values

of the autistic culture, and thus the autistic movement joins the rest of the disability movement in its demand: Nothing about us, without us!

Changing the view of autism: Much of the wrongs done to autistics are a result of the way autism is viewed from the outside. An important leverage point in changing that is influencing **the way research is done and its purposes**. Currently, most researchers justify funding their research by pointing to the prospects of eradicating autism, either by making autistics more normal, or by preventing the birth of autistic babies. This perpetuates the stigma of autism as something inherently bad. **Fighting against attempts to "cure" autism** or to prevent the birth of autistic babies also involves direct opposition to non-academic organizations set up for this goal, e.g. parents organizations and government programs.

Developing appropriate services: Involvement of autistic self-advocates in crucial in this area. Services for adults that aim to assist them to live according to their choice rather than trying to mold them into existing social norms are very rare. Such services are vital to the well-being and quality of life of autistics of all ages and functioning levels.

Part III: **The Israeli society and culture**

Israel – Geographic and demographics

Israel is a small country - 8550 square mile (including the Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem). It borders Lebanon on the north, Syria, Jordan and The west bank on the east, Egypt and Gaza strip on the south and the Mediterranean Sea on the west [46].

There are 7,282,000 residents in Israel. 75.5% of them are Jews, 20.1% are Arabs and the rest are "others" (most of the others are new immigrants not recognized as Jews by the authority). Most (69%) of the Jews in Israel were born in Israel. From Apr 2007 to May 2008, most of the population growth (88%) stemmed from natural growth (births minus deaths) [47].

Israeli society – immigration [48]

From the year 70 to the end of the 19th century, Jews were spread throughout the world as what we cal the Diaspora. Whether they were forcibly exiled and when exactly did the 2000 years of Diaspora begin and when did it end - the answer to these questions depends on whom you ask [49], but for the cultural belief, the Israeli state was established on the basis of the long awaited home coming of Jews from all over the world.

During the 19th century, mostly due to oppression of Jews on ethnic background, the Zionism movement emerged (first in eastern & central Europe) and from the end of the 1880s Jews started to build a Jewish homeland in Israel. Being a culture that is based mostly on population coming from all over the world, the Israeli culture is an immigration one.

The first steps of creating the Israeli culture can be characterized as:

- A melting pot of several immigration groups and several cultures with one common basis: an ethnic oppression that led to immigration.

- Ongoing conflict with local and neighboring Arab cultures.

- Socialistic majority ruling with a strong democratic ambition.

The mixture of immigration groups with different cultures is an ongoing dilemma for the Israeli society. Only at recent years can we observe the beginnings of a real mixture that can be recognized as "Israeli" and the dropping of the cultural segregation that can characterize all groups until then. And even now, when this segregation is beginning to dissolve, there are still claims of ethnic discrimination and classification.

From the beginning of Jewish immigration back to Israel, there have been clashes (mostly armed ones) with local and neighboring Arab cultures. These began with local clashes between the first settlers and Arab residents and continued with a fight for the right of building a Jewish homeland.

This was a fight with local residents, neighboring states and the rulers of the country – first the Turkish Empire and later on with the British mandatory. Since the independence war of 1947-1949, there is a war each decade, and even times of non war are tense in regard of the Israeli Arab conflict.

There were different political movements in Zionism from it's emergence in the 19th century, but until 1977 the Socialistic movement was the largest and most influential in shaping of the political regime. The left / right division of political parties in Israel is based on approach to the Jewish – Arab conflict rather than on socioeconomic views.

The October war in 1973, the first military operation that Israel couldn't claim full victory, resulted in a first victory of the revisionist party in the elections of 1977. That changeover brought about an ongoing change in socioeconomic policy with growing liberal / capitalistic forces and less and less welfare legislation and equalitarian policy.

Israel - Society at war

Because Israel is in a continuous conflict, security issues gain most of its attention. Throughout the years, the defense expanses are 30 - 50 % of the total state budget [50]. Public attention and awareness is focused mostly on defense matters and the Israeli Arab conflict. There are more news items about security / war and peace policy than any other arena.

Not only money, but cultural values, norms of behavior and social status are biased due to the central role of security. Presenting an ex-military officer rank is considered a very much appreciated status symbol and in the mid-high ranks can provide by itself the background sufficient for high positions in the public sector. On the other hand, People not serving in the army, for any reason, are considered outcastes in many circles of culture.

 Being strong and healthy is considered an important way you can help your country. There are songs, and stories, written about "the young strong beautiful heroes" who gave their life to their homeland and just like Tom Paxton's "What did you learn in school today?" [51], you can learn in school that war is an inevitable means to maintain an independent Jewish state and serving in the army is the best way to help your country. Even inside the army there is a kind of worship of combatants and contempt of non-combatant soldiers.

Israeli culture - historical influence

For most of its existence, the Jewish nation was spread among other nations and did not have its own governance. Until Emancipation in the 18th century, Jews were not a part of the general society. Therefore, a stance of distrust in state bodies and generally, resistance to authority, is understandable. Moreover, even when the Sons of Israel were independent, the Bible describes

the notion of a king as a necessary but a bad thing. A more "anarchist" structure existed also in the religious learners' world, with variety of opinions and many scholarly arguments. The saying goes that where there are two Jews, you will find three opinions. Someone's position of authority does not mean other's obedience.

This non-conformity is related to innovation. Jews were involved with a great portion of revolutions of all kinds – philosophical, religious, scientific, social and political – in various parts of the world. Another characteristic related to change is the tendency to improvise. For many centuries, Jews depended on the caprices of the volatile attitudes of their surrounding society, not knowing what will happen the next day and therefore unable to plan for long-term. Israelis are notorious for being very good at improvising but often forced to do so because of insufficient planning.

Personal excellence, performance and scholarship were always important values in Jewish culture. Very few boys were illiterate, because religious education was abundant. Excellence was a pathway of a minority people who were not allowed to be farmers or craftsmen, but could be merchants, travelers or doctors. The Jewish mother's dream for her sons used to be a lawyer or a doctor, and now it is also a broker or a high tech worker.

Strong reliance on family and social institutes, maintained the Jewish community through the ages. In Israel, family connections are still strong and parents keep in contact and support their grown up children, even when the family institution is not the traditional one any more. During the mandatory regime prior to the establishment of the Jewish state, the Jewish population in then-Palestine (Yishuv) already had many institutes of what was called "the state to be": schools, medical clinics, statewide economical cooperation (mainly maintained by the workers' union), political parties, even defense force (underground). Some of these systems remained even when the Israeli government was supposed to take responsibility of their areas of activity.

The price for strong social cohesion is less tolerance for individualism and deviance. This may seem inconsistent with innovation and resistance to authority, but it is not. Resistance to authority is tolerated, if this authority comes from the outside so the whole community shares this stance. One may think and even express new ideas, so long as they are irrelevant to shared values (e.g. ideas in science and technology) or do not violate their boundaries. There have been Jews who dared to break social or religious taboos, but they paid the price and were banned from the Jewish community (e.g. Baruch Spinoza [52]).

Israeli society and the Internet

In the early years of Israel, the main exports were Jaffa Oranges and Carmel Avocados. With time, agricultural development became technological (and even today Israel is leading new

technologies in agriculture) and today the main export of the Israeli market is high-tech. [53]. High-tech produces about 15% of the business sector GDP and more than 5% of total jobs [54].

The Israeli culture is characterized not only by producing high-tech but by using it as well. In 2006 74.1% of Israelis under the age of 75 owned computers, 87% were using cellular phones and 89.5% were using the Internet [55]. The rate of owning cellular phones in Israel is one of the highest in the world [56].

Another aspect of the prominent role of high-tech and the Internet in the Israeli society is proficiency in English. The English language is not the native language of most Israelis but 68.4% of the Israeli population reports "knowing English" [55].

English literacy is a manifestation of the cultural attraction of European and American characteristics. Anything coming from the US or Europe is preferential– whether merchandise (more than 60% of goods imported to Israel is from Europe and the US [57]), services and even ideas.

Israeli culture – the Hebrew language [58]

The Hebrew language is one of the oldest languages being used today. The development of the Hebrew language can be divided to five stages:

Ancient Hebrew is the language spoken and written by Jews in the biblical era.

After the bible was sealed, the Hebrew language has begun decaying as a spoken language. At the era of the MISHNA, Jews started speaking Aramaic and the new dialect **Mishnaic Hebrew**, was used mainly by the religious establishment.

Medieval Hebrew was used from the 2nd century to the 19th century for religious scripts, poetry, philosophy and science. Jews of that time spoke the local language or the "local Jewish language" - Yiddish or "Jewish Arabic" that later on was known as Ladino.

With the emergence of the Zionist movement in Europe at the end of the 19th century, the process called "the **revival of the Hebrew language**" was a part of a whole cultural process of building a new image of the Jew and the old-new homeland for the Jewish nation. The basic principals used for inventing new words (for material and non material things that had not been used in Hebrew before) was systematical and based on former dialects of Hebrew for the linguistic system and words and meanings from other (mostly European) languages.

This revival process sprang a native language now spoken by nearly 7 millions of people. **Modern Hebrew** differs from the revived Hebrew in that it is being constantly renewed and has an aspect of fashionable slang. According to the Israeli law from 1953, the supreme institute for the Hebrew Language is the Academy of the Hebrew Language [59].

Part IV: **Autistic people in Israel**

Disabled people in Israel

The status of a disabled person in Israel is based, primarily on the "cause" of disability. There are 4 main groups defined by various laws:

- IDF disabled people

- Terror actions casualties

- Accident casualties

- General disabilities

Belonging to one of the first 2 groups is considered a part of the "hero" image and should be fully compensated for, while being in the other 2 groups is being a burden on society. According to the Israeli law, there is a different authority, different stipend systems and even different services for each group.

IDF disabled people – people injured during service in security services, are under the responsibility of the ministry of defense while the other groups are under the responsibility of the social security authority. The stipends for IDF disabled people and for terror actions casualties are based solely on the severity of injury determined by medical doctors. The stipends for accident casualties and for general disabilities are based on the severity of disability and on the loss of ability to participate in the workforce due to disability (determined by the social security authority). The stipend is this case is a wage replacement.

Once found eligible to services, a disabled person is sent to a service provider. "Zahal Disabled Veterans Organization" (NGO) [60], sponsored partially by the ministry of defense, is providing services for IDF disabled people. This is the only national cross-disability self advocacy service provider. Members of other groups are sent to a care giver according to sort of disability. These care givers are usually NGOs or, in some cases, private businesses. The main way the government is involved in service provision is by partially financing some of the care givers and in very rare cases (although this is written in some laws, it is done very rarely de facto), providing supervision and control of the care givers. An example is the law on "supervision of resident homes" - a law from 1965 [61] that has no regulation measures even today, and de facto, each resident home has its own rules of conduct.

The approach taken by the ministry of welfare and the social security authority (now operating under the ministry of industry, trade and labor) has undergone 3 main stages:

Provision: The beginning of Israeli welfare system is a socialistic viewed one. From the foundation years to the early 1980s a set of laws and institutions were set to provide a rehabilitation system for disabled people.

Integration: The political changeover in 1977 brought a change of vision. Integration was everywhere: Schools, work places, public services and even the private sector. The preachers got integration argued that the way to fight socioeconomic and other discriminations is by mixing all kinds together and treating everybody the same way. Accordingly, from the early 1980s to mid 1990s the legislator and provision systems tried an approach of integration.

Human rights: In mid 1990s few cracks appeared in the wall of integration. From that point on, each part of the system is looking for a different alternative to integration. In the field of disability, only in the last few years (with the emergence of several self advocate organizations and as a later part of the debate on Human Dignity and Liberty law - enacted March 17th, 1992 [62]) a debate is beginning to arise on the question of human rights to disabled people.

One of the most influential factors in this talk of rights is an NGO called "BIZCHUT" [63] (Hebrew for "by right") that initiated The Equal Rights for People with Disabilities Law - enacted March 15th, 1998 [64]. This law is a beginning. Its application is merely in the first steps i.e. the law enforces the establishment of an Equal Rights Commission for Persons with Disabilities that is only now (after several years of activity) beginning to understand the difference between "Equality Commission" and "Equal Rights Commission".

In December 2001 a strike of disabled people took place near the government buildings in Jerusalem. The strike went on for several months and was mostly about rights. This strike can be marked as the first fight of disabled people (led by "The headquarters to the fight of disabled people") for rights instead of beneficiary acts.

Organizations for disabled people and their families have been active in the Israeli society even before the establishment of the state of Israel. But it is only the last decade that we can point at the growth of self advocacy and self representation of disabled people. In the last 10 years several movements have emerged to advocate for disabled people by themselves and to promote disability culture (i.e. the center for independent living in Jerusalem). This enabled further development of the few disability cultures that were active even before that (i.e. the deaf community and culture and the blind people community).

Intellectual impairment in Israel

The pattern of governmental financing of service programs operated by NGOs repeats in the field of intellectual impairments: mental retardation, Downs syndrome and learning disabilities.

AKIM was established in 1951 by parents of people with mental retardation and professionals in order to represent the people with mental retardation and to promote services for them [65]. Although the organization has a program for self advocacy, its board and administrative management never included a retarded person. Services for both retarded people and their families are provided by private organizations through the wing of treatment for the retarded person in the ministry of welfare [66].

Yated - the parents NGO for Downs Syndrome is a much smaller and much less funded organization then AKIM is. There has never been a Downs Syndrome person in a key position in the organization, but there is a place saved for adults in the annual gathering of the organization [67]. Some families with Downs Syndrome individuals can and do use the services provided by the wing of treatment for the retarded person in the ministry of welfare and others get some services from the ministry of health.

There is no organization by neither people with mental retardation nor with Downs syndrome, and as far as we know, there is no self gathering of them in Israel.

One of the first and most prominent NGOs dealing with Intellectual impairment in Israel is NITZAN - an organization of parents (established in 1964) for people with learning disabilities. One of the main goals of the organization is "to help children and youths who suffer from learning disabilities to cope with their disabilities and reach their full potential" [68]. There is no known learning disabled person in any key position in NITZAN (they claim, like other organizations "acting on behalf" that the disability itself prohibits such involvement). NITZAN is operating several services for disabled people and their families - from diagnosis and support groups to schools and boarding schools.

Recent years have introduced several groups that include learning disabled people. The most prominent of these new NGOs is LESHEM - an association for the advancement of learning disabled students in higher education [69]. The NGO has brought a change in the policy of higher education committee, opened a new service of tutoring learning disabled students and initiated together with BIZCHUT a new law for "the rights of learning disabled students in the higher education system" (enacted April 01st, 2008 [70])

The most powerful factor in mental health in Israel is the ministry of health. After decades of forced hospitalizations, several organizations (most of them by parents) emerged, demanding a change in policy. Their activity, together with BIZCHUT and several people coping with mental conditions working inside existing NGOs (like Benafshenu [71]) resulted in a new law that enforces the rights of people coping with mental conditions and their families – "rehabilitation of mentally disabled people in the community" (enacted July 10th, 2000). This new law mandates the

provision of a "rehabilitation package" suiting the person's condition, in all areas of life, with the person's full participation (and the full involvement of a family member if he person wishes) in the whole process.

Today, apart from the ministry of health, there are several organizations in this field, involved in implementing and farther updating the new law. Some are parents and professionals dominant (like ENOSH [72]) and some are self advocacy organizations (like LISHMA [73]).

Diagnosis and treatment of autism in Israel

Until the late 1970s, Autism was thought in Israel to be a mental illness, and people diagnosed with autism lived in psychiatric hospitals. Autism was a rare disorder, and information about it was very scarce, and mainly relied on the psychoanalytical paradigm.

Alut, the Israeli Autism society [74], was founded in 1974 as a result of this reality. A group of parents, whose autistic children graduated from a psychiatric day-care, could not put up with a lifetime of psychiatric hospitalization. They learned about community services available in other countries, and decided to have these services in Israel as well [75]. This initiative was met with fierce opposition by the professional establishment, and a cold shoulder from governmental authorities. Alut turned to Mrs. Leah Rabin, wife of then prime minister of Israel Yitzhak Rabin, to serve as its president and help the efforts of raising awareness and money. In 1977, Yachdav (Hebrew for togetherness), the first school for autistic children in Israel, opened in a small rented apartment in Tel-Aviv, with very little governmental support. Alut parent Mrs. Edna Mishori, and Leah Rabin herself, visited programs for autistic children abroad and formed contacts with them, to train Israeli teachers and caregivers in rehabilitative (rather than psycho-therapeutic) methods. The school became a part of the public school system only in the 1990s.

The next step was to find a solution for the students when they reach the age of 21 and graduate this school. In 1980, a grandparent of an autistic boy killed his grandchild and then took his own life, because of the fate his grandchild faced. Media coverage of this event helped to raise awareness, and money was given both by donors and by the government. Kfar Ofarim, the first group home for autistic adults in Israel (named after Ofer, the grandchild) opened in 1988. Alut sets up and runs group homes and adult day activity centers. In recent years, Alut also runs daycare centers for children younger than three years old, who are not covered by the law for special education. Alut's facilities are located in the community, but are mostly segregated, with some efforts for community employment of varying degrees.

Alut is the prominent autism charity in Israel and the biggest service provider, but not the only one. Over the years, other charities started to cater for needs not met by Alut. Some of them did not last; others are still active alongside Alut. In the early 1990s, the growing number of children

diagnosed under age of three years did not have suitable programs. Families of these children joined Alut, but the existing management still focused on older children and adults, struggling to raise funds for its school and group homes. The Society for Children at Risk [76] was founded in 1990, and its main activity in its first decade was to start kindergarten classes for autistic children under three years old. Another wave of newly diagnosed children and youth took place towards the 2000s, when professionals became more aware of Asperger Syndrome. Parents of AS children and youth, who met with Alut officers but were not satisfied with what Alut could offer, founded Effi – the Israeli Asperger society [77]. Effi itself does not run service programs, but it allies with private service providers in developing specialized services and advocates for funding them by the state. Other charities, e.g. Beit Issie Shapiro [78] run services for children and adults with developmental disorders, not limited to but including autism.

In the 1990s, professional knowledge about autism was still scarce, and very few information resources were available to parents. In 1991-1992, a newsletter called Mifgash Nissi (miraculous encounter in Hebrew) was published privately by the Singers, parents of an autistic adult, but its circulation in Israel was very limited. From 1994 to 1999 Alut and the Ministry of Education jointly issued a bulletin called Netivei Kesher [79] (Hebrew for "pathways for connection"), with articles by local professionals and Alut members. There were very few autism researchers at universities, and most medical doctors who knew about autism, held a psychodynamic (if not psychoanalytical) approach. Schools and kindergarten classes mainly used the TEACCH [80] method, and aimed at providing a workable environment for the autistic children, advancing them towards normalcy as much as possible. Curing autism was not a goal, not because of acceptance but in recognition of "the severity of the disorder". Most children diagnosed with autism or PDD were also mentally retarded and non-verbal. High-functioning people, like Temple Grandin, were heard of but considered to be a rare exception.

During the late 1990s, the increasing usage of the Internet enabled parents to learn about various treatment methods used abroad, mainly in the USA. Most of these methods were tried by Israeli parents, either by encouraging local therapists to train in them or by direct contact with treatment centers abroad. The most popular approach was Behavior Modification or Lovaas (now called ABA [81]), but Option (Son-Rise [82]), Greenspan [83] and biological interventions were tried too. Parents pushed for mainstreaming in education too, and in spite of poor cooperation on the part of the public schools system, they used their own connections and money to get their children integrated in regular-ed classes, with a personal aid. Even now, when the law for inclusion in education [84] mandates that the state provides the needed support, parents have to go to the Supreme Court to make that happen.

The situation in the recent decade is dramatically different. Since Alut held the first conference in Israel in 1995 (celebrating its 20th anniversary), there have been at least two autism-related events each years. In 2008 alone, between January and May, there have been at least 6 conferences and symposia about autism or Asperger Syndrome. On 2001 Alut, together with Ashalim (a charity organization), Social Security authority and Ministry of Welfare, founded Beit Lauren [85], a family resource center whose main activity is information dissemination.

Researchers who did their PhD in autism research centers abroad, have returned to Israel, started research groups and opened service programs for diagnosis and treatment. There are several training programs for teachers in colleges and schools of education in universities. Treatment approaches – ABA (programs in TAU [86], and the Wingate sports training center [87]), DIR (at the Baker center in Bar-Ilan University [88]) and Mifne (a version of Option [89]) gained academic recognition by departments of psychology, social work or education which back them up with research. Asperger Syndrome and high-functioning autism are recognized, as more children with milder forms of autism, and a small but growing number of adults, are diagnosed. Social-skills groups are now available to higher-functioning children and youth, based on methodology developed in university programs [90]. Treatments are offered also in private clinics.

Media coverage has also changed dramatically, from almost nothing to abundance of autism-related items. In early years, there were few news items, when an autistic child was killed by a family member or killed someone (e.g. by dropping a baby out of the window). Now a variety of topics are covered, including medical and scientific research, integration in education and family support. Most news-stories are initiated by steak-holders, mainly autism organizations and to lesser extent, service providers. Alut runs a massive campaign once a year, towards its yearly donation-day, promoting mainly personal stories of families and their coping with autism. Other triggers for media coverage are Supreme Court lawsuits (e.g. to enforce provision of personal aids for mainstreaming) and autism-related conferences.

In the beginning, Alut was content with the situation where all treatment for autism was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. It was assumed that funding for psychiatric hospitalization was much more than for any other service, and so the effort was geared to get the state to give comparable funds to inmates in group homes. For many years, there was no official, explicit funding (i.e. an entry in the government's budget) for autistic adults, and so some found solutions in programs for retarded people, some "fell through the cracks". Since the late 1990s, the push for more community integration led Alut to realize that the Ministry of Welfare would better serve this cause, and thus Alut advocated for transferring the responsibility for serving autistic people to this ministry. Since year 2000, all services for autistics of all ages (except for special education) and their families are mandated to the Unit for Treating Population with Autism [91]. This unit does not

run services by itself, but uses its budget to fund services through service providers (commercial and nonprofit) and social services units in municipal authorities.

All this massive activity is based on the perception of autism as a disorder that affects the quality of life of afflicted individuals. Those who are more "optimistic" invest any effort in "curing" autistic people, or at least in making them as normal as possible. Less-optimistic ones work on providing group homes and day centers, aiming to secure decent and safe, albeit fairly restrictive, living arrangements for autistic adults. None of the nonprofit organizations has autistics on its board, and the bylaws of Alut restrict membership to parents and family members only.

Advocacy goals of the autism community

The term "autism community" refers to all those who perceive autism through the medical model. According to this model, autism is not just a difference, but an impairment of the individual. Research is done to better understand and describe its characteristics, and to develop and evaluate treatment methods to make the individual as normal as possible. Services are provided to administer these treatment methods and, in as much as the individual is still substantially different, to provide a segregated environment that will keep the individual safe. Naturally, most of the autism community consists of parents and other family members, educators, therapist, policymakers and researchers. However, the distinction between the autism community and the autistic community stems from difference in perception and not from professional status. There are (very few) parents and researchers who accept autism as a legitimate way of life, and OTOH autistic people who believe in "curing autism". In accordance with this view of autism, the Israeli autism community highlights the following goals:

- Awareness to autism, with the aim of early diagnosis and treatment, and to lesser extent, of prevention.

- Emphasis on children (rather than teens and adults), to generate sympathy (if not pity) and to foster the notion of "outgrowing autism".

- Portrayal of autism (mainly in the media) as the worst disability. This tactic serves both to justify government allocation of more resources than are given to support people with other disabilities, and to raise money for 3rd sector charities acting as service providers.

- Helping mainly families (rather the autistic people themselves).

- Promoting integration (mainly in education) – with the goal of the integrated individual becoming more normal by learning from the surrounding normal society.

Part V: Autistic community and culture in Israel

Stages of development

The Israeli autistic community is a direct outcome of the creation and spread of the international autistic community and culture. Until the current millennium, very few adults were diagnosed with autism spectrum conditions, and no attempt was done by professionals or caregivers to put them in contact with each other. However, a few Israelis somehow found about online forums and mailing lists, and participated as individuals in the international autistic community. Sometimes these ACs didn't even know about each other's Israeli identity, as they all corresponded in English and some chose nick-names which did not sound Israeli. Sometimes, personal communication led a foreign AC to connect two Israelis, who were not aware of each other. Even then, communication between the Israelis was often in English, partly because email programs back then did not fully support Hebrew, partly because connecting with the autistic community was identified with English, because there was no Hebrew-speaking autistic community. Chen Gershuni [92] even went as far as assuming that English was a better communication channel, because before he realized that he was autistic, he attributed his difficulties in daily communication to the nature of the Hebrew language.

One of the authors of this article (Sola Shelly) was extremely frustrated by this situation. **Sola**: I realized that most of my writing – personal communication, essays and poems – shifted to English, because the only people I knew about who would understand and appreciate it could not read Hebrew. When trying to formulate my inner processes in words, I often found myself using English. However, I have always been a great lover of the Hebrew language, and I still feel that writing in Hebrew can express the various aspect of my identity better than writing in English.

After being officially diagnosed in 2001, I set up a web-site in Hebrew [93], whose purpose was twofold. I wanted a platform to spread the ideas of the international autistic community among people who were not fluent in English. I had translated before essays by prominent autistic writers, but other than shoving hardcopies into the hands of people I knew, I had no way of publishing them. In addition, I hoped that Israeli ACs who would find this web site will contact me. In 2003 I found an online autism discussion forum at Tapuz, one of the biggest Israeli internet portals [94]. I used the occasion of posting information about Autreat, and added a small note: "I am on the spectrum, and I would like others on the spectrum to contact me". In addition, I searched the online forums of Effi [77] for adult ACs who left their email addresses, and wrote to them. I also wrote to ANI-L [95], where I knew a few Israeli members. I started a Yahoo group called Israel-AC [96] to facilitate communication among the handful of people who responded to my

messages. Correspondence in this group was mainly in Hebrew, through we often had problems with character encoding, which made the messages unreadable.

On April 2005 we held our first real-life meeting. Five people came to a trip to the mountains near Jerusalem. We met every few months, as it was hard to find times for people to come from all over the country, especially that there is no public transportation on Saturdays.

Our small group was mainly social. When issues like services, disability allowances or parents' organizations came up it was mainly for personal reasons and not in the context of global social change. On 2005 I made some attempt to participate in the Tapuz parents' forum, to bring to the table the POV of autistic adults. The response I got ranged from mildly positive to ignoring, but I was very frustrated by the dynamics of this forum and the technical way it operated. A thread did not last in the front page for more than a day or two, and I could not respond fast enough. This situation motivated me to start a blog at the same portal [97] whose main purpose was to bring my viewpoint and response to various issues in my own pace, and to enable discourse with the readers – something that I did not know how to implement in my website.

On the turn of 2006, I suggested to have an "online party" on our yahoo group. Online parties, where list members schedule to be online at the same time and post playfully back and forth, were a habit on ANI-L. A member of our group suggested that we have this party at an online forum. As any Tapuz user could open an online private forum (termed "commune"), I opened a commune called Israeli ACs [98] for this party. This commune later took over the yahoo group, being much more active. Its location on a big Israeli portal drew more attention and enabled more ACs to find out about us. I made it a closed commune, where only members could read and post, and only people who identified as ACs were allowed to join. I received many requests from parents and professionals, who wanted to communicate with us and learn about our experiences. However, because we wanted to keep our commune a safe haven, I opened an additional commune named Gesharim [99] (Hebrew for Bridges) for discourse among ACs and parents, professionals and anyone interested in communicating with us. These two communes were very active, until May 2007, when we moved to our own forums at the ACI website.

The other author of this article (Ronen Gil) played a crucial role in the creation of ACI. **Ronen**: I found our group in 2006, when I learned that I was autistic. When I browsed the Internet about this topic I found Jim Sinclair's writings I read the principles of ANI, which were one of the first texts I translated to Hebrew. My high social awareness and history of activism for social change almost immediately led me to discuss with Sola our new organization. We drafted our goals and principles, based on those of ANI and adapted to the situation in Israel. We then discussed these

guidelines to the rest of our group, and the few people who expressed interest in self-advocacy joined us in founding ACI.

We did not expect all the social group to become self-advocates. The committed members of ACI are those who share ACI's ideals and goals. In the broader circle are ACs who are mainly interested in contacts with other ACs, but are not necessarily interested in ideology.

Being computer-oriented (at the time I had a commercial business for computer communications), I owned a web-server. Soon enough, I designed the ACI web-site [100], and published our goals and principles. The website also features some autistic creations (see next paragraph).

Israeli autistic culture

Communicating in Hebrew with other ACs felt really good, but almost immediately raised a need for a Hebrew term parallel to the English AC used in the international autistic community, so we had to invent one. Inventing new words is fairly common in current Hebrew. We wanted the new term to be an acronym, and to sound similar to the English letters A and C. As acronyms in Hebrew are pronounced as words (rather than spelled out), we looked for two words whose initials sounded like A and S. What we came up with sounds like "us", made from the letter Aleph for the Hebrew word people (anashim) and the letter Samach for spectrum (pronounced the same in Hebrew), meaning together spectrum-people. The acronym also sounds like the Hebrew word for ace – the winning card, so it also has a positive connotation. Once we have this word, we can derive from it a plural form, and an adjective parallel to ACness.

Another term that we had to invent was the parallel of Cousin. There is a possessive case in Hebrew (meaning Uncle's son), but we made instead a compound noun, to distinguish our use of the word from its original meaning. (In English, cousin also means "similar" or "related", while in Hebrew it applies strictly to familial status). We also made a word for stimming. We used the root referring to senses (Hash), and constructed a quadruple-root (hish-hush) to make it playful. Most quadruple-roots in Hebrew are made of a repetition of two letters (e.g. galgal) and often describe repetitive movement, like rolling (gil-gul), waving/blowing (nif-nuf) etc. This grammatical form was found highly suitable for stimming… For stim-toy, we made a compound noun from the root of sensing, and the beginning of the word "mis-hak" (game), yielding "mis-hash". For other words, like overload and crash, we just use their Hebrew trsanlation.

Our local meetings reflect Israeli reality too. Being geographically small and having relatively fewer adults who are aware of being AC, we do not hold local meetings, but try to arrange meetings so that everyone who wants to attend can come. Until very recently, we did not have a public space where we could meet. On the other hand, malls and restaurants are too overloading to most of us. We therefore met in open spaces, mostly in the countryside. Israeli climate enables us to meet

outdoors for most of the year. In addition, field tours are very popular in Israeli culture, so our AC preference of outdoor, less crowded places agrees with our love for nature and landscape as Israelis. The only problem with this is on holidays, when most popular nature sites are too crowded with other Israelis and so we have to come up with alternative places for a hike.

Some of the most popular special interests in the American autistic culture draw on the American general culture, and are less known in Israel. For example, science fiction is much less popular in Israel, and so, less Israelis tend to fixate on sci-fi topics. The same goes for spacecraft and astronauts. Of course, perseveration on television shows will have its local flavor, as those differ from one country to the other. On the other hand, Israelis may fixate on topics which are unique to Israel, e.g. Arabs and the Israeli-Arab conflict, David's citadel or the Ramon crater (a unique geological phenomenon present in Israel only).

One may view any artistic expression of Israeli ACs as an integral part of the Israeli autistic culture. ACI's webpage carries some of our creations: Literary expression in Hebrew, paintings [101], photography [102], and digital art [103]. In addition, a few of us maintain blogs and websites.

The makeup of our group reflects the Israeli society, which includes immigrants from all over the globe. Our members come from various countries and cultural backgrounds.

The Autistic community of Israel and the Israeli and Jewish culture and society: Similarities and parallels

In our efforts to build the Autistic Community of Israel we find many points in which our activities resemble somewhat the Jewish culture, some characteristics of the Israeli society and at many points, the early fight of Zionism.

- **A long term dream**. It is claimed that Jews have dreamt on the rebuilding of Zion for 2000 years. And they kept on dreaming. We dream much of the same dream - to build a strong and ever lasting community. We hope it will not take 2000 years to build but we are ready to wait even longer than that. Another aspect of dreaming is "The garden of Eden" - a place of all good and nothing evil. We have this place in our minds as well. Even though it is not exactly the same as a typical Jew would have thought about it…

- **We are spread all over**. Just like Jews had to come together and to find each other, so are we. Spread throughout the country without knowing one about the other. The reach out to individuals that could potentially be part of our community is not easier than the reach out the first Zionists had to do in order to establish a large enough movement. It was Herzl how said: "If you will it, it is no dream".

- **Having to face shame**. For nearly 2000 years Jews had to accept shame. Numerous cultural mechanisms (both material and non material) have been built to express and exploit this shame. Only when the Zionist movement began to renounce that shame and to fight it they were able to continue and fight for the establishment of the homeland. The renouncement and fight against shame is hard. Its even harder when you don't know you are expected to be ashamed. But non the less is this fight and renouncement part of our activity.

- **A fight for the freedom to practice our own culture**. For almost 2000 years, Jews tried to keep and maintain their own, unique identity despite numerous attempts to force on them foreign faiths. A common "bravery" in the Jewish faith is death for "KIDUSH HASHEM" - that is to prefer death over accepting a foreign faith. We find ourselves fighting attempts to "cure" us and to stop us from practicing our culture in much the same way. We do not prefer death but we really do have to fight for the freedom to be how we are.

- **A fight for self determination**. It is only when the Zionist movement began to demand self determination as "a nation like all other nations" that the struggle for building an old new homeland could become practical. It is only when we started to get together and demand to be treated as different but not lesser human beings that the struggle for social change could materialize. A community cannot exist without self determination. This is true for the Israeli community, the Autistic community and any other community.

- **Ongoing clashes with surrounding culture(s)**. All over the years, the Jewish, Zionist and Israeli society had to deal with an un accepting cultural surrounding. Whether it was the nations of Canaan, the local society during the Diaspora or the Arab nations in the Middle East today, Jews always have to bear arms to keep on living. We hope it would never go to a position were we have to bear arms but we do face the un accepting cultural environment.

- **A differed level of interaction with the community**:

  o There are some Israelis who need Israel as a physical home to live in (and some of those would never leave the state). Some of us do need (although this can't be given at this point of time) the Autistic Community of Israel as a place for physical living without going anywhere else.

  o There are Jews that need Israel as a partial place of residence. In the rest of the time they can live outside Israel. So are some of us as with the Autistic Community.

  o There are Jews that have to have constant interaction with Israel but prefer to live elsewhere. So are some Israeli autistic persons. They need a constant interaction with the community but prefer to live somewhere else.

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- There are Jews that need an occasional interaction with Israel (like donating money) but would rather not be preoccupied by Israel. So are some autistics that need the occasional interaction with the Autistic Community but for the most part do not want to be bothered by the community.

- There are Jews that need to know Israel exists but would not interact with it. There are autistics that would not consider themselves part of the Autistic Community but need to know it exists.

- There are Jews who are indifferent to the fact of Israel being a homeland for the Jewish nation. There are autistics that are indifferent to the existing of the community.

- And unfortunately, Just like there are Anti Zionist Jews, there are autistics that oppose the existence of the Autistic Community.

Self-advocacy efforts and goals

Members of ACI are involved in various activities to promote both the development of the community it self and a social change in all relevant circles of the Israeli society. Here are some examples of our activities (not chronologically ordered):

- **Building and maintaining the ACI web site and forums system**. The Internet plays a great role, not only in our communication with one another and with the international autistic community, but also as a tool to expose the larger Hebrew reading society to our existence and to our ideas.

The ACI web site (HE): http://aci.selfip.org and the forums system (HE): http://aci.selfip.org/forums

- **Ongoing discussions with parents and professionals in a larger forum system**. The dialogue with parents and professionals, as hard as it may be, is an important tool of exposure to the community's goals.

Autism, Asperger and PDD in Tapuz forums (HE): http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums/main/forumpage.asp?forum=612

- **Co-operation with Beit Issie Shapiro**. Recognizing existing organizations that are willing to except our point of view (at the current stage, even if it is excepted along side other, conflicting, points of view) and to change (even a little bit) their course of action according to this point of view is an important milestone in the road of greater social change. We have found Beit Issie Shapiro as such an organization and we our doing our very best to co-operate with them and to broaden this co-operation.

Beit Issie Shapiro (EN): http://www.beitissie.org.il/eng/

- **A talk about the importance of the autistic community in an annual conference of "EFI" - the second leading parents NGOs in the Israeli autism community and a talk about "special needs of AC adults" in an annual conference of the Weinberg Child**

Development. "Penetrating the wall" of the autism community in Israel is a hard task, and we are proud to be able to exploit any cracks in this wall we can make. These two talks are important achievements on their own (in a way to recognition by the establishment) but more than that, they open the way for farther social change.

The presentation on the importance of the community (HE): http://aci.selfip.org/28012008.pps

The presentation at the Weinberg Child Development (EN): http://www.sheba.co.il/img/upload3/5/543_1861.pdf

- **Electronic media appearances: two in national television and two in national radio stations**. As a byproduct of the two activities above, we managed to infiltrate into state run electronic media. This is not enough but it's a starter.

One of the TV interviews (HE): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgDdPDejM-E

- **Articles in Globes, Haaretz, alternative life and LAISHA**. Autreat 2007 was marked in ACI as a breakthrough of written media in a format of an article in the weekend issue of Haaretz - one of the leading daily newspapers in Israel. While writing this article for Autreat 2008, an article in LAISHA - a leading weekly magazine in Israel has been published and another one is on the way in the local version of "Epoch times".

The article in Haaretz (EN): http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/876283.html

- **A meeting with the commissioner for equal rights for people with disabilities**. In that meeting we heard how excited the commissioner was to meet us and to understand that there is a self representation organization of autistics in Israel. Practical steps in a way that would include us in the commission work, since that meeting - not that many! Nevertheless, the fact that we did meet the commissioner and a written paper that documents that meeting, in which you can find a formal statement that the commissioner sees ACI as the legitimate representation body of all the autistic spectrum in Israel, is a big step in the way to recognition and in the needed social change.

The meeting with the commissioner (HE): http://aci.selfip.org/18112007.pdf

- **Participation in a course for "social change in the disability arena", Participation in IDSN - the Israeli Disability Studies Network email list and co-operation with the center for independent living in Jerusalem**. The connection between ACI and other forces for implementation of the social approach to disability is an important field of action, both for greater success in this implementation and in including autism and other disabilities in it. In fact, ACI takes an important role in the theoretical and practical change in the direction to the social approach to disability at large.

The center for independent living in Jerusalem (HE): http://www.cil4u.org/

- **A meeting with Tina Caterino from GRASP, ongoing conversation with Ari neaman and involvement in AFF, wrong planet and ANI-L**. Participation in the international

autistic community and being part of this community gives us an important aspect of the backing, experience and the sense of belonging, without which the fight for social change would be much harder. Establishing the Israeli autistic community without this international backing would have been much harder if possible at all.

- **Social gatherings and field trips**. We would have like to do more, much more of this kind of activity that is crucial to the development of the community. In the last months we found (in Beit Issie Shapiro) a convenient place for meetings and we hope to start a yearly planed set of meeting, just after Autreat 2008.

Photos from our trip near the HULA Lake: http://aci.selfip.org/09112007.php

- **The first ACI symposium (scheduled July 23rd 2008)**. The merely planning of the symposium has already led to more exposure to the existence of ACI then ever before. We do hope to bring about a symposium that would enlarge this exposure and will start the public debate on the social approach to autism in Israel.

The call for proposals for the symposium (HE): http://aci.selfip.org/acfp08.php

Epilogue

As we described in this article, the emerging Israeli autistic community has a significant cultural nature. It can be referred to as separate culture with various influences or as a subculture of either the Israeli culture or the autistic culture or both. We have come to a point were we have some infrastructure for a substantial change to take place. We have several starting points in which we can continue to build our local autistic community. We hope to thrive on these starting points and to build a community that: will provide a safe place by and for many Israeli ACs; continue to maintain strong ties with the international autistic community; lead social change in a way of accepting us as who we are; be a substantial part of the disability movement in Israel, for the benefit of it's members, their immediate surroundings and the Israeli society at large.

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