

Who is a Secular Jew?

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Now that over a year has passed since the elections, we can see more clearly the possibility of a cultural war in Israel. On the other hand, we might say that a "window of opportunity" has opened up.

During four years of rule, Labor and Meretz blocked any pointed cultural struggle. Their vision of peace and a new Middle East, that took precedence over the development of a secular Jewish culture, was marketed as a substitute for cultural identity. Shimon Peres employed Rabbi Amital of Meimad, his "Shabbos Jew," as "Minister for Inspiration," and in the traditional spirit of the Labor Party promoted the view that secular Jews dealt with practicalities while religious Jews were responsible for the spiritual life of our people. Education Minister Amnon Rubinstein might well have staged a revolution by implementing the recommendations of the Sherhar Commission, but for two years his ministry related to the Commission's report technically, without leadership on his part. The former Meretz minister still doesn't seem to understand the significance of the "Jewish identity" question; he is no different in this regard from former coalition colleagues, whose Jewish references consist of a thin, decorative layer of verses such as "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares." (It is no coincidence that they constantly quote the same worn-out verses from the Prophets.)

The political left still doesn't understand that elections are determined by the perceived cultural platforms of parties: "Jewishness" is the monopoly of the "religious" while "secularism" is based mainly on the negation of religious norms, if not explicitly on hatred of religious persons. The need to define "Jewish identity" emerges precisely at a time when new technologies offer to link us all to the "global village" and when a need for identity is strengthened by a vision of peace and fellowship. The election results prove that leaders who failed to forge a Jewish cultural identity are incapable of leading us into an era of open borders.

A "cultural war" doesn't mean confrontation between the religious who want a halakhic state and the secular who want a liberal society. Part of the struggle must take place *within* these camps so that secular Jews could first clarify their own values. Do we have a common version of Jewish history? To

which aspects of our past do we relate in our contemporary lives? What distinctive measure of Jewish culture should be on the Israeli educational agenda today? What texts should be included? Each side is strengthened by contact with its rival and is forced to sharpen its arguments. In the past, as a result of this process, creative controversy developed. Such were the clashes between pagans and monotheists, between Judea and Rome, between Judaism and ancient Christianity and Islam. The secular camp now needs such a profound cultural *mahloket l'shem shamayim* — controversy for the sake of heaven. Avoiding this, or confining it to the limits of the political status quo — “yes or no to Shabbat travel on Bar Ilan Street” — will only lead to its defeat.

To prepare for a cultural war, we secularists must start by gathering internal intelligence: Who is actually committed to our outlook? What is their motivation and staying power? What resources do they have? The meaning of the term “secular” is not clear; neither does the word “religious” denote only one position. Any newspaper reader can distinguish between different religious groups and has recourse to a long list of identities — national-religious, ultra-Orthodox, hasidic etc. These, in turn, can be divided into sub-groups. The secular camp however, is generally represented as a single mass. By distinguishing between different options, secular Jews will lend sophistication to the debate regarding Jewish identity.

A SECULAR RELIGION

Devout adherents of secularism aim to create a new establishment and a new secular halakhah alongside the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements. They want to perform plastic surgery on Judaism to make it politically correct. With recruiting slogans such as “pluralism” and “humanism,” learned members of the secular religion deliberately twist Jewish sources. Their relationship to Jewish books is fundamentally instrumental; texts are used mainly as tools for political education to illustrate desired values. Texts that don't serve this purpose are censored or abandoned. “Ahnai's Oven,” an exceptionally beautiful talmudic story concerning the authority of earthly courts over a heavenly *Bat Kol* (Bava Metzia 59b), is exhausted from overuse.

The vision of a secular religion includes creating secular ceremonies for marriage, burials, festivals, etc. to be directed by the new religious establishment. Despite intense talk about pluralism, this stream, too, aspires to power at the expense of other groups. The belief that religion will inevitably disintegrate as part of a historical process affects the way in which secularists relate to the images of the god in which they don't believe. Sometimes, their deity is that of Supreme Court President, Justice Aharon

Barak — a liberal, feminist, democratic, progressive god, whose Torah is distorted by the insensitive Orthodox rabbinate. At other times, he is the satanic divine who represents catastrophes and evil in the world. While leaders of the secular religion tend to exhibit an aggressive fighting spirit as they seek to conquer Judaism at conferences and seminars, their heterogeneous audiences engage in polite, uninspired discussion about "Jewish values."

APIKORSIM AND SUB-CONSCIOUS DOUBTERS

Apikorsim (heretics) are a rare species appearing in unexpected places, even within religious frameworks. Secular *apikorism* experience a process of apostasy that involves inquiring into the concept of divinity until the quest loses its potent validity. These are the secular Jews for whom the god in which they don't believe has no essence. Alongside them are the "Brennerites" — devotees of Yosef Hayyim Brenner — who deny God with such passion that one can almost "taste" Him.

Subconsciously secular Jews are more common. They declare openly that Judaism does not interest them; religion is viewed as mere superstition. Graced from birth with a deafness to religiosity, they are repulsed on esthetic grounds by religious practices. They are ambivalent toward tradition: while complaining and criticizing, and always pretending to be coerced, they become "consumers of Judaism". They continue to circumcize their sons, are married by the rabbinate, celebrate the Pesah seder for the benefit of their parents or children, hold traditional bar-mitzvah ceremonies, etc. They want it both ways.

How can we account for this inconsistency? Perhaps it is because they are basically bourgeois, behaving according to "acceptable" social norms, motivated by fear of standing out among their friends. What would the neighbors say if they didn't make a bar-mitzvah for their son? How would they convincingly explain to their parents that a rabbi was not marrying them? Maybe they are coerced — but it is not the religious who coerce them; their own bourgeois secular milieu, compels them to follow tradition.

Minimal exposure to religion and maximal ignorance of Jewish philosophy, history and culture cause many among this group to suffer from "immunity failure" in the field of religion. They lack an ability to participate in intelligent debate on the subject, and become easy prey for recruiters to the *ba'al teshuvah* movement and to vendors of "spirituality."

SEPHARDIM AND JEWS FROM THE LEVANT

There are many reasons for blurring the distinction between secular Sephardi and Levant Jews; they are not the same. In our context, it should be noted merely that despite its pronouncements, Shas is not really a Sephardi movement, and that being Sephardi does not necessarily lead one to Shas.

Sephardim and Levant Jews are markedly different in the historical memory each of them carries. As a broad generalization, the latter encountered secularization as a trauma along with the crises of immigration, discrimination, disintegration of social structures, and breakdown of parental authority. The memory of this shock lives on in their lives and determines their perception of Jewish identity. Film images such as the defeated father in "The Sheep" or the blind father in "Sh'chor" illustrate the love and pain of the younger generation of *mizrachim* as they stand before God.

Sephardim distanced themselves from a life of halakhic unity at least one generation earlier; they are still undergoing a process of secularization but without trauma or even rage. It didn't involve alienation from the synagogue, or from God, and was not accompanied by a grappling with Jewish identity. Zionism, and national patriotic Israeli identities caught on relatively easily and harmoniously in place of halakhah, and an easy-going Jewish identity was always a source of pride. "Mazal tov, she's lovely, but weren't there any Jewish girls? You had to marry an Ashkenazi!" Thus, commented the Bulgarian neighbors when my father married my mother who was of German origin.

What we find among Sephardim is not only a cultural fracture but also an inner struggle like that of Brenner, Berdichevsky and Feuerberg. However, there is no rejection or revolt against the past, no great rebellion against their parents and what they represent. Maybe that is one of the reasons why the God in which Sephardim do (or do not) believe is more conciliatory and lenient than the Deity of the Ashkenazim and Levant Jews. They may pay a price in terms of consistency and depth but I still feel close to the Bulgarian rabbi who explained why he travels on Shabbat: there are no horses harnessed to a car, and a car, unlike horses, doesn't need a day of rest.

I am also reminded of Gil Hovav's grandmother, described in his book, *Family Kitchen*. "I cannot give matzah to birds," she says after carefully cleaning the house for Pesach. "If a bird that doesn't eat matzah appears, what shall I say to him? Sorry, sir, but it's Pesach right now. Birds are used to eating bread so that's what they'll get from me. Anyway, why should I make the poor bird suffer? Maybe he's a Muslim!" This is definitely not the outlook of the party Shas which, for whatever reasons, attempts to combine under one banner the son of an Iraqi communist, the daughter of an aristocratic Italian

Jerusalemite, and the grandson of a Casablanca trader who lost his world in the transit camp.

It is in this easy-going Sephardi Jewish identity that does not sanctify consistency and is never fanatical — an identity based on rebellion — which gives me great hope for a secular Hebrew culture. □