

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 348 5 Tevet 5757 / 15 December 1996

HAREDI-SECULAR CONFLICT IN JERUSALEM

Yosef Goell

**A 40-Year War / Factors Affecting the *Haredi* Community / Growing Secular Anxiety
/ The Zameret Committee / Jerusalem Demographic Trends / Prospects for the Future**

A 40-Year War

In 1957 there was a major war in Jerusalem around what was called *breichat hato'eva* — the "pool of abominations." Although this may sound like a line from Kings II in the Bible, it actually concerned *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) opposition to mixed-sex bathing in the first public swimming pool in Jerusalem. Although difficult to imagine today, there were major clashes over this issue which involved large numbers of *haredi* demonstrators and police. Thus, the latest riots surrounding the proposed Shabbat closure of Bar-Ilan Street are actually the continuation of a 40-year war, with many ups and downs.

In this conflict, things may well get worse, and possibly even much worse, before they get better. The potential for things getting better in the *haredi*-secular confrontations is based on past experience, that when the opposing sides do evince a mutual and simultaneous interest in cooling things down, they do so. At the present time, they clearly do not.

The recent clashes on Bar-Ilan Street are part of a relatively long history of confrontation between

the *haredi* communities — they are not just one community — and everyone else, including, to different degrees, secularists, traditionalists, and the national religious. The dividing line over many questions in Jerusalem is not religious-secular from the point of view of who goes to synagogue on Shabbat and who does not. The difference is rather between the all-encompassing total lifestyles of the *haredim*, on the one hand, and that of nearly all the other sectors of the population, on the other.

The ultra-Orthodox discussed here are nearly entirely represented politically in the Ashkenazi Agudat Yisrael and Degel Hatorah parties. The generalizations made here are not applicable in most cases to the Sephardi Shas party, although they are applicable to part of the Shas rabbinical and political leadership. But Shas is not primarily a membership group and the people who vote for Shas are a very mixed religious and primarily ethnic group.

Throughout the years there have been major demonstrations over *haredi* demands. Some of these demands were met, as in the decision to close Shabbat Square (between Geula and Mea She'arim)

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-5619281, Fax. 02-5619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 507, Philadelphia, PA 19103; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

and the adjoining streets on the Sabbath. However, in other areas, the *haredim* lost their battle. For instance, there were violent demonstrations over Shabbat traffic on the road to the new community of Ramot over a decade and a half ago because the road skirts *haredi* neighborhoods in the north of the city. In addition, when Road No. 1, the former Nablus Road, that Mayor Teddy Kollek had pushed through as the major highway in the eastern part of the city, was completed and opened to traffic, there were major demonstrations on three Shabbatot by thousands of *haredim* demanding that this major highway be closed to Shabbat traffic. In both of these confrontations, the *haredim* lost.

In addition to violent confrontations on this issue, after the Six-Day War there were many altercations in connection with archeological digs in the Old City of Jerusalem, especially when it involved ancient Jewish graves which the *haredim* insist should not be disturbed.

There was also conflict over the fate of the Shuafat ridge abutting the Arab neighborhood of Shuafat in the northeastern corner of Jerusalem, where Mayor Kollek had wanted to build a major sports stadium. The fight was over land allocation because the *haredim* wanted that hilltop for their own housing. At the time, *Hamodia*, the Agudat Yisrael newspaper, ran its lead headline: "Hellenism Versus Judaism." A sports stadium and the whole idea of sports is considered a Greek-Hellenistic and thus a non-Jewish idea, and therefore an abomination. As a result of that conflict, the stadium was built in the southern part of the city instead, and Shuafat ridge became the recently populated gigantic *haredi* housing development Ramat Shofet.

Factors Affecting the *Haredi* Community

From the point of view of comparative urban politics, this is obviously a fight over turf. Different communities with diverse lifestyles consider different neighborhoods to be theirs, and they want to be in control of these neighborhoods. Considering the fact that Israel is a very rapidly growing country with a rapidly growing population, it is important for such groups to be in control of reserve areas for their further expansion.

The conflict is also over control of the public domain, particularly the symbols of the public domain, and this part of the conflict has often been the most dramatic. Whether there will or will not be transportation on Shabbat or restaurants open on Shabbat in various non-*haredi* neighborhoods of Jerusalem is not a matter of *haredi* turf, but rather a matter of the general conflict in the country over the nature of that

public domain, or *phrahesia* as the ancient Aramaic-Greek has it.

The latest upsurge around the closure of Bar-Ilan Street is related to very high *haredi* expectations as a result of two electoral victories — one in the municipal elections three years ago in which Labor and the Left were roundly defeated. Ehud Olmert of the Likud was elected mayor thanks to massive *haredi* electoral support and a municipal council was elected with a very large religious and especially *haredi* representation. This was a harbinger of what was to happen in the national elections last May when the narrow electoral victory of Binyamin Netanyahu was made possible by a similar massive *haredi* turnout in his support.

Twenty-five years ago the majority of the population in Jerusalem was not *haredi*. Before the Six-Day War, the narrow lane that was Bar-Ilan Street was on the border next to no-man's land in a divided Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was and continues to be one of the poorest communities in the country in terms of per capita income and other economic indicators. This is mostly due to the large concentration of *haredim* in the city, most of whom are poor.

Poverty among the *haredim* is a very important factor in the conflict. The average family size is 8 children, compared to 2.8 for secular Israeli families. Eight children per family is a great financial burden, especially when the ideal is that the men continue their Torah learning as long as possible rather than working. This creates a constant state of pressure among a population that realizes that if it wanted to, it could do better. This is a population which, in its own way, is highly educated, highly motivated, and many of whose people are very capable. The poverty and overcrowding create tremendous frustration and pressures within the community.

Money in Israel is concentrated around the area of Greater Tel Aviv. Yet next door to Tel Aviv is *haredi* Bnei Brak, the poorest part of that area whose municipality has gone bankrupt. There are those who claim that *haredim* are not interested in controlling municipalities and their government, but merely in exploiting them as much as possible for their own interests. Being in control means being in charge of imposing and collecting taxes and also of providing "secular" services, which is problematic for the *haredim*.

The recent *haredi* outbursts stem from expectations that are not being fulfilled rapidly enough. In some areas *haredi* communities have been rewarded for their voting, but there are significant parts of the coalition agreements, both in the municipality and in the national

government, that simply have not been carried out. So there is a lot of frustration among the *haredim* who expected much more and much more quickly.

There also appears to be a breakdown of internal control in the different *haredi* communities. The political and rabbinical leaders do not always have as much control over what their people do, as they did in the past. This was clear in the recent national elections when quite a number of *haredi* rabbis were very careful not to openly take sides between Netanyahu and Peres because no one knew who was going to win. Just as clearly, many of their followers flouted the rabbis' will and actively campaigned for Netanyahu. In the case of the violence on Bar-Ilan Street, it seems equally clear that many of the rabbinical leaders have lost control of the situation.

Growing Secular Anxiety

There is also growing anxiety on the secular side. Even though the status quo on religious issues has changed in the direction of greater liberality for the secular population in Jerusalem (movie theaters and pubs are open on Friday nights), nevertheless, secular Jerusalemites hold the subjective perception that their lifestyle is being threatened.

Another related factor is that there has been a decline in emotional identification with the city among the secular population of Jerusalem and of Israel in general over the last twenty years. Before the Six-Day War and in its immediate aftermath, both religious and secular Jews were very identified with Jerusalem, not only as a place to live, but as a symbol of Israeli sovereignty. For many secular Israelis, the Western Wall used to be a meaningful symbol in patriotic Zionist terms, but for many that is no longer true today. Some may even be considering leaving Jerusalem because of the conflict with the *haredim*, but most reports of such intentions seem to be highly exaggerated.

The Zameret Committee

The whole issue of whether or not to close down Bar-Ilan Street on Shabbat had been disputed very intensely for a few months, with the *haredim* trying to close the road to vehicular traffic and the police insisting on keeping it open. The new Minister of Transport, Yitzhak Levi of the National Religious Party, finally ordered the road closed on Shabbat, whereupon an appeal was made to the High Court of Justice to overturn that decision. The High Court did not want to be the body to decide such a delicate and clearly political

issue and told the Minister to appoint a bi-partisan committee to arrive at some sort of reasonable compromise. The Zameret Committee was made up of eight members — four secular, including traditionalists, two *haredim*, and two national religious.

The recommendations submitted by the committee after two months constituted a tradeoff, wherein Bar-Ilan would be closed to vehicular traffic on Shabbat during prayer times in exchange for a vague recommendation to provide alternative public transport to the secular population on Shabbat — for instance, buses or special taxis. The closing of Bar-Ilan Street is considered to be a matter of great inconvenience to secular residents of Jerusalem's northern neighborhoods who use this street as a major thoroughfare. Moreover, the proposed alternative routes also run close to *haredi* areas. In addition, the secular feel that once they give in on Bar-Ilan, it is only a matter of time before other roads will be closed to them on Shabbat. On the other hand, having heavy traffic drive in their midst on Shabbat is abhorrent to the *haredim*. The compromise recommended by the committee thus sought to establish a balance of inconvenience between both populations.

The *haredi* representatives refused to sign the committee report, and the national religious members could not openly support any proposal for transportation on Shabbat. The Minister of Transport thus rejected the recommendation for alternative transport on Shabbat in secular neighborhoods. It is clear that the Zameret Committee did not solve the problem of Bar-Ilan Street and the matter will have to go back to the High Court of Justice.

The committee was also asked by the High Court to suggest a mechanism to deal with religious-secular conflicts in other areas throughout the country. It proposed setting up a permanent council on religious-secular relations under the aegis of the President, to deal with such problems in other parts of the country. Regarding roads, one proposal called for the principle that a street could be closed to transportation on Shabbat if it was not a major thoroughfare and 80 percent of the residents on that street demanded it.

Jerusalem Demographic Trends

Dr. Zvi Zameret, the Chairman of the Committee, wrote a controversial cover letter to the report regarding his assessment of the demographic and geographic future of Jerusalem. In 1978, the *haredi* population in Jerusalem was estimated at around 52,000. By 1985 they had grown to 85,000 and by 1996 to 130,000, representing over 30 percent of the Jewish population,

their highest proportion in modern Israel. By the year 2010, if present trends continue, the population of Jerusalem, which is today 600,000 plus, is expected to grow to 800,000, of whom 250,000 will be Palestinian Arabs and 250,000 will be *haredim*. This means, according to Zameret, that 500,000 out of 800,000 will be non- or anti-Zionists. The fate of Jerusalem during this period will be determined by what happens to the potential land reserve for 40,000 apartments that can still be built within the present boundaries of the city. Forty thousand dwellings means an additional population of approximately 200,000. Thus, the urban planning decisions being made now will determine the demographic makeup of Jerusalem in 2010. Zameret recommended that no additional subsidized housing be built in Jerusalem because subsidized housing attracts economically weaker parts of the population who are predominantly *haredi*. He recommended that, as much as possible, different policies be adopted that will encourage more and more *haredim* to move to the periphery of Jerusalem — for instance, Kiryat Sefer, Betar, and Beit Shemesh. Zameret came in for severe criticism for raising the specter of social engineering — a particularly tricky proposition when it concerns the political and demographic future of the city and its religious make-up.

In Jerusalem, *haredi* representatives on the city council control the municipal budget and land allocations for public purposes. As a result, 97 percent of all such land allocations over the last three years have gone to *haredi* purposes — i.e., synagogues and ritual baths. Even though they want to influence the character of the city, the *haredi* leadership does not want to control the city totally because then they would have to take responsibility for funding secular schools and other secular activities.

After the Six-Day War, Jerusalem grew rapidly. Nearly every new neighborhood included a specially-built *haredi* sub-neighborhood. The present thinking on the part of many town planners is that this was a mistake and that, as much as possible, *haredim* should live separately from the other populations because the evidence has shown that living together is very problematic. For example, Makor Barukh, a neighborhood near the old Sha'are Tzedek Hospital along Jaffa Road,

used to be a lower middle class Sephardi neighborhood which was eventually taken over by the *haredim*. During the final stages, quite a bit of violence was used to push the last Sephardim out, a scenario that has been repeated in other parts of town. One of the conclusions is that the differences between these populations are so profound that the greater part of wisdom is not to mix them but to keep them separate.

Prospects for the Future

The situation will get worse in the immediate future but with a potential for improvement when political and public leaders on both sides make it their business to repair and maintain relations and provide for peaceful coexistence between their communities. For a long time this important function has been neglected because the national agenda has been dominated by the overarching issue of relations with the Palestinians and the future of the territories. The entire energy of our political leaders has been invested in that one issue to the neglect of many other issues.

The *haredim* are very aware of their dependence on secular society and the secular political and economic system. They have become more and more dependent on government subsidies. Communities which are so dependent have to be very careful not to anger the people upon whom they are dependent; a *modus vivendi* has to be reached, eventually.

Today the two populations live separately. If there would have been major mixing of concentrations of *haredi* and secular populations, the situation would be nearly insoluble. In fact, Jerusalem is divided into large homogeneous blocks of *haredi* and other areas that have either secular or traditional populations, and this provides a solid basis upon which to build a *modus vivendi*.

* * *

Dr. Yosef Goell is a retired lecturer in political science at the Hebrew University and a political commentator for the *Jerusalem Post*. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.