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The Future Role of Religion in Israel

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Israel as a Jewish State

It is widely accepted that Israel should be a Jewish state beyond mere demographic criteria. That is to say, it must be more than a state of Jews. In order to be a Jewish state, it must be built upon Jewish principles, including what are commonly considered to be Jewish religious principles. On the other hand, to pose this as a matter of religion and state is to adopt a terminology which is in itself problematic in Jewish tradition and to phrase the issue of the relationship somewhat falsely by putting it in Western Christian terms, whereby religion is the province of churches and clerics, and where any close relationship between religion and state would have to provide for some kind of formal recognition of the role of the church or its clerical leadership in the polity. Let us then try to approach the question from an indigenously Jewish perspective which, while it does not solve all the problems inherent in the issue by any means, offers us an alternate way to conceptualize the matter and which may help us to better confront it in reality.

The Three *Ketarim*

The classic Jewish polity is organized around three domains of authoritative expression referred to in the tradition as the three *ketarim* (crowns), namely Torah, Malkhut (civil rule) and Kehunah (priesthood). Traditionally each of these *ketarim* derives its authority directly from some combination of Divine and popular sanction. Even the Keter Torah, whose primary responsibility is to communicate the Divine will to the Jewish people, nevertheless can only function when its bearers are recognized as authoritative by the people. Indeed, since the generation following the destruction of the Second Temple 1900 years ago, Jews do not even recognize voices from Heaven (Bat Kol) as *halakhically* authoritative.

The Keter Malkhut, whose primary responsibility is to provide civil government for the people, exists by virtue of Divine authorization, although the people are empowered to choose their leaders within the limitations imposed by the Torah as constitution. The Keter Kehunah is the Divinely authorized channel through which the people approach Heaven; in other words, the reverse of the Keter Torah. As a channel, it was originally organized by Divine commandment, but it is given meaning only through public action.

Over the generations, the bearers of each of the ketarim have changed. The Keter Torah was originally in the hands of Moses as Eved Adonai, in essence the Lord's prime minister. It then passed to the Nevi'im or prophets and later to the *hakhamim*, the sages of the Talmudic age, then to the *rabbanim*, rabbis. Today, it is in the hands of the *poskim*

(rabbinical decisors) and *dayanim* (judges) and, as a result of modernity, is shared by certain academics and intellectuals, de facto if not de jure.

The Keter Malkhut has always been at least partially in the hands of the *nesi'im* (magistrates) and *zekenim* (elders) or their equivalent (e.g., *parnasim*, *ne'emanim*, -- trustees) in different periods. It has also been shared at various times by the Eved Adonai (Moses and Joshua), the *shoftim* (judges -- from Othniel to Samuel), the *melekh* (king -- from Saul to the last Davidic monarch after the Babylonian exile), the *resh galuta* (exilarch), etc. It has always been managed through a more complex system of offices than either of the other *ketarim*.

The Keter Kehunah was initially in the hands of the *kohanim* (priests) and *levi'im* (levites), particularly the *kohen gadol*, and remains nominally in their hands to this day. Initially the *kohen gadol* was supplemented by *kohanim* scattered throughout the people. Then the entire priesthood and levitical service was concentrated in the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Second Temple, new institutions developed to provide expression for the Keter Kehunah such as the *hazan* in Talmudic Babylonia and, more recently, the congregational rabbi who, de facto if not de jure, has acquired a role that falls more within the Keter Kehunah than the Keter Torah, however much most rabbis would prefer it to be otherwise. That, too, is a result of modern transformations in the expression of that *keter*.

Israel as a Jewish polity already has manifestations of all three of these *ketarim*, carrying on the tasks of its governance. From a traditional point of view, its *poskim* and *dayanim* continue to be the bearers of the Keter Torah, indeed in Israel more faithful to the Talmudic tradition than perhaps in any other Jewish community because of the scope of their jurisdiction. (I exclude the small ultra-Orthodox fringe groups of the diaspora which tend to stand outside the comprehensive communities in their places of residence). The civil organs of the state -- the Nasi, the Knesset and the Memshallah (government) -- continue the tradition of the Keter Malkhut even if only a minority of them see any connection between their role and the traditional constitution of the Jewish people. This, indeed, is a problematic issue to which we shall return. The Keter Kehunah is carried on not only in Israeli synagogues (indeed perhaps least there) but in such institutions as the local religious councils which essentially provide ritual services for those Jews who care to make use of them (and, at least in respect to burial, virtually all Jews in Israel do). Thus, questions of religion, society and state in Israel should be considered within the context of this classic institutional framework and its contemporary Israeli expression.

The first conclusion that we can come to is that, while Israel as a state is formally democratic and secular, providing equal support to all religions and no special recognition to any, as a polity it is indeed a Jewish one even if ambiguously at times and ambivalent about its Jewishness in various crucial ways. It also means that the strengthening of the Jewish religious character of Israel as a polity need not, indeed should not, mean the strengthening of the power of rabbis -- that is to say, the power of the Keter Torah vis-a-vis the Keter Malkhut but rather, in making the institutions of the Keter Malkhut more consciously and deliberately Jewish and in raising the caliber of the

institutions of the Keter Kehunah to satisfy the moral and esthetic as well as the ritual aspirations of Israel's Jews.

In this respect, there has been some substantial progress since the establishment of the state. As we all know, in 1948 Israel was dominated by the Labor camp whose socialist Zionism ranged from a-religious to anti-religious. Labor's major relation to tradition was to try to revalue traditional symbols in such a way that they were emptied of their religious content and, relying on their historical dimensions, to give them a new ideological content in keeping with socialist Zionism. The famous discussion over whether or not to include a reference to the deity in Israel's declaration of independence, which led to the compromise usage of Tzur Yisrael (the Rock of Israel - a traditional euphemism for God but, on its face, innocuous wording) was the apotheosis of this situation.

By the end of the first generation of Israel's statehood, however, a very real change was manifest. It, too, had its symbolic moment in the aftermath of the Entebbe raid in 1976 when the Knesset convened in special session to honor the heroes of that raid and give thanks for the deliverance of the hostages. The late Israel Yeshayahu, then speaker of the Knesset, opened the session by ceremoniously placing a *kipa* upon his head and reading a Psalm.

The election of the Begin government in 1977, which marked the beginning of the second generation of Israel's statehood, accelerated this trend. Begin deliberately tried to introduce traditional Jewish religious expressions into the life of the state, albeit through a kind of civil religion rather than through traditional religion. But, then, in many respects the very character of Judaism is that of a civil religion, linking religious and political matters, which is what makes this new trend not an exploitation of religious symbols for political purposes (whatever the political advantage may accrue to the present government for doing so) but an honest expression of the true Jewishness of the Jewish state.

The "Average" Non-Dati and Jewish Religion

This brings us to the issue of the future relationship of the "average" non-dati Israeli to the values of Judaism to *mitzvot*, and to the authority of the Torah. Israelis break down into roughly three groups: *dati* (Orthodox religious), *masorati* (traditional), and *hiloni* (secular). The *dati* camp is divided into *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox) of various shades and *datiim leumiim* (religious Zionists). Altogether, they represent between a fifth and a quarter of the total population of Israel. The *hiloniim*, who represent another fifth to a quarter of Israeli Jews, also divided into two rough groups -- those who are truly secular, not only rejecting belief but all forms of Jewish practice, and those who, while defining themselves as non-believers form a traditional perspective, observe Jewish religious customs to a greater or lesser degree, in some cases to quite a substantial degree, indeed.

Today most Israelis, between 40 and 50 percent, define themselves as masortiim, which covers such a wide range of beliefs and practices that it is almost impossible of definition. Some *masortiim* observe ritual *mitzvot* which we associate with Orthodoxy except that they may use their automobiles on Shabbat. Others maintain relatively little in the way of ritual observance but see themselves as believers. Indeed, what is common to virtually all *masortiim* is a strong commitment to belief in God, whether in a rational or superstitious way, or some combination of both, along with a concern for accepted traditional practices of the seasonal Jewish calendar (especially Sabbath, holy days, and festivals) and the customs (rites of passage) of the Jewish life cycle.

Many of these *masortiim* are second generation Israelis in transition from *dati* backgrounds to *hiloni* practices, if not beliefs. Unless something is done to give them a firm grounding for a proper religious expression of their Jewishness, in another generation or two most of them will be, for all intents and purposes, in the *hiloni* camp. In this respect, they are like the second generation American Jews of a generation or two ago who formed the backbone of the Conservative movement, many of whose grandchildren today are either joining Reform temples or not affiliating at all.

Whether or not this happens depends upon who will enunciate the values of Judaism in Israel and who will embody the authority of the Torah. It seems that the overwhelming majority of the masortiim are Sephardic Jews, while religious values and authority in Israel are heavily in the hands of one segment of Ashkenazic Jewry, a segment which is poles apart from the Sephardim and the Sephardic attitude toward religious matters. Moreover, the strength of the Ashkenazic religious establishment is such that those Sephardim who become *dati* are more likely to become Ashkenazified in their religious expression (because they are forced to do so) than to introduce the reasonableness and the openness of the Sephardic approach. This is not the place to discuss why this is so. In this writer's opinion, it is a tragedy of major proportions for the Jewish people and Judaism.

Put simply, to the extent that Jewish religious values and authority are considered to be the province of the Ashkenazi religious leadership, they are perceived to be closed, unbending, and looking for ways to make Judaism a matter of following ritual humrot (more serious restrictions), rather than addressing the larger questions of life in a Jewish state from the perspective of all three ketarim. While this is not necessarily an altogether true picture, it is the prevailing one and true enough. As such, it is alienating except for those relatively few who are attracted by the kind of Orthodox fundamentalism implied in such an approach.

As a result, the average Jew in Israel is quite ambivalent toward the religious dimensions of his tradition. On one hand, he respects those dimensions, sees them as reflecting his basic beliefs, and wishes to identify with them through some measure of practice. On the other hand, he finds so many of those who give them expression as being the people furthest removed from his values in almost every other sphere, whether in terms of the responsibilities of citizens within a democratic state, in respect for the political institutions of that state, or in their ability to address the serious problems of a contemporary Jewish society. The exceptions to this are to be found among the national

religious youth who are indeed highly respected in Israel. But at this particular moment in any case, they do not represent the cutting edge of those who seem to dominate the expression of Torah values and authority.

From another perspective, it can be said that there is still a strong majority of Israelis who would like to have a positive relationship to the Torah and *mitzvot* but have not found a way to do so other than through a watered-down version of older traditional responses. They have neither leaders to show them the way nor models to follow. It also must be said that they are not working very hard to search for either. Consequently, the future of Judaism in Israel could go either way. There is every chance that the processes of secularization will continue unabated so that in several generations the vast majority of Israelis will indeed be Jews by virtue of their birth within a certain ethnic community only. On the other hand, if appropriate leadership should emerge, there certainly is a fertile field for reversing that trend.

The Israeli Rabbinate

At the very least, Israel must produce an Orthodox rabbinate that is equipped to cope with the contemporary world, that is to say, rabbis who have a proper general as well as Jewish education and who know how to speak to the Israeli public. Today, it is fair to say that there are no Orthodox rabbis being trained in Israel who meet this standard. The Sephardic community has tried on several occasions to establish yeshivot which move in that direction but have been stymied by the adamant opposition of the *haredim* who have convinced even the Sephardic chief rabbis to stand aside from, if not actively oppose, such efforts. This only compounds the tragedy of the denigration of the Sephardic approach to religion, since that approach was indigenous to traditional Sephardic rabbinical education and has been lost only as a result of Ashkenazification. Consequently, it is fair to say that the Israeli rabbinate today is as close to utterly unequipped to deal with the problems described above as it could possibly be. The American Orthodox experience may be of some help in changing that situation.

Education for Judaism

As far as education is concerned, the Israeli *mamlakhti dati* (state religious) schools are losing students because they are closed to the *masortiim* for all intents and purposes, requiring them to lie about their observance if they are to send their children. As it happens, many *masortiim* want their children to go to the *mamlakhti dati* schools but the segregationist aspects of the *dati* camp, which demand *dati* observance on the part of families before their children are brought in, has assured that non-*dati* children will be sent to the regular *mamlakhti* schools, which only accelerates the processes of their secularization. It is hard to see the wisdom in this, although it does make for the development of a more doctrinally pure *dati* camp. If the goal of the *dati* community is to

maintain a small *shearith ha-pleta* (remnant), there is something to be said for that. If its goal is to maintain Israel as a Jewish state then it is failing in its responsibility.

Partly as a result of this, there has begun to emerge a *mamlakhti-masorati* (state traditional) school system branching off the regular *mamlakhti* schools. Originally opposed by the *dati* camp, when Zevulun Hammer became education minister it was encouraged by him and has been by Yitzhak Navon, his successor. Hammer recognized that, given the aforementioned *dati* attitude, the *mamlakhti masorati* schools do not compete for students with the *mamlakhti dati* schools but with the fully secularized *mamlakhti* system.

At present, there are still only a handful of masorati schools in Israel. In each case, the organizers have been Conservative Jews from the United States who have settled in Israel. Whether or not there will be a real Conservative movement in Israel depends upon the degree of success of these schools, something which the Conservative movement itself does not perceive. If it did, it would be putting far greater resources into stimulating such schools than it presently is.

Non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel

In Israel today there is essentially no discrimination against Reform and Conservative organization for purposes of worship or anything else. There is only discrimination against Conservative and Reform rabbis, who are not recognized as rabbis. However, since both movements have a strong clerical dimension, with the Conservative movement perhaps the most clerical movement in all of Jewish history (in the sense of entrusting virtually all leadership responsibilities to rabbis), their attention has been turned to securing recognition for their rabbis rather than being given to the training of a generation of Conservative *baalei-batim* (householders, usually referred to as lay people in the West).

In Israel, where the daily expressions of religion are in the hands of *baalei-batim* and the rabbinate does not play a clerical role in the Western sense, this is, for them, a great mistake. Recently the Conservative movement established a rabbinical school in Israel, something which the Reform movement has already done. Both have failed to recognize that it is schools for the public which make movements where there is a Jewishly educated community and not rabbis on the American model to lead congregations.

If the non-Orthodox movements foster schools, they will find a presence for themselves in Israel through the products of those schools who, incidentally, will in all likelihood have strong commitments to the values of Judaism, observance of *mitzvot*, and Torah as a source of authority. If they do not, they will not, nor should they. The last thing that Israel needs is the replication of the clericalism of the diaspora. However necessary it may be there, where so many Jews are Jewishly illiterate even if they have strongly positive feelings toward Judaism, certainly it is not in place in Israel, where a Jew must make an effort to be Jewishly ignorant (even though so many are).

The Existence of Religious Parties

If the questions of Torah authority, *hinukh*, and the rabbinate are questions of Keter Torah, then the question of the religious parties is a matter of the Keter Malkhut. The religious parties in Israel are living evidence of the existence of Keter Malkhut as a separate phenomenon, each in its own way. Both the Mafdal (National Religious Party) and Agudath Israel were formed to introduce a religious influence within the Keter Malkhut. Tami, Morasha and Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians), which splintered off from them, reflect the same interest.

The NRP, as a Zionist party, embraced the fundamental principle of that Keter, namely that it was to be independent of the Keter Torah, and was established as an anti-clerical party from the first. While in recent years certain members of the NRP have violated that anti-clerical posture, by and large the party has held to it, choosing as its leaders *dati* politicians rather than rabbis, however important and authoritative the latter might be in matters of the Keter Torah. This, indeed, is a bedrock issue for them. Tami has pursued the same course as, for the most part, has Morasha.

Agudath Israel, on the other hand, is based on the principle that the relationship between the *ketarim* places the Keter Torah in a dominant position as expressed through its Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah (Council of Torah Greats). But even it had to form itself as a political party in open recognition of the existence of a separate realm of the Keter Malkhut, a realm in which it needed to express itself in order to secure its political aims. Shas, which broke off from Agudath Israel, has followed the same pattern, establishing its Moetzet Hakhmei HaTorah (Council of Torah Sages).

The foregoing empirical explanation for the existence of the religious parties should answer the question as to whether or not they will continue to exist in the affirmative, and may even answer the question as to whether or not that is a good thing. Given the understanding of the Jewish polity presented here, it is a well nigh inevitable thing. In a Jewish state, the religious interests cannot abandon a whole *keter* and its entire arena, especially not the Keter Malkhut which, by virtue of statehood, became far more important than it ever was or could be in the diaspora.

Statehood is, in many respects, Judaism's ultimate test. The purpose of the establishment of the Jewish people, according to the Torah, was to single out one people to establish the holy commonwealth, which would be a model for all the peoples of the world, so as to hasten the redemption. Thus the Torah is oriented toward polity-building, first and foremost, and the observance of the *mitzvot* cannot be complete except in a Jewish state. In such a state, the Keter Malkhut will inevitably be strong. Our tradition tells us that, sometimes in exaggerated ways in relation to the Davidic line. Hence only those who have a truncated, highly spiritualized view of Judaism would reject an active religious presence in the political arena. It is difficult to see how that presence could be manifested in Israel's political system other than through religious parties. Needless to say, this explanation for religious parties presented on the highest plane is made even more real by

the very practical reasons of securing legislative and financial support for religious institutions, needs, and expectations on a day-to-day basis.

This does not mean that the future of the present religious parties is assured. The future of Agudath Israel, which seemed secure until 1984, has been clouded by the breaking away of its Sephardic members to Shas, which took two seats from the Agudah and added two others. Still, there is no reason to believe the party will abandon the political arena, given their successes within it since 1977. If the Mafdal appears to be in greater jeopardy, it is partly because of the perhaps temporary emergence of other issues which have siphoned off some of its voters, plus the mistakes of its own leadership. Still, it would be quite premature to assume that it will disintegrate unless the number of religious Jews drops so precipitously that the state is left to turn secular with a vengeance. The parties that have splintered off from it may, indeed, find it advantageous to return to the NRP fold.

What About Religious Legislation?

One of the attributes of statehood is the restoration of the political arena as a major decision-making forum for matters of religious concern in the public domain. Under such circumstances, as Charles Liebman has pointed out, it is inevitable that vital questions such as those surrounding religious standards will become political questions. The fact that they have is another sign that, with all its ambiguities and ambivalences. Israel is a Jewish state even in a traditional sense.

On the other hand, to say that is not to suggest that every situation which in the abstract calls for religious legislation should lead to such legislation. Before a decision is made, there are many considerations which come into play. First and foremost is the issue of consequences. For example, on the latest round of the "Who is a Jew?" issue, in the narrow sense the legislation is almost unexceptionable. But in the larger sense of the preservation of the unity of the Jewish people in a situation in which the legislation will not do anything to change matters for the better and will only precipitate Jewish disunity, one would hardly consider it to be wise. Prudence is also a Jewish value, one that the Jewish people have not always practiced. Invariably, when it has not, disaster has ensued.

Today, the struggle over religious legislation has been exacerbated because of a major shift that is taking place in the Israeli body politic. Until recently, virtually all Israelis, no matter what their particular stance with regard to religious belief and practice, had grown up in traditional environments. Hence they had a certain understanding of and respect for tradition even if they no longer observed or even were militantly opposed to traditional Judaism. Even many militant secularists could appreciate the quiet of an Israeli Shabbat.

Today, paradoxically, at a time when militant secularism has greatly declined, a new generation has grwon up which, while it is more likely to acknowledge a belief in God and the appropriateness of some religious practices, has little or no personal experience with traditional Judaism. It is a generation that fits into the contemporary world of consumerism in which convenience is a most important value. They are the ones who

want cinemas and places of entertainment to be open Friday night and Saturday and who would like to be able to do their shopping on their free day. For them, these are matters of individual choice and they resent interference with their convenience. Thus the consensus around certain publicly enforced standards of observance is rapidly breaking down.

Not surprisingly, those in favor of maintaining such standards and who feel that the face of the society as a whole would be changed for the worst if matters are merely left to individual choice, now seek to reinforce the maintenance of those standards through appropriate legislation, which is opposed by the other side. This situation is analogous to what occurred in the United States in the early 20th century. During the 19th century, people of all levels of religious belief and practice accepted the Protestant norms in society with regard to such matters as Sunday observance, temperance, the content of the school curriculum, and the like. When that consensus broke down early in the 20th century, Protestant fundamentalists sought to restore it through legislation. Even when they succeeded in getting such legislation enacted, as in the case of Prohibition or laws prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the schools, their victories were temporary because the majority of the population and the temper of the times was opposed to them. The end result was to dismantle even the tradition of Sunday closing for the convenience of the new consumers.

That is likely to be the fate of legislation which reflects the imposition of the will of the minority on the majority in Israel as well. Hence those in favor of that legislation should think twice before pressing for it. At the present time the majority is not opposed to the maintenance of public observance in the institutions of the state. They want freedom of choice in other areas. But if a *kulturkampf* is launched on the part of those seeking to maintain the status quo, it is likely that the majority will turn upon them even in those areas that still remain within the consensus.

Religion and Public Issues

What has been missing in Israel is a response on the part of the religious community to the current issues of Israel's foreign security and social agendas, out of their religious understanding. Not that religious groups have not expressed their opinions on these subjects, but their opinions have for the most part been drawn from their political ideologies rather than from the religious tradition, except for extremists who do not separate the two.

It is imperative that the religious community respond to current issues of Israel's foreign, security, and social agendas out of their religious understanding. Fortunately, the nature of serious Jewish thought on such subjects tends to be based on accumulated practical wisdom and not simply on the enunciation of ideal aspirations detached from reality. So, for example, simple-minded peace rhetoric on one side or racist rhetoric on the other in the name of religion should be avoided, even though there will be those who obviously emphasize the religious value of peace or of Jewish self-maintenance above certain other religious values more than others would.

Experience has taught us that there will be no single religious voice on any issue. But the existence of religious voices is what makes religion meaningful in our times. That is not to say that there is no danger in escalating public conflict over policy decisions in the name of religion. Of course there is, since there is a certain apoditic character attached to all positions presented as religiously justified or, in some cases, mandated. That, indeed, can escalate tensions in any society and exacerbate cleavages. Nevertheless, the alternative, namely silence on the part of those who claim to be religious with regard to the pressing issues of our time, is even worse.

What it does mean, of course, is that a much greater share of religious resources must be devoted to exploring policy issues from a religious dimension. This means, for example, religious support for policy studies institutes and think tanks whose members look seriously at the policy questions of the day in light of the Jewish political tradition, which in itself requires far more serious exploration than it has been given to date.

The Mutual Influence of Israel and Diaspora on Jewish Religious Life

In this respect, the Israeli religious community also has much to contribute to the diaspora, particularly by reminding diaspora Jewry that the true expression of Judaism requires even religious Jews to confront the entire range of human concerns and not be content to maintain themselves on the basis of others, whether non-religious or non-Jewish, doing society's dirty work. This is a crucially important contribution, one that is often overlooked even on the part of religious diaspora Jews who visit Israel but, like other Jews, still see Israel as a summer camp and not as a polity grappling with the full range of human problems and then some.

Beyond that, there is no question that Israel is the principal center of Jewish scholarship and Jewish studies in all its forms and, hence, has so much to contribute to diaspora life. With all the very welcome spread of Jewish studies on diaspora, particularly American campuses, there are few Jewish studies programs that reach a critical mass of scholars capable of matching an ordinary Israeli university and none able to provide the range and depth of coverage of Jewish civilization provided in any institution of higher education in Israel. That is natural enough, since it would be as if American studies were covered with the same depth in some non-American university as they are at any university in the United States where American civilization is dominant. That is one thing in Israel that has little if anything to do with religion per se. Jewish studies abounds because Israel is a Jewish civilization.

In the last analysis Israel and the diaspora need each other in the religious sphere as much as in any other. Indeed, the problem is often whether or not the diaspora is capable of absorbing what Israel produces in those spheres.

Conversely, when it comes to Jewish thought -- especially Jewish thought with regard to living intellectually in the contemporary world -- the diaspora religious leadership is far

ahead of most of their Israeli counterparts. They have something serious to contribute to Israel and should do so. All forums which can be developed to encourage such exchanges are to be welcomed.