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Sum Thing for Everyone

The annual abstract put out by the Central Bureau of Statistics is much much more than a dry collection of statistics

By Yinon Cohen

"*Statistical Abstract of Israel 2002*," The Central Bureau of Statistics, No. 53, two volumes and CD-Rom, NIS 200

Every year, at Rosh Hashanah, "The Statistical Abstract of Israel," the flagship of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), is published. The press reports on the size of the population and maybe another figure or two, and then the yearbook is left to the whims of the libraries and research institutes until the following year. This is a pity, because it is a fascinating document that includes a wealth of information about the country, its people and its institutions.

In the abstract there are 28 chapters that contain hundreds of charts, scores of diagrams and two maps, all packaged in an impressive bilingual production (Hebrew-English). The subject matter is varied: from geophysical characteristics through demographic, social and economic data, to statistics about the government, to the local authorities, the police, environmental quality and more.

The abstract has been coming out for more than 50 years and tries to present figures that allow for the identification of trends over time. Recent years have seen the addition of a synchronic dimension of international comparisons, which are sometimes essential for understanding the Israeli experience. The final product is a comprehensive document, of a high level, which contains the reliable information that is essential for any serious discussion of questions about society and economics in Israel.

Statistics that appear tiresome and superfluous become meaningful in discussions of policy. Take, for example, the seemingly banal information that women consult doctors far more often than men do. This datum takes on significance when it is recalled that from time to time, it is suggested that fees be charged for visits to doctors, and it is realized that this not a gender-neutral economic step, but affects women more than men.

Sometimes the diachronic dimension of the yearbook, and not only the snapshot of the situation in a given year, is what is important. Thus, for example, contrary to the prevailing sense that the slaughter on the roads has been getting worse over the years, the abstract shows that the number of killed and seriously injured in traffic accidents is indeed rising, but relative to the size of the population, it turns out that the rate has gone down by about 50 percent since the 1970s. Here, it would have been appropriate to have added international comparisons, as was done for the rates of participation in the work force (which indicate that our rates are low and a cause for concern).

No Occupation

What arouses most interest in the yearbook are the demographic and economic chapters, which are based on figures that the CBS receives from the Population Registry and analyzes itself (birth rate, death rate), or gathers from the census (population size) and sample-based surveys that are carried out regularly (and relate to prices of goods,

employment, wages). There are states that use statistics to prettify the reality. In the Romania of Nicolae Ceausescu, an amazingly low rate of infant mortality was listed. The trick was simple: Mortality was counted only among infants who had survived the first month of their lives. Other states have played around with the unemployment index to cut out some tenths of percentage points, and our Education Ministry prefers to present the proportion of those entitled to matriculation certificates as a percentage of those who have taken the matriculation exams and not of the entire cohort of 18-year-olds." The Statistical Abstract of Israel" presents the demographic and socioeconomic data in the professional manner that is accepted in the world, and though it is not devoid of weaknesses, it passes the test of integrity with a higher mark than other institutions in this country, without trying to conceal gaps between various social groups.

The yearbook attempts to conform to international standards that allow for comparisons. In most cases it succeeds, even when Israeli bureaucracy makes this difficult. Thus, for example, in most countries, the unemployment rate is calculated as the number of people who sought work but did not find it (out of all workers and job-seekers). For historical reasons, in Israel only the Employment Service, which does not have the tools to estimate unemployment rates, is allowed to use the terms "unemployment". The CBS has solved this problem in an elegant way. The forbidden words do not appear in Hebrew, and the unemployed, whose rate is calculated in the way that is internationally accepted, are called in the Hebrew version "not employed" (*bilti moasakim*) Lest there be any doubt, the Hebrew term "not employed" is translated to the English term "unemployed" and it is clear to all that the percentage of unemployed and "*bilti moasakim*" are one and the same.

The yearbook does not always supply data that can be compared. In recent years, the proportion of persons imprisoned has become an accepted figure that is published by all enlightened countries. In the United States, for example, the percentage of prisoners in the population is six times higher (!) than in European countries, and today it is clear to many people that the American dream is based in part on throwing the poor and minorities into prison. And what about Israel? With respect to imprisonment rates – do we resemble the United States or Europe? Ever since the (partial) reporting was stopped in the mid-1980s, we look more like the dictatorships that do not provide the figures. The yearbook reports on criminals, but does not report on detainees and people under arrest - neither in Israel nor in the territories. A disturbing question is why this annual report does not include information on people who are in prison.

The CBS abstract is an official document, and as such, it reflects government policy. In the first years after the 1967 Six-Day War, a chapter was added to it on the "administrative territories," which included a description of the Palestinian population and economy. When the Likud came into power, the chapter changed its name to "Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip," and since the Oslo agreements, it has disappeared entirely, along with any mention of the Palestinians and the occupation.

Reflecting, Shaping Reality

In certain cases, abiding by the official policy provides rare information. For example, a look at the large colorful maps that include the Green Line (pre-Six-Day War border). As the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have not been officially annexed to Israel, the maps in fact cover the 1967 borders, apart from Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Moreover, many

of the charts display data according to geographical areas, and include a wealth of information about the residual category (that which does not belong to any region) called "Yesha" (the acronym for Judea, Samaria and Gaza). Thus, fortunately, we are able to learn a great deal from the abstract about the population of the Jewish settlers in the territories. For example, that they are disproportionately employed in public services; that their birth rate is similar to that of the Muslims in Israel and that the government has invested in public construction in the Jewish settlements more than it has invested in the entire northern region.

As compared to the Jewish settlers, about whom there is a great deal of information, readers interested in finding out about the differences between the religious and the nonreligious will be disappointed. The important social groups of the religious and the ultra-Orthodox simply do not appear in the abstract. Even the size of religious groups is unknown. The only table from which it is possible to extrapolate crudely the number of religious and ultra-Orthodox is that covering the number of students in the various educational systems (60 percent of first-grade students in the secular public school system, and the rest split evenly between the religious public school system and the ultra-Orthodox schools). But these numbers, which were applicable for 2001, cannot be compared to the figures from the 1990s, not to mention earlier years. It is a pity that the CBS has not estimated the size of the groups over time. This can be done and would show whether the percentage of religious and ultra-Orthodox is rising sharply, as many people sense.

Moreover, it is important that the CBS makes a serious effort to include and identify religious groups in regular surveys. The extent of religious observance is important for understanding Israeli society and its development no less than ethnic origin, religion, nationality or education. Until this happens, the yearbook will continue to report on birth rates among Jews according to continent of birth (women born in America are slightly in the lead) when it is clear that the differences derive more from the extent of the mothers' religious observance than from their geographical origin.

The abstract, then, not only reflects the reality but also shapes it – especially with respect to issues that are unique to Israel and do not require international comparisons that dictate to the CBS how to present the data. Refraining from research into the religious and ultra-Orthodox groups is one example. Another example is the categorization of the population by ethnic group and religion. The ethnic origin of the Jewish population is categorized according to the single factor of country of birth, and for people who were not born in Israel, by father's country of birth. As a result, members of the third generation of immigrants (people born in Israel to fathers who were born in Israel) – who constitute about one-third of the Jewish population – are defined in the statistical abstract as being of "Israeli origin." The reliance on country or continent of birth as the only indicator of ethnic origin, together with the decision to follow it only one generation back, leads in fact to the eradication of ethnic origin (and the eradication of the ethnic gaps) in the Jewish population in the official statistics within two generations or 50 years.

Administrative Israelization

The eradication of the ethnic gaps and the adoption of a totally "Israeli" identity are key aims of the melting pot. However, the administrative Israelization that is forced by the abstract on members of the third generation prevents readers from examining whether these goals have been achieved – that is, whether the gaps between the third generations of

Ashkenazim and the third generation of Mizrahim (people originating in Muslim countries) have indeed vanished, and whether all of them really do see themselves as being of "Israeli" origin. "Objective" ethnic origin by continent or country of birth is important, because to some extent, it determines the way the environment relates to the individual, and also affects the subjective formation of identity. However, it cannot serve as the sole indicator of ethnic origin, especially if the people concerned do not see themselves as having one origin or another. As this is the case, it is important that the CBS ask the inhabitants of this country not only where they were born, but also ask them to define their origin. This is done in other countries of immigration where most of the population is from the third generation or more of immigrants. For example, the American census asks inhabitants about their "ancestry." The question is open, and everyone is entitled to choose two different "ancestries" (less than 40 percent of Jewish natives of Israel who live in the United States chose "Israeli" in answer to this question).

Unlike their Jewish compatriots, the Palestinian inhabitants of Israel cannot be "of Israeli origin," irrespective of how many generations they and their forefathers have lived in Israel. Until 1994, the word "Arabs" did not appear in statistical yearbooks (the word "Palestinians" still does not appear), and the basic division of the population is between Jews and non-Jews. The latter are categorized as Muslims, Christians and Druze. With the rise in non-Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union, a new religious category has been added – "Others, Religion Unclassified" – and the Christian group has been subdivided into "Arab Christians" and "Other Christians." Thus, more than one quarter of a million Israelis are labeled in the state's official statistics as "Others".

In recent years, the "Others" have been added to the Jewish group, and the basic division of the population is between "Jewish and Others" and "the Arab population." Ostensibly, this is an insignificant semantic change, but in fact, as University of Pennsylvania professor Ian Lustick has shown, this is a step in the transformation of Israel from a Jewish state to a non-Arab state. It is clear, then, that the statistical abstract is much more than a collection of dry statistics. It describes the society well, it shapes the public debate to a large extent, and it also indicates future directions with respect to key questions.

Yinon Cohen is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Labor Studies at Tel Aviv University .