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Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

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Israeli Mustard

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It's A true story. I have told it once, and I shall tell it again.

A friend of mine in Warsaw, who is half Jewish, advised a well-known Polish journalist to visit Israel, to see for himself.

When the journalist came back, he called my friend and reported breathlessly: “Do you know what I have discovered? There are Jews in Israel too!”

He meant, of course, the Orthodox, with their black clothes and large, black hats, who look like the Jews imprinted in Polish memory. They can be seen in any Polish souvenir shop, side by side with other figures from Polish folklore: the king, the nobleman, the soldier etc.

As this foreigner noticed immediately, these Jews bear no resemblance whatsoever to ordinary Israelis, who resemble ordinary Frenchmen, Germans and, well, Poles.

The orthodox (called in Hebrew “Haredim”, the “fearful”, those who fear God) are not part of the Israeli state. They don’t want to be.

Most of them live in isolated ghettos, which fill large parts of Jerusalem, the town of Bnei Brak and several huge settlements in the occupied territories.

When one thinks of a ghetto (originally the name of a Venice neighborhood), one thinks of the humiliating isolation once imposed by Christian rulers. But originally it was a self-imposed isolation. Orthodox Jews wanted to live together, separate from the general population, not only because it gave them a sense of security, but also – and mainly - because of their faith. They needed a synagogue they could reach on foot on Shabbat, a ritual communal bath, kosher food and many other religious requisites. They still need them in Israel and elsewhere.

But most of all they need to avoid contact with others. In modern times, with all the deadly temptations, they need it more – far more – than ever. With the streets full of big ads featuring unclad women, with TV spewing an endless stream of soft (and sometimes not so soft) pornography, with the internet full of tempting information and personal contacts – the Orthodox have to protect their children and keep them away from the sinful Israeli way of life.

This is a matter of sheer survival for a community that has existed for 2500 years, and that until some 250 years ago encompassed practically all Jews.

ZIONISM, AS I have often pointed out, was among other things a rebellion against Judaism, no less then Martin Luther’s rebellion against Catholicism.

When Theodor Herzl raised his flag, almost all East European Jews were still living in a ghetto-like Orthodox atmosphere, ruled by the rabbis. All these rabbis, almost without exception, saw Zionism as the great enemy, much as Christians view the Antichrist.

And not without reason. The Zionists were nationalists – adherents of the new European doctrine that human collectives are based primarily on ethnic origin, language and territory, not on religion. It was the opposite of the Jewish belief that Jews are the people of God, united by the obedience to his commandments.

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As everybody knows, God exiled his Chosen People from their land because of their sins. Some day God will forgive them and send the Messiah, who will lead the Jews, including the dead, back to Jerusalem. The Zionists, in their crazy desire to do so themselves, were not only committing a deadly sin, but actually rebelling against the Almighty who had expressly forbidden his people to enter the holy country en masse.

Herzl and almost all the other Zionist Founding Fathers were convinced atheists. Their attitude towards the rabbis was condescending. Herzl wrote that in the future Jewish state, the rabbis would be kept in their synagogues (and the army officers in their barracks). All the leading rabbis of his time cursed him in no uncertain terms.

However, Herzl and his colleagues had a problem. How to get millions of Jews to trade in their old-time religion for the newfangled nationalism? He solved it by inventing the fiction that the new Zionist nation was merely a continuation of the ancient Jewish “people” in a new form. For this purpose, he “stole” the symbols of the Jewish religion and turned them into national ones: the Jewish prayer shawl became the Zionist (and now the Israeli) flag, the Jewish Menora (the temple candlestick) became the state’s emblem, the Star of David is the supreme national symbol. Almost all the religious holy days became part of the new national history.

This transformation was immensely successful. Practically all “Jewish” Israelis accept this today as gospel truth. Except the Orthodox.

The orthodox claim that they, and only they, are the real Jews and the rightful heirs of thousands of years of history.

They are quite right.

The Founding Fathers declared that they wanted to create a “new Jew”. Actually they created a new nation, the Israeli.

David Ben-Gurion, an avid Zionist, said that the Zionist Organization was the scaffolding for the building of the State of Israel, and with the building complete, it should be discarded. I go much further: Zionism as such was the scaffolding, and should now be discarded. The pretense that this is a “Jewish” state is the continuation of a fiction that may have been necessary at the beginning, but is redundant and even harmful now.

This pretense underlies the present situation: the Orthodox are considered by Israelis as a part of the Jewish-Israeli community, while behaving as a foreign people. It is not just that they do not salute the Israeli flag (as mentioned: the prayer shawl with the Star of David) and refuse to celebrate Independence Day (much like the Arab citizens, by the way) – but they also refuse to serve in the army or perform any other national service.

This is now one of the main bones of contention in Israel. Officially, the Orthodox claim that all their young men who are liable to be drafted – some 15 thousand every year – are busy studying the Talmud and cannot stop even for a day, much less for three years, like ordinary students. One rabbi declared last week that they actually serve the country more than ordinary combat soldiers, because they assure divine protection of the state.

The Supreme Court – so it seems- is not so much impressed by the divine protection and recently annulled a law that exempts the Orthodox, causing a political scramble for alternatives. A new law circumventing the court is in the making.

Actually, the Orthodox will never allow their children to join the army, because of the justified fear that they will be contaminated by ordinary Israelis – learning about night clubs, TV and – God forbid – hashish, and, worst of all,

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listening to the voices of female soldiers singing – considered an absolute abomination in Jewish religious law.

The separation between the Orthodox and others – between Jews and Israelis, so to speak – is almost complete. The orthodox speak another language (Yiddish, meaning “Jewish”) and have a different body language, dress differently, have a different world view. In their separate schools, they learn different stuff (no English, no mathematics, no secular literature, nor the history of other peoples).

Israeli alumni of state schools have no common language with alumni of Orthodox schools, because they have learned totally different stories. An extreme example: some years ago two rabbis published a book called “The King’s Way”, which states that killing children of non-Jews is justified if there is any fear that these, when grown up, would persecute Jews. Several senior rabbis endorsed the book. When pressed, the police started a criminal investigation for incitement. This week the Attorney General finally decided not to prosecute, on the grounds that the rabbis only quoted religious texts.

An Orthodox Jew cannot eat in an ordinary Israeli home (not kosher, or not kosher enough). He certainly will not let his daughter marry a “secular” Israeli boy.

The attitude towards women is perhaps the most striking difference. There is absolutely no gender equality in the Jewish religion. Orthodox men view their women – and the women see themselves – mainly as means of (re)production. The status of Orthodox women is determined by the number of their children. In certain neighborhoods of Jerusalem, it is quite usual to see a pregnant woman in her 30s surrounded by a crowd of her offspring, carrying a newborn in her arms. Families of 10 or 12 children are quite unexceptional.

A well-known Israeli commentator and TV personality recently wrote that the Orthodox should be “squeezed”. In reply, an Orthodox writer poured his wrath on “secular” personalities who did not protest, singling out “the untiring ideologue Uri Avnery”. So I should make my position clear.

As an atheist Israeli, I respect the Orthodox for what they are – a different entity. One might say: a different people. They live in Israel, but are not really Israelis. For them, the Israeli state is like any other Goyish state, and Israelis are like any other Goyish people. The difference is only that, by having Israeli citizenship, they can milk the state shamelessly. We practically finance their very existence – their children, their schools, their life without work.

My proposal for a sustainable modus vivendi is:

First, a complete separation of state and religion. Annul all laws based on religion.

Second, grant the Orthodox complete autonomy. They should elect their representative institutions and govern themselves in all religious, cultural and educational matters. They should be exempted from military service.

Third, the Orthodox should pay for their religious services themselves, with the help of their brethren abroad. Perhaps there could be a voluntary tax for this purpose, which the state would then transfer to the autonomy authority.

Fourth, there would be no “chief rabbinate” or other rabbis appointed by the state. These are anyhow rejected and, indeed, despised, by the Orthodox. (The irascible Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an observant Jew, once called Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren “the Clown with a Shofar”.)
I would, by the way, propose a similar autonomy for the Arab citizens, if they so wish.

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There remains the question of the so-called “National-Religious”. These are the offspring of the tiny minority of religious Jews who did join the Zionists right from the beginning. They are now a large community. Not only are they ardent Zionists, but they are ultra-ultra, leading the settlement enterprise and violent right-wing Zionism. They don’t just accept the state and the army – they aspire to lead both, and have made considerable progress in that direction.

Yet in religious affairs, too, they are becoming more and more extreme, approaching the Orthodox. Some Israelis already use the same term for both groups: “hardal” (which could be translated as "Nareor – National-Religious-Orthodox.) Hardal, by the way, means mustard.)

What to do with this mustard in an autonomy dish? Let me think a moment.

By the way: when an Israeli Jew is asked by a stranger anywhere in the world “what are you?” he always answers: “I am an Israeli”. He will never, ever, say: “I am a Jew”.
Except the Orthodox.

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