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המרכז הבינתחומי הרצליה - 84260					

# Rivlin urges society to confront country's changing demography

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

The demography in Israel is changing, President Reuven Rivlin declared Sunday night in his keynote address at the Herzliya Conference.

Rivlin has in the past avoided using the word demography, which he said is “ostensibly a polite way of describing one or other population group as a ‘threat,’ or a ‘danger’ – as unwanted, as illegitimate. Sometimes the finger is pointed at the Arabs, sometimes at the national religious Israeli Jews, or at the haredim [ultra-Orthodox] – depending on the context.” He has not and would not regard any sector of Israeli society as a threat or a danger or illegitimate, he said.

Yet despite his aversion to the terminology, he had chosen to speak about demography he said, because significant demographic changes dictate the essence of reality.

As he has pointed out to many audiences in recent months, Rivlin said that what used to be a large secular Zionist majority, plus three minori-



‘ISRAELI SOCIETY is in need of a wake-up call,’ President Reuven Rivlin says at the 15th annual Herzliya Conference yesterday. (Erez Harodi-Osim Tzilum)

ty groups: a national-religious minority, an Arab minority, and a haredi minority is nothing more than a pattern that remains frozen in the minds of much of the public.

But today’s demographic processes are restructuring the shape of society, said Rivlin, citing the composition of first-graders where the overall ratio is around 38 percent secular Jews, approximately 15% national religious, about one

quarter Arab and close to a quarter haredim.

Acknowledging that neither identities nor birth rates remain static, Rivlin nonetheless could see a clear change in the demographic process, even though such changes appear to be overlooked or ignored by the system. In the new reality, he said, there is no longer a clear majority, nor are there clear minority groups.

“Whether we like it or not,

the makeup of the ‘stakeholders’ of Israeli society and of the State of Israel is changing before our eyes.”

From an economic standpoint Rivlin cautioned: “The current reality is not viable. The mathematics is simple, any child can see it. If we do not reduce the current gaps in the rate of participation in the work force and in the salary levels of the Arab and haredi populations – who are soon to become one half of the work force – Israel will not be able to continue to be a developed economy.”

Rivlin lamented the fact that “a child from Beit El, a child from Rahat, a child from Herzliya and a child from Betar Illit – not only do they not meet each other, but they are educated toward a totally different outlook regarding the basic values and desired character of the State of Israel. Will this be a secular, liberal state, Jewish and democratic? Will it be a state based on Jewish religious law or a religious democratic state?”

Poverty is already having a drastic effect on Isra-

el, said Rivlin, and this will only expand and weaken the nation unless it defines the commonalities between the different population groups and builds on them.

In the past, he observed, the army served as a central tool for fashioning the Israeli character. In the IDF, society would confront itself and would consolidate and shape itself morally, socially and in many ways economically.

“However, in the emerging Israeli order, more than half of the population does not serve in the military. So the different Israelis will meet for the first time, if at all, only in the work place. In any case, the mutual ignorance and lack of a common language between these four populations, that are becoming ever more similar in size, merely increase the tension, fear, hostility and the competitiveness between them,” Rivlin underscored.

In the new Israeli order, said Rivlin, “Israeli society is in need of a wake-up call” and must take on this new challenge in partnership with all the different communities.