

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF RABBI

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Dear Herman,

I am turning to you, amongst a select number of leading personalities in Israel, to seek your advice, and possibly your assistance, in an effort to make some contribution towards alleviating the grave crisis afflicting our people in the wake of the Yom Kippur War.

Even greater than the threat to Israel's security from the might and machinations of our enemies from without is the mortal danger from within of disunity and disintegration, sapping Israel's inner strength, resolve and morale. To Jews with a historical awareness, the present fragmentation and bitter strife in Government, inside the political parties and even in the Rabbinate cannot but be ominously reminiscent of the "Sin' hinam" which, as our Sages invariably maintained, caused the destruction of Jerusalem 1900 years ago.

I have urged, both publicly and in private discussions - at any rate during the present emergency when religious faith and national unity are such indispensable assets to Jewish survival - that we shift the emphasis in our spiritual confrontations and challenges from legislation to education. More specifically, I suggest that

- 1) secularists be persuaded to admit some regular religious education and religious experience in all schools in Israel and
- 2) a moratorium be called on all new legislation of religious significance, such as conversions, civil marriage, public Shabbat observance and autopsies.

At the root of our perilous predicament, to my mind, is a profound spiritual crisis revealed and accentuated by the Yom Kippur War. Israeli society is being acutely polarised and, worse still, demoralised by ever more bitter divisions on the very ideals which have sustained the spirit of our nation and united us in all our past tribulations.

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We are now paying a fearful price for the lack of a spiritual faith amongst so many of Israel's children. The rigid demarcation in the State system between religious schools for only a minority and non-religious schools for the rest, has raised a generation which put its entire faith solely in the invincibility and infallibility of its military establishment. Moreover, it produced a generation which recognised as the only *raison d'être* for the Jewish State the security it had to offer, vainly believing that the fulfillment of the Zionist dream would normalise the Jewish condition and eliminate anti-Semitism by making the Jewish people accepted as an equal among the nations. Both this faith of self-confidence and this secularist dream have now been shattered and, in the absence of any other faith, numerous people nurtured in an atmosphere of spiritual nihilism are now on the brink of despair. Desolate and disillusioned, many ask what are we fighting for; why risk our and our sons' lives every few years? Insufficiently exposed to the magnetic spell of the Land's sanctity and the fascination of living in a society suffused by uniquely Jewish values, they are bound to question their attachment to the Land and the sacrifices it calls for, once they believe that they can find at least equal security elsewhere with lesser risks and privations.

Profound as are the heart-searching and the quest for enduring Jewish values in Israeli society today, the religious establishment is all but impotent in reaching out to the masses and in relieving their spiritual starvation. I believe there are two principal impediments to making religious influences more widely effective: a) the fear of religious coercion (which feeds the suspicion that religious power is being used to oppress the non-religious majority, infringing their freedom by laws which, estranged from the religious tradition, they cannot appreciate or value), and b) the politicisation of religion (whereby the growth of religious influence represents a potential threat to the voting strength of other political parties and their interests). As a result, the gap between the spiritual "haves" and "have-nots" is constantly widening, with a corresponding increase in bitter conflict between them - all for reasons entirely unrelated to any intrinsic objections to Jewish traditional values, the need for which is now more widely recognised than ever before.

Clearly, therefore, some radical departure from the hitherto hallowed "status quo" is desperately required. New thinking must devise a formula aimed at achieving three vital objectives: to replace the present internal strife; a resurgence of religious faith to overcome the existing despondency, and to restore the historic identity of the Jew; and the disengagement of spiritual causes from partisanship and political bargaining.

The proposal of a moratorium here envisaged is designed to remove from the current political agenda contentious items on which fierce divisive controversies continue to rage and which, whilst supremely vital in themselves, are subordinate to the overriding need to fortify our spiritual defences by raising G-d-fearing and practising Jews. This gesture should help to win wider national support for the positive suggestion to promote the introduction of religious education in schools.

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What is suggested is that a period of one to two hours daily be set aside for regular religious education and tefilah, to be conducted by deeply committed religious persons. If sufficient qualified teachers cannot be found, their services should be augmented by suitable local rabbis and a corps of volunteers drawn from the vast reservoir of often highly skilled and enthusiastic religious students at Yeshivot and other academic institutions. Whilst this programme must obviously be implemented under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, it should be administered by a special statutory authority, operating on an entirely non-partisan basis, and subject to the overall direction of a panel of religious educationalists.

The setting up of such a non-political authority, with the blessing and active support of secular state agencies, and indeed the whole new approach underlying these proposals, might well serve as a first and tangible step towards the disengagement of religion from politics, towards national unity, restoring the fellowship of our people, and strengthening the nation's historical and spiritual conscience.

After numerous recent consultations with rabbinical colleagues, national and communal leaders, and Jewish thinkers in Israel as well as in this country and America, I am led to believe that such a scheme could win acceptance if it were powerfully endorsed by leading intellectuals and "opinion-makers", including especially some who are not specifically identified as belonging to the religious establishment or indeed to the "religious camp" in general. I am inviting your views on these proposals, and more particularly your agreement, if you so see fit, eventually to associate yourself publicly with a call for their adoption.

As a second stage in launching this scheme, we might consider a sustained publicity campaign, including full-page advertisements in the Israeli press, in an effort to gain widespread public support. I already have the agreement of some leading colleagues in Europe and America who in principle are prepared to sign such an appeal and to find the funds required for its promotion.

What is at stake is both the security of Israel and of Jewish life throughout the world. I therefore eagerly await your response.

With fervent prayers for the Peace of Israel, and cordial personal regards,

I am,

Very sincerely yours,

I. Jakobovits
Dr. Immanuel Jakobovits
Chief Rabbi