

# Israel: state and religion - The Original Sin

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A FRIEND of mine in Warsaw told me about a Polish journalist who visited Israel for the first time. On his return he reported with great excitement: "You know what I've discovered? In Israel, too, there are Jews!" For this Pole, Jews are people who wear a long black kaftan and a big black hat. In almost every souvenir shop in Poland, little figures like this are exhibited along with other classics like the nobleman, the artisan and the peasant.

This distinction between Israelis and Jews would not have surprised any of us 50 years ago. Before the foundation of the State of Israel, none of us spoke about a "Jewish state". In our demonstrations we chanted: "Free Immigration! Hebrew State!" In almost all media quotations from those days, there appear the two words "Hebrew state", almost never "Jewish state".

IN SCHOOL we acquired an ardent love for the country, the language and the Bible (which we considered the classic book of Hebrew literature.) We learned to regard with disdain - if not worse - Jewish life in the Diaspora. (All this, of course, before the Holocaust.) In 1933 I lived for half a year in Nahalal, the legendary communal village. Seeing it for the first time, I marveled at the communal hall building, the milk processing plant and the large agricultural school for girls (in which Moshe Dayan was the only male pupil). Out of curiosity I asked about the synagogue and was shown a ramshackle wooden hut. "That's for the old ones," one of the local boys told me pityingly. One cannot understand what happened since then without knowing that in those days almost everyone believed that the Jewish religion was about to disappear, together with the Yiddish-speaking old people who still stuck to it. Poor geezers. If somebody had predicted that the Jewish religion would dominate the future state, people would have laughed.

ZIONISM WAS, among other things, a rebellion against the Jewish religion. It was born in sin - the sin of secular nationalism, which had swept through Europe after the French revolution.

Zionism rebelled against the Halakha (religious law) which forbade Jews to "ascend" to the holy country en masse. According to the religious myth, God exiled the Jews from the country in retribution for their sins, and only God had the right to bring them back. Because of this, practically all the important rabbis - both the Hassidim and their opponents - cursed the founders of Zionism. (Needless to say, these curses - some of them very juicy ones - do not appear in Israeli schoolbooks.)

Before all the international inquiries preceding the establishment of the state, delegations of Orthodox Jews appeared in order to oppose the Zionist delegations.

But David Ben-Gurion, who refused to wear a kippah even at funerals (where most atheists do wear kippahs as a gesture towards the beliefs of others) thought that it was worthwhile to get the Orthodox to join his government coalition. Therefore he promised them to free a few hundred Yeshiva (religious seminary) students from military duty and to pay for their studies and upkeep, so that they would not be obliged to work for a living.

The consequences were unexpected. That little gesture has grown to monstrous proportions. Today one could man several army divisions with those shirkers from army duty. They now constitute 13% of the entire yearly crop of those liable to the draft. Moreover, 65% of all Orthodox male citizens do

not work at all and live on the public purse.

The situation is absurd: the state is paying for the upkeep of a large and growing population of Torah-shielded parasites, who undermine the state. The state pays hundreds of thousands of young religious people in order to keep them from – God forbid – working. It pays them generous subsidies so they can produce more and more children (from 5 to 15 per family) most of whom will also neither work nor serve in the army. One can calculate exactly when the economy will collapse, together with the welfare-state and the “citizens’ army” based on conscription.

The whole phenomenon is an authentic Israeli invention. All over the world, Orthodox Jews do work like everyone else. During one of our visits to New York, we wanted to buy a camera. Rachel – who is a professional photographer – was told about the biggest photo shop in town. When we went there, we couldn’t believe our eyes: all the staff of the huge place were Orthodox Jews – all male, of course – clad in their traditional garb. That was the first time we had ever seen Orthodox men working.

This experience had an amusing side. We were both wearing an emblem with the flags of Israel and Palestine. When Rachel went to the cashier to pay, he looked sideways at Rachel’s pin, and without looking at her face asked: “What flag is that?”

“The flag of Israel,” Rachel responded.

“No, the other one!” the man insisted.

“The flag of Palestine” she answered.

The man turned and spat on the floor, exclaiming loudly “Tfoo, tfoo! Tfoo!”

THE ORTHODOX camp in Israel is a hole which swallows anything that comes too near. For example: the Oriental Jews who came from Islamic countries. (They are frequently called “Sephardi” – “Spaniards” – though only a fraction of them are actually descended from the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492.)

The Sephardi religious tradition has always been far more tolerant than the Ashkenazi one. It includes the teachings of geniuses like Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides), the personal physician of the great Saladin. Maimonides forbade religious students to make a living from their studies and ordered them to go out and work. The Sephardis have their own traditions, garments and symbols.

But lo and behold, upon coming to Israel, they subordinated themselves to the Ashkenazis and adopted their blind fanaticism, together with the kaftan and the hats that originated in cold Eastern Europe, where they were worn by the non-Jewish upper classes in bygone centuries. Their Sephardi party, Shas, is slavishly subservient to the Ashkenazi Orthodox. Their “spiritual” leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, grovels before the East European anti-Hassidic Rabbis (called “Lithuanians”).

Last week, a miracle occurred. A Sephardic Rabbi, Haim Amsalem, rebelled against Rabbi Ovadia and his party, demanding a return to the Sephardic traditions of tolerance. He was promptly excommunicated.

IN THE early days of the state, the Orthodox Ashkenazis, though extreme in their religious beliefs, were moderate in national affairs. Not only did they not celebrate the Independence Day of the Zionist state or salute the flag of the Zionist heretics, but they also obstructed the nationalist adventures of David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres. Later they opposed the annexation of the occupied territories – not because of any excessive love for peace or the

Palestinians, but because of the Halakhic ruling that forbids the provocation of the Goyim, because it could cause harm to the Jews.

When the Orthodox set up settlements, they did not do so with any ideological fervor, but solely because of the need to find housing for their ever-growing numbers of offspring. The government gave them cheap land only beyond the Green Line. Nowadays, the largest settlements are Orthodox - Beitar Illit, Immanuel and Modi'in Illit - the last of which is located on land stolen from the Arab village of Bil'in.

WHEREAS THE large religious camp opposed the new Zionist movement, a religious splinter group supported it. In the religious camp they were a small minority. Between the two sides, ardent hatred was the rule.

Thanks to the massive support of the Zionist leadership, the "national-religious" camp grew in Israel at a dizzying pace. Ben Gurion set up a special branch of the educational system for them, which grew more extremist by the year, as did the national-religious youth movement, Bnei Akiva. Members of one generation of the national-religious community became the teachers of the next, which guaranteed an inbuilt process of radicalization. With the beginning of the occupation, they created Gush Emunim ("the Bloc of the Faithful"), the ideological core of the settlement movement. Nowadays this camp is directed by Rabbis whose teachings emit a strong odor of Fascism.

This would not be so terrible if the two opposing religious factions neutralized each other, as was indeed the case 50 years ago. But since then, the opposite has happened. The national-religious have become more and more extreme on the religious level, and the Orthodox more and more extreme on the nationalist level. The two factions are very close to each other today and together constitute an Orthodox-national-religious bloc.

The youngsters of the national-religious faction despise the lukewarm religiosity of their fathers and admire the robust religiosity of the Orthodox. The youngsters of the Orthodox faction are seduced by the nationalist melody, unlike their fathers, for whom Israel was just like any goyim-state to be milked.

The union of the two factions is based on the essence of the Jewish religion, as fostered in Israel. It does not resemble the Judaism which existed in the Diaspora - neither the Orthodox nor the Reform model. It must be said: the Jewish religion in Israel is a mutation of Judaism, a tribal, racist, extreme nationalist and anti-democratic creed.

There are now three religious educational systems - the national-religious, the "independent" one of the Orthodox, and "el-Hama'ayan ("to the source") of Shas. All three are financed by the state at least 100%, if not much more. The differences between them are small, compared to their similarities. All teach their pupils the history of the Jewish people only (based, of course, on the religious myths), nothing about the history of the world, of other peoples, not to mention other religions. The Koran and the New Testament are the kernel of evil and not to be touched.

The typical alumni of these systems know that the Jews are the chosen (and vastly superior) people, that all Goyim are vicious anti-Semites, that God promised us this country and that no one else has a right to one square inch of its land. The natural conclusion is that the "foreigners" (meaning the Arabs, who have been living here for 13 centuries at least) must be expelled - unless this would endanger the Jews.

From this point of view, there is no longer any difference between the Orthodox and the national-religious, between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Seeing the "youth of the hills", who terrorize Arabs

in the occupied territories, on screen, one cannot distinguish among them anymore – not by their dress, not by their body language, not by their slogans.

The source of all this evil is, of course, the original sin of the State of Israel: the non-separation between state and religion, based on the non-separation between nation and religion. Nothing but a complete separation between the two will save Israel from total domination by the religious mutation.

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\* From : <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1290871909>