

"KULTURKAMPF"
The Religious Situation in Israel Today

I

Last year, when I last spoke of the religious situation in Israel, I expressed the hope that Israel would not be afflicted with a Kulturkampf. Today, after my most recent visit to the State of Israel, I must express the hope that we can emerge from it intact. Because we are well into it.

The term "Kulturkampf" is about a hundred years old. It goes back to Bismarck's Germany, when a split occurred between the "Old Catholics" and the Church concerning the new doctrine of Papal infallibility. The battle, which raged mostly about education, posed a threat to the integrity of the civic and social fabric of Germany. And the Kulturkampf, or cultural collision, between religious Jews and secularist Jews in Israel today, this clash of commitments especially about education, is a fact of Israeli life with world-wide repercussions and dangers.

To hear the story from the combatants, one would have to believe that all religious Jews are neanderthal bigots arrayed against the enlightened and open-minded secularists; or, alternatively, that the religious community is the army of the Lord, the only remaining loyalists to the Jewish tradition, who confront self-hating, anti-Semitic Israelis.

I wish I could tell you that either interpretation, in all its simplicity, is credible. I wish I could tell you that our side is always right, and the other always wrong. I wish I could tell you that we American Orthodox Jews can keep out of the battle or above the fray.

But none of these is true. And we shall have to enter the battle, like it or not, and we shall have to take each issue as it comes, examining it with discernment and discrimination, weighing and measuring, and not allowing our critical functions to be suspended because of the directives of any group of people. We shall have to participate in this cultural confrontation, and yet try to calm passions wherever possible. But, above all, we must try to be honest. Because honesty, truth, and clarity are the chief casualties in the Kulturkampf so far.

II

What are some of the major issues? Last week, we spoke of the Russian Jews, especially the Georgian Jews. This week let us analyze briefly -- I admit: too briefly to do them justice -- some of the other issues. I shall begin with those in which the religious side is weakest.

The first issue is amusing, especially because it has nothing to do with the secularists or the non-religious, but is directed by the extreme right wing against the more "moderate" religious Jews. I refer to the banning of the recent World Conference of Orthodox Synagogues in Jerusalem in which I participated. At first the ban was placed on the meeting because it was decided to hold some sessions in the Haichal Shlomo, the seat of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and a building identified with the Mizrachi. Later, it was expanded, so that the meeting was proscribed whether or not it took place in Haichal Shlomo. A wise and gentle and honorable sage was manipulated into issuing edicts of prohibition on matters that are far beneath his weighty concerns. One would imagine that the greatest problem in the Jewish world was the serious suspicion that a conspiracy was afoot between the President of the Orthodox Union, and key-note speaker -- namely, me -- in conjunction with Major Jaffe, the Executive Director of Haichal Shlomo, and probably Rabbi Goren, the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv -- stealthily to organize a Sanhedrin and present it full-blown for all the world as a fait accompli...

III

At times the problems are paranoiacally self-defeating. Such a case is the prohibition and the ban placed on the Midrasha, an institution dedicated to training rabbis for the State of Israel. On the eve of Rosh Hodesh Shevat a couple of weeks ago, a half-day fast was proclaimed in the pious sections of Meah Shearim to pray that the nefarious plans to establish this Midrasha be frustrated. Why such a reaction against a rabbinical seminary? Because the zealots smelled therein the winds of modernism, such as: the teaching of Jewish philosophy (now renamed, "Jewish Ethics" or "Musal"), rhetoric and homiletics, Jewish history, and Hebrew. How dangerous, how defiling to the purity of faith! And how unfortunately self-defeating is this entire effort, for never before was an enlightened Rabbinate as necessary for a country as it is for Israel today!

In both cases, the right wing of religious Jewry was valiantly fighting the battles of 25 and 100 years ago with the means appropriate for 200 years ago.

IV

At times the issues are even more consequential. It hurts me to mention it from this pulpit. I refer to the National Voluntary Service for Girls. Everyone agrees that no girl should be required to enlist in the Army. That is not the problem. The problem is whether the government may set up a voluntary system for religious girls to do their national service in orphanages, hospitals, schools, and outlying kibbutzim where they will be teachers. No one demands of girls who lead a very sheltered existence, and not permitted by their parents to work in offices and factories, that they volunteer (or, certainly, be forced) to enter such service. All that was proposed was that the government set up the machinery to allow and encourage such kind of voluntary service by religious girls. Here the right wing over-reacted in an incredible manner. Such volunteering was prohibited and declared "אין ארץ ישראל", one must rather submit to death than to volunteer. Volunteering for national duty was thus categorized as "אין ארץ ישראל", a major infraction of Jewish morality. A Rosh Yeshiva in America announced his decision: parents of girls of twelve years and over may not go on Aliyah. I confess to you that I am embarrassed merely to mention what was done and the positions that were taken, even without passing my personal judgment upon them. Merely to state the case is to condemn it. Can you imagine what this says by inference to those young ladies, from religious homes and themselves pious, who saw it as their national obligation to volunteer such service -- how offensively tasteless is this attack on their integrity and their morality? As a result, the very slight kernel of truth in the argument of the right wing has long been lost -- and an enormous "אין ארץ ישראל" has been let loose upon the country.

V

A constant source of friction in which, on balance, I believe the religious side comes out better than the non-religious, is that of autopsies. Clearly, a certain level of autopsies is necessary for medical progress. Certainly, as communications increase and conditions in society change, it is necessary for halakhic authorities to reinvestigate the guidelines which will make autopsies in individual cases either prohibited or permissible or obligatory. But Israeli law at the present time permits autopsies to be performed without the family's consent or without the consent of the person during his lifetime. Such is not the case in any enlightened democracy such as the United States

or Britain where consent is necessary.

The result of this coercion has been a series of crank threats against the lives of pathologists and the harassment of these physicians. Amazingly, the reaction of the pathologists has been to go on strike and to close various hospitals for varying periods of time. Such a non-professional attitude would be inconceivable in New York. Can one imagine that the Police Department will go out on strike because some anonymous letters were received calling them obscene names and threatening them? Everyone seems to have gone slightly mad.

Yet, as I have said, on balance the religious side comes out better. The argument of the pathologists for the continuation of the law which allows them to perform autopsies at their own discretion and without obtaining family consent, is that if it were voluntary, no more than 10%-20% would allow autopsies to be performed. But does this not just precisely prove the opposite of their point? It means that a small group of professional experts, namely pathologists, wish to coerce the overwhelming majority of the country -- from 80%-90% by their own estimate -- to do something against the will of this majority, even if it is for the benefit of the entire population. This is a form of benevolent scientific Fascism. The job of the pathologists is not to seek to coerce others by law, but to educate the population to volunteer and cooperate with them. Our response to the pathologists must be, "educate but do not operate."

VI

The "Who is a Jew" issue is another one in which the religious side has the far greater merit. The Knesset has agreed that the definition of Jewishness must be largely halakhic: that one is a Jew only if he is born to a Jewish mother or converted. The problem remains with the omission of the words: "...converted -- according to the Halakhah." What the Knesset has done is to affirm a proper principle, but leave the door wide open for invalid conversions performed mostly by Reform rabbis in the United States. This represents a real problem, and one must agree with the Lubavitcher Rebbe's major thrust in demanding an amendment to the law (adding the words "according to the Halakhah"), even if one is willing to question some of his techniques or political ramifications and demands. We are here speaking of our very identity as Jews, and the point is therefore a profoundly psychological and spiritual one, as well as a legal and technical one. Interestingly, at the recent Zionist Congress,

both Mrs. Meir and the leader of the opposition, Mr. Menachem Begin, firmly declared that in their opinion there ought to be no separation between Jewish nationality and the Jewish religion.

VII

As a result of these tensions, we have been witness to escalation, polarization, radicalization, and an upsurge of ^{אין אדם} ~~אין אדם~~, of largely unnecessary and improper hostility and hatred.

Many religious Jews are convinced that the majority is unredeemable. They look upon the major part of our people in Isarel as, "The Enemy." There is a tendency on the part of the entire religious community to allow the extreme rightists of Bnai Brak and Meah Shearim to dictate policy for the rest of us. A "dominoe" situation is developing, whereby Brisk and Satmar are the ones who influence those closest to them and so on, so that the entire religious community often falls into line because of their influence.

The secularist side evinces progressive deJudaization, a process so complete that many of the businessmen of Tel Aviv or the youngsters at discotheques in Haifa would, if not for the Hebrew language, be indistinguishable from any other thoroughly assimilated Jews throughout the world -- and some of them have such hardened anti-religious attitudes, that in the mouth of a gentile it would faintly smell of anti-Semitism.

So, instead of a Kulturkampf of a rational and sane dialogue, we have a clash in hatred, irrationality, and paranoia. The right wing, the religious extremists, are unaware of the existence of a new world, new problems, and new challenges, and they become more and more recessive and separatist. And the secular side becomes more and more insensitive and unaware of the consequences of their position. They do not understand Judaism. They see every religious deed as having an ulterior motive. Sometimes I think that in the eyes of an Israeli secularist Jew, when a religious Jew prays Minhah, it is interpreted as a purely political act. They are unaware that -- as I told The World Conference of Synagogues in Jerusalem some two or three weeks ago -- the world Jewish community is today in the midst of a ^{אין אדם} ~~אין אדם~~, a silent spiritual Holocaust of assimilation. More recently a historian calculated that if not for assimilation -- not persecution, just assimilation -- we would today number not 11 million, but 140-150 billion Jews throughout the world!

This hardening of the lines reveals itself in a development of a new national sport in Israel which threatens to displace soccer from its position of eminence: a demand for flexibility from the rigid Rabbis, a protest against the changelessness of Halakhah, while loftily and unquestioningly assuming the eternal rightness of Israeli secularist policy, and assuming that Zionist dogma endureth forever.

The Halakhah must permit everything -- but no innovation or creative suggestion can be accepted for the Zionist Congress if it does not conform with the "Jerusalem Platform."

The Rabbis must abrogate a whole section of the Torah dealing with illegitimacy -- but the call for an American aliyah, so relevant in the 40's and perhaps the 50's, and so irrelevant today with the great Russian immigration, is repeated as if it were a sacred litany.

Religious, Orthodox Jews are always declared to be narrow, but Zionist secular leadership is open-minded and enlightened and beyond such criticism -- even when it disinvites a Nachum Goldman for daring to disagree with the party-line, even when it sends its police crashing in a brutal over-reaction against the rather peaceful Black Panthers and New Left ¹⁵⁸ demonstrating in Jerusalem.

Religious Jews are accused or provoking dissension, but the Zionist Congress is allowed to invite as one of its major speakers Prof. Albert Memmi, who, according to the JTA report, delivers himself of a tirade against Orthodoxy because it has the temerity to oppose mixed marriages.

VIII

I must regretfully report that a new issue is emerging which is even more painful and more embarrassing than the others we have mentioned so far. That is, the very serious problem of the desecration of the Sabbath. I do not intend by this the buses running on Shabbat in Haifa, or the overzealous Egged drivers who begin their trip from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem while the sun is still shining on Saturday. I refer, rather, to the right of the religious Jew not to be coerced to violate his conscience by desecrating the Sabbath in Israel.

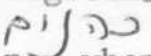
The problem began to become serious when the present Minister of Labor, Mr. Almogi, began issuing ^{הוראת שעה} wholesale -- permits to keep factories open on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews thus found themselves successively barred from various industries, especially the chemical industry, and from

television and communications. Those who were already working there began to get the uneasy feeling that they were unwanted; those who applied for positions found all kinds of difficulties in their way.

I should like to make it clear: I am not speaking of ^{הן} ^{הן} situations, cases where the Sabbath must be violated because of matters of life and death, such as police or fire or hospitals. The government has gone beyond the ^{הן} ^{הן} criterion and permitted the desecration of the Sabbath for commercial reasons only. So that religious Jews today can be turned down from jobs in Israel because of their religious convictions, something which does not occur in London, Paris or New York. In the latter city, to discriminate against the Sabbath observer is a violation of the law with full penalty following.

Worse yet, such coercion to violate the Sabbath does not exist in Soviet Georgia! The Jews who have come from Georgia have decided to emigrate not because life is easier in Israel and not because they could not be Jews in Georgia -- because they did live fairly comfortably, and in a thriving Jewish community where the Jewish tradition was observed without outside interference. Now these same Jews, when they try to obtain positions as porters in the airport at Lod, are punished, fired, and the director of the airport has the undiminished effrontery to demand that those seeking employment at Lod sign on the dotted line in advance that they will violate the Sabbath when asked to do so. Many of the Georgian Jews who came a year or two years ago have been forced to do just that, and as a result they attend Shabbat services at the crack of dawn and thereafter go to work in Lod. Many of the new emigrés, as well as those who have come before, are broken-hearted and broken-spirited. They find that the move from Soviet Georgia to democratic Israel has resulted in a diminution of their freedom of religion rather than an expansion. And the Minister of Transportation, Mr. Peres, had the tastelessness and vulgarity to express surprise and astonishment that religious Jews would even seek employment in Lod. So we have the paradoxical and ironical and infuriating situation whereby religious Jews are becoming, in a manner of speaking, second-class citizens. (The subsequent denials by Mr. Almogi are entirely unconvincing. I have personal knowledge of two cases -- one an American girl and the other a Russian man -- who experienced employment difficulties because of Shabbat.)

I wonder where are all those professors whose hearts go out to the underprivileged of other peoples, and where are all the

professional liberals in Israel and the United States who rally to the cause of two people who could not marry because the taint of illegitimacy, or to the dozen or two dozen or three dozen  who could not marry divorcees -- where are they now when hundreds of religious Jews in Israel will be denied their first choice of employment merely because of their desire to observe Jewish law? Or are civil liberties in Israel only to be invoked on behalf of the freedom to display pornography and obscenity, even as certain Jewish civil libertarians of the United States feel that human rights were meant to be invoked only for Blacks or Puerto Ricans, but never for Jews in Russia or the Jewish poor in New York?

Last Friday, a private citizen of Israel, an American immigrant, published a full page ad in the Jerusalem Post, Haaretz, and Maariv, which contained an Open Letter to Mrs. Meir, in which he mentioned some of the points we have just discussed. Haaretz, the most respected of the Establishment newspapers, which vigorously and aggressively expresses the secularist point of view, answered in an editorial which charged the writer with politics -- a foolish charge because he belongs to no political party. More important, it concluded with the ominous message Jews the world over must understand that the forms of Sabbath observance which prevailed in the Diaspora are not acceptable in the State of Israel.

So that Haaretz is now setting religious standards for the Jews of the world. It is telling us how we must observe Judaism if we wish to come to Israel and enjoy the full benefits of the country. We must remind Haaretz, and through it all of the secularist leadership in Israel, that the same kind of religious test was given to us in Europe after the Emancipation. We were told that if we wanted to enter to broader society of Western civilization, all we had to do is change the form of our religious observance -- with or without Baptism. Many Jews who came in the great wave of immigration from Europe to the United States in the early years of this century, were urged to throw their tallit and tefillin into the ocean as they approached Eliss Island. Those who submitted to these blandishments -- many, many of their children and grandchildren are no longer with us; they are lost not only to Judaism, but to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel.

This is the low road for the Kulturkampf. It is most regrettable for me to say so, but I believe that whereas we once sought for a public posture for Judaism in the State of Israel, we now have fallen back to a narrower defensive line, and we must now forgo the public image of Judaism and fight at least for

the rights of individual religious Jews not to suffer because of their Jewish commitments in the Jewish State.

So the lines are being drawn and the issues are serious, although the Kulturkampf seems to be more kampf than kultur.

IX

However, I do not want to overdraw the picture. It would be a distortion to maintain that the situation is all shadow and no light. Indeed, the very existence of redeeming features imposes upon us the moral and Jewish obligation to make our contributions to the improvement of the situation. Whoever has eyes to see and ears to hear will notice the general dissatisfaction of the younger generation on the 'kibbutzim -- and they are the ideological pace-setters for Israel -- with the Marxist ideology that their parents have bequeathed to them. One notices a continuous search for Judaism, for Jewish values. There is a growing population of what we would call "Modern Orthodox" who are beginning to react against the submissiveness of the religious community to the extremes of both right and left. There is a religious academic community, a religious university, and yeshivot that are more open to life in Israel.

Now is the time to emphasize the kultur rather than the kampf, and to raise the dialogue to a higher level. As for the Israelis, they must learn to cut down on the extremism, on the rhetorical overkill, on the excessive politicization of life in Israel. They must emphasize similarities even while arguing differences.

We in the United States must not allow extremists in our own camp to push us into decisions and postures which are not really ours. We must recognize that many of the religious extremists in the United States have directed their activities not so much against Reform, or against the secularists, as against those who are Orthodox but somewhat to the left of them. Such policies can only prove suicidal. We must insist upon the independence of our critical judgment, and not be coerced by the edict of any religious council that sets itself up as authoritative and infallible.

And we must openly and firmly reject the stifling and insensitive secularism of the majority. We will not be overawed by the majesterial eminence of the Israeli government or Israel's

press representing, as they usually do, a secularist point of view. In all this, ^{אמונה וישראל}, the love of Israel, is vital; but rhetoric alone will offer no solution to our problems.

Positively, we must determine once and for all to build up the center, the middle ground. What we stand for must not be permitted to be crushed by either extreme. We must work powerfully for moderation. I do not mean that we must be moderate in our support of Torah; on the contrary, we must be passionate in our support of Torah -- but we do not identify Torah with what is preached to us by Satmar or Brisk. We identify Torah as that of which it is written

^{והיה דרכו של אלהים אמת ושלום}, that "its ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." We must rally to such causes that attempt to bridge the gap between both camps. I refer especially to groups such as Gesher, which I am pleased to report is making excellent progress. We must help such institutions as Midrasha which seeks to train rabbis with a greater breadth of outlook and greater efficiency to deal with a new and modern generation. We must give our support more and more to such yeshivot that allow its students to feel that they are not only in Israel but also of Israel, that are not averse to cooperating with an Army program (hesder) for their students. And these are only a few of the various causes and organizations that constitute a healthy middle sector.

X

The situation is tense and confusing but far from hopeless. Our tasks are difficult but we have a great and historic role to play. Above all, it is our task to show Torah in its true form, in its proper light.

There are many for whom the halakhic regimen seems unbearable and stifling. We must respect their feelings, but it is our moral and Jewish duty to teach them otherwise.

The great Hasidic teacher, author of "^{אגרות אברהם}," makes the following comment on the verses in today's portion which tell of the Children of Israel who complained about the bitter water which Moses then sweetened for them. Water, says our author, is a symbol of Torah. There are times when Torah seems bitter, restrictive, inhibiting. But really this is an indication not of the quality of Torah, but of the quality of the man. Honey tastes sweet, but in the mouth of a sick man it often tastes bitter. So, one who finds Torah bitter is sick,

and we must help cure him, not berate him. We must make every effort to give Torah a sweet and pleasant taste for the spiritual patient, by education and explanation and friendship.

The author then quotes his grandfather, the Besht. The founder of Hasidism said the following: in the Talmud we read that Jerusalem was destroyed *לא היה בטובה תחילה*, because they did not make a blessing over the Torah in the beginning. Why the word, *תחילה*, "in the beginning?" Do we not know that the blessings over the Torah are recited before the actual reading or the study of the Torah? The Besht answers that the reference is particularly to one word which comes at the very beginning of one of the major blessings over the Torah: *והיה נא ה' אלקינו אלהיך*, "Make the words of the Torah sweet"... The problem with the sages of Jerusalem was that they forced Torah on the younger generation, they crammed it down the throats of those who were unwilling, they failed to emphasize *והיה*, to make Torah pleasant and sweet. And that is why Jerusalem was destroyed.

So was Jerusalem destroyed. Our task is now to rebuild Jerusalem, to contribute to the up-building of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and to the renaissance of Torah in our days. And this we can do by emphasizing *והיה*, by making it sweet, and by teaching all our people that Torah in its fullness is a blessing.