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JEWISH RELIGION AND POLITICS IN ISRAEL

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As 5741 begins, issues of religion and politics are once again in the news in Israel. In what is fast becoming a tradition, the official rabbinate of Jerusalem placed its annual advertisement in the local newspapers proclaiming that "worship" (sic) in Conservative synagogues will not absolve Jews of their religious obligations, an action that is sure to raise a storm among non-Orthodox Jews in Israel and the diaspora. The Ministry of Religions and its Minister, Aharon Abuhatzeira, is under police investigation for alleged irregularities in the transfer of state subsidies to various yeshivot (talmudical academies). Despite these headline grabbing events, relations between religious and non-religious in Israel are probably better than ever. There is widespread understanding of the differences between the perhaps 20,000 fanatically Orthodox, who are the source of most of the conflicts between the two elements, and the great bulk of the religious fourth of the population which numbers in the vicinity of three-quarters of a million people. Non-orthodox religious movements, while still small, have expanded many-fold in recent years. There are now tens of M'sorati (Conservative) and Yahadut Mitkademet (Reform or Progessive) congregations in the country and the M'sorati state school has expanded from 30 to over 300 students in a few years.

Formally, Israel is a secular democratic state, more so than any other state in the Middle East except Turkey. Israel has no established religion, has no provisions in its laws requiring a particular religious affiliation, belief, or commitment -- Jewish or other -- as a requirement for holding office, a requirement which is quite common in other Middle Eastern constitutions, most of which provide that only Muslims can hold certain offices. On the other hand, the place of religion in Israeli society very much follows the pattern of the Middle East, which means there is a close interconnection between religious communities and

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the state, where religions are held to have a claim upon the resources of the state to support their legitimate activities. Any religious community can apply for and receive official recognition in Israel and receive state support. Israel's Ministry of Religions is the ministry of Religions and not of one religion only. That is to say, it is a ministry which serves Jews, Muslims, Druze, various Christian denominations, and others.

Informally, Israel's society and policy are permeated with Judaism and Jewishness, just as the other countries in the Middle East are permeated by Islam and Islamic sectarianism in one form or another. People from outside the region may not see or understand this characteristic element of the region and even people living within it may not perceive just how much Israel's character as a "Jewish state" is closely parallel to similar phenomena in its neighbors.

Increasingly, Jewish religion has become an important element in Israel's civic culture. The transition in this direction in the past thirty years is very noticeable indeed. When Israel's Declaration of Independence was issued in 1948 -- a document which addresses itself to the secular democratic character as well as to the Jewish character of the state -- a strong secularist block opposed any mention of the Diety. The compromise was to use a traditional phrase, 'Rock of Israel,' which in traditional circles is used as a synonym for God, but which could also be interpreted by atheists or agnostics in some other way. Contrast that with the scene which took place after the Entebbe raid in 1976, when the Knesset in special commemorative session was opened by the late Yisrael Yeshayahu, then its Speaker, taking out a skullcap from his pocket, ceremoniously placed it upon his head and reading from the Psalms.

Relations between religion and politics in Israel can be divided into five categories. First, there is what might be termed the politics of establishment religion, the religion of the religious establishment that controls those organs that are linked to the state. These include the chief rabbinate, the local religious councils, the rabbinical courts, and the state religious educational system. For the most part this is the religion represented by the National Religious Party, which has been a coalition partner in every lasting government since the state was established, and even before. In that role, it has exercised a predominant, though by no means exclusive, influence over the public expression of religion in Israel.

Then there is the popular religion of the broad public, a combination of residual folk traditions, of commonly accepted Jewish practices, and elements of emerging civil religion (of which more below). Even though only a quarter of Israelis define themselves as "religious" (which in the Israeli context means Orthodox), probably the largest single body of Israelis -- the estimates are around 40 to 50 percent -- define themselves as "traditional." For the Israelis, "traditional" is an umbrella term which includes people who are highly observant by any standards to those who simply maintain certain home customs to those who observe virtually nothing but consider themselves

believers. Even among the 25 percent who define themselves as secular, many retain a very substantial element of folk religion in their own lives -- certain sabbath observances in the home, avoidance of overt mixing of meat and milk, and the like -- though they will define themselves as secular because, for them, these represent a comfortable kind of "Jewishness" rather than manifestations of religious belief. Popular religion is well rooted in Israel, in almost every quarter. It is undergoing radical change right now, because of the transformation of most of the 55 percent or so of Israelis who come from Afro-Asian backgrounds, who are in the midst of a process of detraditionalization, to a greater degree than the Jews who came from European background, most of whom started that process a generation or two earlier.

The third element is civil religion, which is in the process of rapid development in Israel today. In a sense, civil religion represents the point of intersection between establishment and popular religion. The transformation mentioned above from the use of the term 'Rock of Israel' to the reading of the Psalms in a neo-traditional manner in the Knesset, reflects the emergence of a civil religion in Israel that is grounded in traditional Judaism but which is not traditional Judaism. Elsewhere I have suggested that it reflects the re-emergence in new ways of Sadducean Judaism, the civil religion which existed in Israel prior to the destruction of the Second Commonwealth and the great Jewish dispersion. In this respect it is different from the Talmudic or Pharisaic Judaism embodied by Israel's establishment religion and which has been the dominant mode of Jewish religious expression for at least 1600 years. It is, in essence, a new Sadduceanism based on the centrality of Jewish public life in the expression of Judaism. The evolving civil religion in Israel seeks to sacralize expressions of Jewish moralistic nationalism connected with the state and to infuse into those expressions traditional religious forms.

There was always a degree of this, even when the most secularist halutzim took Jewish festivals and reinterpreted them along lines that gave expression to the values of the Zionist revival. One could see the beginnings of the present civil religion in those efforts. But things have moved the other way in recent years in the sense that now celebrations that might once have been entirely secular or could have been developed in strictly secular ways are being infused with Jewish religious symbolism and behavior.

For example, Israeli Independence Day has increasingly taken on the elements of a religious holiday. It is expected that the President of the State and Prime Minister will go to evening and morning religious services on that day. Those services, parts of the regular daily prayer cycle, now include recitation of traditional prayers of praise and thanksgiving for Israel's independence. In addition, the religious establishment is trying to develop some kind of appropriate recognition of Israel Independence Day as a holiday which can be institutionalized in the Jewish calendar. Jerusalem Day, the anniversary of the liberation of the old city according to the Jewish calendar, is also acquiring the characteristics of a quasi-religious holiday.

Fourth, there is extremist religion, so-called because it is even more extreme in its expression of classical Talmudic Judaism than establishment religion. These are the people who make the headlines by throwing stones at autos that travel through or near their neighborhoods on the Sabbath, who protest the immodesty of women dressed in modern fashion, and the like. As small as they are in numbers, consisting of at most a few tens of thousands by the broadest definition, they are really a state within a state, and it is accepted that they will be. They maintain their own schools, institutions, rabbinical courts, and the like. There are points of intersection between them and the larger polity, but generally the policy is to try to leave them alone, to give them the same state support as every other group, but in order to get them to leave the state alone.

This is an uneasy relationship that usually leads to sporadic conflict when the intersection between the two groups occurs around certain critical issues, but this should not obscure the degree of routine cooperation that exists between them at other times.

Finally, there is an emergent non-establishment Judaism in the form of the M'sorati (Conservative) and Yahadut Mitkademet (Reform) movements which, taken together, are approaching 50 congregations in strength. With M'sorati congregations now being formed in all parts of the country and the first Reform rabbi recently ordained in Israel, it is reasonable to conclude that these non-establishment movements are in the country to stay. While they remain formally unrecognized, there are increasingly contacts between them and the authorities in the course of their daily activities and, in some respects, they have gained a certain tacit recognition. For example, the Ministry of Education has supported the establishment of a M'sorati school within the framework of the state educational system, various congregations have obtained land for buildings from the municipal authorities, and occasionally non-Orthodox rabbis have been authorized to perform marriages.

What are we to conclude from all this? It is vitally important to understand that the government of Israel does not control or seek to control the religious establishment in the state. Rather, the various religious communities and groups utilize state instrumentalities to further their own ends.

What of the future? The shift toward greater concern for Jewish tradition on the part of pace-setting elements of Israeli society is a reflection of at least two factors: the perennial search for meaning which is characteristic of Jews, including Israeli Jews, and the concern for the Jewish future of Israel. These factors are mutually reinforcing and both are appropriate in a world where religious concern is on the rise. One unexpected response to this may be developing with regard to establishment religion in Israel. Until recently, the National Religious Party was only concerned with maintaining its position as a balance wheel in coalition politics, so that it could protect the religious camp within Israel's consociational framework. It had

no aspirations to seek power beyond that. With the failure of the Labour Party to keep its monopoly as government coalition leader and the subsequent failure of the Likud in the last several years, there has been a new development within the NRP, in which the younger guard sees its party as having a role to play beyond simply being the balance wheel. Traditionally, the NRP followed the lead of its dominant coalition partner in economics, foreign affairs and defense policies. In the last two years, there has been a move on the part of the young guard toward taking the party into policy initiatives in spheres in which it was never active before, not only toward defining NRP policies on their own, but in leading the coalition as well. This is in response to the failure of the Likud to define policies clearly, or of Labour to define alternative policies.

There is a growing sentiment today within the NRP to open up the party and to move it in the direction of the European Christian Democratic parties -- in other words, to make it a broader based party that can compete for control of the government as the major party in a coalition. This sentiment is still very tentative. It will probably run into very great problems because of at least two factors: the character of establishment religion in Israel and the character of the NRP as its principal spokesman. It is a development that has not yet attracted any public attention, but it is likely to affect the shaping of the NRP internally, certainly over the next few years. The Abuhatzeira investigation casts an unexpected shadow over these plans. If it does not lead to a major scandal, this movement may even influence the direction of the state for the coming generation.

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