



Can Generation Y save Israel

Disillusioned with capitalism, Israel's millennials seek peace and a new world order

"THEY'RE NOT like us" is the working title of a soon-to-be-published book by Prof. Oz Almog and his wife, Dr. Tamar Almog, both of Haifa University, on Israeli "millennials," or Generation Y – those born between 1980 and 1995.

A generation is a group of people born during the same period of time, usually about two decades. Because they live through the same experiences, such as economic recession, war, crises and upheavals, they tend to share similar values and behavior. As Financial Times columnist Lucy Kellaway observes, "Someone's age tells you about their experience. It is a measuring stick to how well they are doing."

The title of the Almogs' book sums up their key finding. Gen Y – the "millennium or post-sabra generation," in their twenties and early thirties – grew up in the age of the PC, cellphone and Internet, feminism, civil rights, the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, economic affluence, the Palestinian intifadas and suicide bombers, and the first and second Lebanon wars. They are very different from their elders.

"The influence of this generation on Israel is enormous," Oz Almog tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "Their cultural profile raises many important issues."

The Almogs' research also identified an intermediate generation, Gen XY, those aged 35-44, born in the 1970s, who have one foot in the lifestyle and values of Gen Y and one foot in those of the previous generation, Gen X. The younger siblings of Gen Y were born during the years 1996-2009 and are known as Gen Z.

Oz Almog is a professor in the department of Land of Israel Studies. Tamar Almog teaches in the department of Learning, Teaching and Supervision. Together, they have created the hugely popular website www.peopleil.org about Israeli society. Oz Almog's father, Ze'ev Almog, was a commander of the Israel Navy.

Israel's Gen Y comprises some 800,000 people, or one Israeli in every 10. Gen Y members are not like their grandparents, now aged 65 through 90, or their parents, Gen X members, aged 40-65. Since their elders have created "A messy world" (*The Jerusalem Report*, November 18), perhaps that is a good thing.



Despite how older people view them, global Gen Y members have the potential, say the Almogs, to save Israel and the world. Their votes, for example, changed Israeli politics in the surprising 2013 national elections by helping to elect Yesh Atid's 19 Knesset members.

How do you catalog an entire generation's personality and values? How can you generalize about a cohort of people born over a decade or two, when individuals differ so



NATI SHOHAT / FLASH 90

widely? Anthropologists Henry Murray and Clyde Kluckhohn once observed, “Each of us is like all other people, some other people and no other person.” The Almogs have documented in their new book the ways in which every member of Israel’s Gen Y is alike.

They achieved this by means of thorough methodology: First, they conducted fieldwork, visiting bars, night spots and other locations where Gen Y gathers. They took more than

5,000 photographs of Gen Y. They read thousands of Gen Y blogs and talkbacks. They read Facebook postings and Twitter tweets. And finally, they created numerous Internet focus groups of 14 people each, and asked every person in the groups to voice associations with key words such as father, wedding, computer, etc., and then documented the results in their 800-page manuscript.

They also made effective use of Gen Y “su-

Generation Y in action in a Jerusalem café

per-interviewees,” individuals with strong verbal skills and self-awareness who talk openly about themselves and their friends.

Their findings apply mainly to secular Gen Y members, but also to some extent to religious ones, though “with a delay of a few years.” Their research was funded by the S.

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Neuman Institute, the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology think tank where I work.

“It’s like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, putting the pieces together,” Tamar Almog tells *The Report*. “We read thousands of books and articles, too.”

“Most sociological research defines variables and seeks correlations among them,” Oz Almog explains. “We did not do this. We searched for narratives, for stories.”

As an academic who has cranked out correlations for 40 years, I am now convinced that truth and insight indeed emerge from such narratives.

The study of the values and character of generations was popularized by two American scholars, Neil Howe and the late William Strauss. Their book, “Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation (2000),” makes the case that Gen Y will save the world. They claim Gen Y will resemble the Great Generation, born 1901-1924 in the US, which came of age during the Great Depression and made enormous sacrifices to save the world from the Nazis during World War II.

Howe and Strauss claim there are four basic generational archetypes that repeat themselves in an 80-year-long cycle. They claim the current Gen Y members are a “hero” generation, born during an “unraveling” or crisis, and who as elders will have major political achievements. A less rosy view is that of San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge, whose findings are more grounded in data than those of Howe and Strauss. She calls Gen Y “Gen Me.” The title of her 2006 book sums up her main conclusions – “Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable than Ever Before.”

Are Israeli Gen Y members like Gen Y in America and elsewhere? The Almogs believe they are. “One of our conclusions is that there is great similarity between the American Gen Y and the Israeli Gen Y,” Oz Almog says, noting that Gen Y is perhaps the first truly global generation, linked worldwide by the Internet and constantly sharing experiences and exchanging views.

What are the key characteristics of Gen Y members, and the principal ways in which

they differ from those of older generations?

DECISION-MAKING: “They have a hard time making decisions on their own,” Oz Almog observes. “This is the cellphone syndrome. Gen Y has a very wide range of choices, and there is always a responsible adult, or friend, available to consult by phone, and this has been true for their entire lives.”

MATERIAL GOODS: “Gen Y likes money, likes to live well, like its predecessors,” Oz Almog says. However, he notes, they are less willing to sacrifice or work hard for it.

“The older generation enters a restaurant, sees a bottle of wine on the menu for 200 shekels (\$57) and forgoes it,” Tamar Almog explains. “Gen Y buys the wine – and usually, we, Gen X, pay for it, and gladly. They reject ‘time is money.’ They have ‘yuppie fatigue.’ Social gaps bother them a lot. They don’t want to be like us, the older generation.”

“They are a generation of pleasure seekers,” Oz Almog notes. “They like to party, to enjoy life. And their parents like to join them sometimes. Of course, Gen Y lets the parents foot the bill.”

PROTEST: Tamar Almog tells me that “the social protest movement in Israel was really a big bluff. It has collapsed. Gen Y prefers to withdraw, rather than rebel.”

ROLE OF THEIR PARENTS: “They [Gen Y] are the etrog generation; the older generation wrapped them in silk, like a citron, to protect them,” Tamar Almog says. “So Gen Y tends to lack the resilience that comes from dealing with hardships. We, Gen X, wrapped them in love; we had good intentions, to make life easy for them, but we forgot that part of our suffering equips us for life!”

Howe and Strauss describe what they call “helicopter parents,” those who hover over their adult children protectively and query their professors and their employers “to complain, cajole or promote their sons or daughters.” The IDF has been dealing with this issue for years, with platoon commanders getting phone calls from irate parents about why their children have to crawl through mud and thorns or go without sleep in training.

COLLABORATION: Gen Y members are highly social and have strong social skills. They like to socialize in pubs and clubs. They

are disillusioned with capitalism and seek a more refined economic system, one that creates fewer and smaller social gaps in the distribution of income. Perhaps this is why Gen Y is helping to fuel a revival of the kibbutz, whose lifestyle it likes.

SEARCH FOR MEANING: Gen Y members worldwide share a common goal – the search for meaning in their lives. Meaning is the degree to which our lives have purpose, value and impact. An American study by Harris Interactive, conducted in 2011, found that what young adults aged 21-31 want most in a successful career is a “sense of meaning” – the ability to make a difference – much more than financial success. Of the Gen Y members surveyed, three-quarters said meaningful work was among the key factors defining career success.

In this, Gen Y echoes Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl’s landmark book, “Man’s Search for Meaning.” Since “meaning” usually means doing things for others, Gen Y members have an internal conflict between enjoying life for themselves and creating value for others. It will be fascinating to see how this conflict is resolved. San Diego’s Twenge, for instance, finds that younger Gen Y members tend to show more concern for others than their older counterparts.

One possible resolution of the conflict between “meaning” and hedonism may be that proposed by author and venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki, the founding marketing guru for the Macintosh computer. “Make meaning, not money,” he advises entrepreneurs in his book, “The Art of the Start.” “If you make meaning for others, you will probably make money. But if you only try to make money, you will fail.”

TECHNOLOGY: “Maybe we should call them Gen I,” Tamar Almog quips. “Everything has an ‘i’ – iPhone, iPad, iPod. Only it should have a capital ‘I’. It’s all about me.”

Every year, the Oxford English Dictionary chooses the Word of the Year. For 2013, the hit word is selfie. A selfie is a photograph of oneself, taken with a cellphone, often with a celebrity. It has replaced requests for autographs, which are so 2000. Selfies typify Gen Y’s “it’s all about me” focus.

PRIVACY: According to Tamar Almog, “Gen Y has no privacy. Unlike us, the older generation, they grew up with the theology of tell-all psychology. They reveal all, tell all. They use Facebook heavily; Twitter, they use less than American Gen Ys because it is too short, limited to 140 characters, not sufficiently social. They want to show, to announce,

who they are, what they are doing. They use *Ma v'Zeh* (This and That), a website started by two girls, aged 27 or 28, about how you feel about life; it now has 300 bloggers, all in their twenties. Most blog once a week.”

BOOMERANG: Boomerangs return to the hand of the thrower. Gen Y returns to the home of their parents, though somewhat less in Israel than in the US. “They finish their army service and many return to their parents’ home,” Oz Almog said. “Often, their parents are quite happy about it.”

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, “about 51 million Americans [one in six] live in a home that boasts at least two adult generations.”

This intergenerational mingling is healthy. US presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson once said, “Nothing so dates a person as to decry the younger generation.” The better elders understand Gen Y, perhaps the more they will appreciate their qualities.

GENDER: Gen Y members are unisex; they shun gender differences. Our Gen Y son and daughter-in-law bought a classic Gen Y toy for our 18-month-old granddaughter – a plastic toy Swiss army knife. She loves it. This unisex value can create problems. “One Gen Y woman complained to us, ‘We can’t find a real man!’ [one without feminine qualities],” Tamar Almog notes.

SEX: Gen Y members mature physically earlier than previous generations. The age of menarche has fallen. In the US in 1900, it was 17. Today, it is 12. One girl in six reaches puberty by age seven, and Gen Y members have sex earlier than previous generations; but, the Almogs say, it is very childish. Emotionally, Gen Y matures much later.

JOBS: Gen Y members will leave their jobs at the drop of a hat, if their work is boring or lacks meaning; unlike Gen X and the boomers, who stuck it out for that all-important paycheck. Employers find this hugely irritating, but the wisest of them learn to adapt to it. Gen Y will not rush to find a new job after leaving the previous one. They don’t find unemployment unbearable, unlike their parents’ generation.

Jean Twenge found, for American Gen Y members, that “they see work as less central to their lives, are more likely to value leisure, and say they are less willing to work hard.”

The Almogs have similar findings for Israel’s Gen Y.

EDUCATION: The Almogs cite an album by the rock band, Pink Floyd, “The Wall”, released in November 1989. The words of the lead song include: “We don’t need no ed-



COURTESY

Oz and Tamar Almog: ‘We, Gen X, don’t act on our beliefs, but Gen Y does’

ucation, we don’t need no thought control... Teachers! Leave them kids alone!” It has become an anthem of Gen Y.

“Today’s educational system is simply inappropriate for Gen Y,” Oz Almog says. “It is too slow. Gen Y is highly educated, in terms of academic degrees, but is not intellectual. Gen Y regards degrees as a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Degrees get them a livelihood and extend their bachelorhood.”

I ask how the boomers and Gen X react to their findings. “They say, in 10 years or so, they [Gen Y] will be just like us,” Oz Almog notes. “But we know they won’t! We get two different reactions. Some say, ‘My child or my grandchild is not like that.’ And others say, ‘What a relief! I thought it was only my son or daughter who was like that. Now I see it is a whole generation!’”

Indeed, Tamar Almog observes, “the generation gap is closing somewhat, because Gen Y influences us and we [Gen X] are becoming more like them in values, beliefs, perceptions, though not yet in actions... because we, Gen X, don’t act on our beliefs, but Gen Y does.”

Can Gen Y save Israel, and the world?

Surprisingly, the Almogs believe it can and will. “They [Gen Y] are forcing us, the older generation, to change, to adapt our institutions. They are telling us: ‘The world you bequeathed to us is not suitable.’ Gen Y is disillusioned with capitalism. They seek peace and a new world order.”

Gen Y is a testosterone-free zone. “Gen

Y works together. They do not want to fight wars,” Oz Almog observes. “This is true in Islamic countries as well, including Iran. In these lands, Gen Y will overcome the fundamentalists. Gen Y says: We need each other.”

He points out that there is a new digital Arabic language for cellphones that uses a mixture of Latin and Arabic characters, unlike classical Arabic. “The older generation doesn’t understand it; the young Arabs use it all the time to communicate,” he explains.

Surprisingly, the Almogs are betting on two unusual minorities to become “the new elite” in Israel – Russians and the ultra-Orthodox. Within Gen Y, both have relatively high aspirations and potential abilities.

After concluding the interview, I reflect on my own family’s generations. My wife and I have four children. Two are Gen XY, two are Gen Y. They are all wonderful and love one another, but the two “batches” are quite different. Our Gen Y kids offer us a small window to the Gen Y world. And they give us great hope and optimism. They deeply respect our planet and its environment, they think differently, creatively, and they understand that the global bell tolls for us all.

Gen Y can’t do any worse than the baby boomers and Gen X did. And as the Almogs’ research shows, it can – and hopefully will – do much better than its predecessors. ■

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