

# JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 341 17 Elul 5756 / 1 September 1996

## RELIGION IN ISRAEL: A CONSENSUS FOR JEWISH TRADITION

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**How Religious are Israeli Jews? / Even Secular Jews Follow Common Jewish Practices / Patterns of Israeli Belief / The Meaning of Religious Pluralism in Israel / Bleak Prospects for Reform and Conservative Judaism / Israel and the Nature of Mediterranean Religion**

### How Religious are Israeli Jews?

The unexpected victory of the religious (meaning Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox) parties in Israel's elections surprised many people. For years, reporting from Israel and the comments of those Israelis whom the reporters cover or interview has suggested that Israeli Jews are divided into two groups: the overwhelming majority who are secular and a small minority who are religious. While figures, even percentages, were not always stated, outsiders and even many insiders were left to assume that 80 percent of Israelis fell into the secular camp and were being religiously coerced in one way or another by the Orthodox 20 percent.

More than that, for most outsiders, all religious Jews in Israel were assumed to be dressed in black, whether they were or not. One almost never saw a picture of a religious Jew in modern dress with a knitted kipa performing a religious act unless it was in connection with their presumed nationalist fanaticism, i.e., Jewish settlers in the territories either imposing on Arabs or resisting the Israeli government.

The May election brought the world up short. To almost everyone's surprise, those "fanatically religious" Jews suddenly seemed to have scored a major victory at the polls, providing the critical votes for the election of Binyamin Netanyahu as prime minister and themselves winning 23 seats in the new Knesset, just under 20 percent of the total, which, when religious Knesset members from other parties are added, brings the total religious representation up to 25 percent. The shock of this should break through people's perceptive screens and bring them to look again at the real situation in Israel, one which Israelis and others who have followed the issue closely over the years have long recognized.

The latest survey on the subject by the prestigious Guttman Institute of Applied Social Research, published in 1993, tells the true story. The tables below summarize the critical results from that study of Israeli Jews' beliefs and practices.

Taking into consideration the entire Jewish population, Jewish religious practice is high on most of the usual measures. While the mainte-

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nance of those Jewish observances could be explained as residual among Israeli Jews still close to their traditional roots, the claims of the same public with regard to Jewish belief, often a problem of some embarrassment to those who wish to seem modern, is especially impressive.

What we learn from this and other studies is that Israel's Jews are not divided into two groups but into four: in Israeli terms, ultra-Orthodox (*haredim*), religious Zionists (*datim*), traditional Jews (*masortiim*), and secular (*hilonim*). The ultra-Orthodox, those strangely (to Western eyes) garbed, black hatted Jews who are featured in all the pictures, represent only 8 percent of Israel's Jewish population.

Another 17 percent are religious Zionists who normally are lost to view in the studies and the statistics because they are generally lumped with everyone else.

The religious Zionists are similar to the modern or centrist Orthodox Jews in the diaspora, partaking of most or all aspects of modern civilization except that they maintain Orthodox observance of Jewish religious law and tradition.

The third group consists of the vast majority of Israeli Jews, some 55 percent, who define themselves as "traditional." These Jews are from many backgrounds but most are Sephardim from the Mediterranean or Islamic worlds. They are people who value traditional Jewish life but who are prepared to modify *halakhically*-required Jewish practices in those cases where they believe it to be personally necessary or attractive to do so. They cover the whole range of belief and observance from people of fundamentalist belief and looser practice to people who have interpreted Judaism in the most modern manner but retain

### ISRAELI JEWISH RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Religious Practice	Always	Sometimes	Never
Light Shabbat candles	56%	22%	20%
Recite <i>Kiddush</i> (Friday Night)	46%	21%	32%
Synagogue Saturday morning	23%	22%	56%
Don't work [in public] on Sabbath	42%	19%	39%
Participate in Passover <i>Seder</i>	78%	17%	5%
Light Hanukkah candles	71%	20%	9%
Fast on Yom Kippur	70%	11%	19%
Bless <i>Lulav</i> (Sukkot)	26%	15%	59%
Observe <i>Kashrut</i> at home	69%	18%	14%
No pork, shellfish, etc.	63%	16%	21%
Brit Milah	92%		
Bar Mitzvah	83%		
Wedding	87%		
Burial/ <i>Shiva</i> / <i>Kaddish</i>	88-91%		
<i>Mezuzah</i> on front door	98%		
Contribute to charity	74%		

## ISRAELI JEWISH RELIGIOUS BELIEF

"To what extent do you believe or not believe in each of the following?"	Believe Completely	Not Sure	Do Not Believe
There is a God	63%	24%	13%
There is a supreme power guiding the world	57%	29%	14%
Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai	55%	31%	14%
Good deeds are rewarded	52%	33%	14%
The Jewish people was chosen among peoples	50%	29%	20%
A watch from above is kept over everyone	49%	32%	19%
The Torah and <i>mitzvot</i> are God's commands	47%	29%	24%
Prayer can help one get out of a bad situation	45%	35%	20%
Bad deeds are punished	44%	38%	18%
The coming of the Messiah	39%	29%	32%
There is a next world	35%	35%	30%
Those who don't adhere to <i>mitzvot</i> are punished	27%	36%	37%
Non-observing Jew endangers the Jewish people	21%	29%	50%

many of its customs and ceremonies.

Many of these "traditional" Jews differ from the Orthodox only in that they will drive their cars on the Sabbath, use electricity, watch television, or go to a soccer game or to the beach, frequently after attending religious services in the morning and the evening before. Many of the men don *tefillin* every morning. What is critical is that all are committed to a major religious component in the definition of their Jewishness and the Jewishness of the Jewish state.

Many of these Sephardim have been drawn to the haredi-oriented Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) movement, that has grown from a small handful of Jerusalemites dissatisfied with the then Ashkenazi-dominated National Religious Party to become the third largest party in the country with 10 seats in the present Knesset. Even more important, Shas has an extraordinarily active educational system that reaches into neighborhoods neglected by the "establishment," including the religious establishment. Except in the days of Project Renewal, those neighborhoods have never been seen by Jews from the diaspora, yet a good half of the country's population live in them. Shas has

brought them a revival of the religious traditions they knew, presenting them in a more Orthodox way than the older Sephardic customs in their communities demanded, through the warm-hearted activities of Shas-appointed rabbis, educators, and preachers, the major ones of whom have far larger followings than all of the non-Orthodox religious movements in Israel combined.

#### Even Secular Jews Follow Common Jewish Practices

The fourth group consists of those who define themselves as secular, some 20 percent of the Jewish population. These are people whose beliefs are secular. Their practices, on the other hand, may be quite similar to those of many traditionalists, only they claim to maintain those practices for family and national reasons rather than for religious ones. The fact that Jewish religious observance has such a strong national component makes it a major component of most Jews' national identity even if they no longer see themselves as believers in the Jewish religion.

The Guttman study shows that an astounding three-quarters of the "secular" 20 percent follow the most common traditional religious practices. Only a quarter,

or 5 percent of the total Jewish population, say they observe no religious practices whatsoever, a figure which is belied by data showing that 98 percent of Israeli Jews have *mezuzot* on the doorposts of their houses and 92 percent circumcise their male children, to mention only two of a number of observances that are so deeply entrenched in the culture that hardly anyone thinks of them as religious observances.

As in the diaspora, almost all Israeli Jews have some form of Passover Seder. Indeed, one of the observed phenomena in Israel is how many Israelis who are planning to travel abroad during Pesach, which means that they are not concerned about keeping strictly kosher for the holiday as Jewish law requires, schedule their departure from the country after the evening of the Seder, while almost no one leaves during the day the Seder is to take place.

What is true is that almost all the elites in Israeli society – cultural, intellectual, political, and economic – are found within the secular 20 percent, so that they frame the picture that outsiders get of Israel. Moreover, that 20 percent is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, either Jews from Eastern and Central Europe or descended from them, the ones who are most likely to know English, to have relatives in the diaspora, or to be contacted by journalists coming to the country, thus allowing this skewed picture to emerge.

#### Patterns of Israeli Belief

Let us look at the tables more closely. Nearly two-thirds of all Israelis believe that there is a God and another quarter believe that it is possible that there is ("not sure"). Even more impressive is that 55 percent believe in the literal revelation of the Torah by God to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, while those who believe that it is possible that there was ("not sure") raise the total to 86 percent. So, too, with other measures of belief.

In 1948 when Israel was founded and socialist Zionism was in the saddle, there were undoubtedly many more atheists in the country than there are today. On the other hand, believers should not take too much comfort from these figures since the belief of the Israeli majority is like belief in other Western countries. Only 27 percent believe that God will punish them for not observing His commandments, even though twice as many believe that the commandments are of Divine origin.

All told, however, most Israelis observe far more than the average Reform or even Conservative Jew in the diaspora. Moreover, since a majority are Sephar-

dim and the Sephardi world never had a reformation like the Ashkenazi world, where religious Jews divided themselves into three or more "denominations," even those who do not pretend to be Orthodox believe that Jewish tradition itself should stand relatively unchanged and should not be fragmented. They reserve for themselves the informal right to pick and choose, but they want the formal religion to remain as is, as in the rest of the Mediterranean world.

In the whole history of the Zionist enterprise there has been no indigenous movement to reform Judaism or Jewish religion, this on the part of a people who are prepared to have reform movements for everything. That should tell us much. Not only that, but the 1993 survey simply replicates earlier surveys going back some thirty years. True, the amount of observance has dropped over the years but not appreciably.

#### The Meaning of Religious Pluralism in Israel

When diaspora Jews say there is no religious pluralism in Israel, they are referring to religious pluralism of the American kind. In fact, Israel is hardly monolithic in any respect and enjoys a deeply rooted religious pluralism that must be recognized for what it is. Israel is a country with at least half a dozen different recognized religio-ethnic communities which in the Middle East are the primary manifestations of pluralism. These include Jews; Arabs including Muslims, Bedouin, and Christians; non-Arab Christians of various denominations from Armenians to Mormons; Druze; and Circassians (Muslims of Russian rather than Arab background).

Perhaps most overlooked by outsiders is the pluralism within the ultra-Orthodox/Orthodox camp. For those who see all Orthodox Jews as dressed in black, whether they are or not, it is hard to see the many serious groups into which they are divided. There are something like a dozen different hassidic "courts" ranging from the extreme unbendingly anti-Zionist Satmar, to Habad, strongly Zionist in a very nationalistic way and dedicated to "*kiruv*," that is to say, bringing all Jews closer to Judaism as they understand it. There are hassidic courts like Bratslav whose leader, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, has been dead for 200 years and who are highly spiritual and quietist; others like Gur and Belz noted for their political activity both within the ultra-Orthodox world and often outside of it; small courts such as Sadigorer which are the preserve of certain families and include members of those families who may not be in any way ultra-Orthodox in their behavior.

There are other communities gathered around "Lithuanian" yeshivot ranging in orientation from the ultra-religious and nationalist like Mercaz HaRav Kook to the militantly anti-Zionist yeshivot of groups like Toldos Aharon. These are *misnagdim* (those who have opposed hassidism since the eighteenth century), most of whom have become more active in Israeli affairs over the last decade and a half. The political leader of the mainstream yeshiva world is Rabbi Eliezer Shach who has been given much attention in the last few years.

There are the *hardal* groups, that is to say, *haredim leumiim* (ultra-Orthodox nationalists) who pride themselves both on their Orthodox devotion and on their willingness to take on such tasks of nationalist commitment as combat service in the IDF and settlement in the territories. There are the very moderate religious of the religious kibbutzim, most of whom come out of the socialist religious Zionist background of Poalei Mizrachi, long traditional allies of the Labor camp. There is the Meimad group of peace-oriented modern Orthodox intellectuals. One could go on almost endlessly.

In certain respects, the differences between the extremes of the ultra-Orthodox/Orthodox camp are far greater than those between Conservative and Reform Jews in the diaspora, but they are all united in their acceptance of the traditional understanding of *halakhah* and the Torah and in their rejecting non-Orthodox claims to equal religious legitimacy. All told, they represent about 25 percent of Israel's population.

There are also the older customary differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, often further divided by country of origin, manifested in different synagogues, and for the larger groups, other institutions as well, in which different sets of religious customs are maintained.

Then there are the differences from city to city. For example, if Jerusalem is the place where religious conflict among ultra-Orthodox and other Jews is hardly concealed, Safed is a place where all groups seem to live in harmony and consciously pursue harmonious sharing, while Hebron is a place devoted to religious ultra-nationalism. These differences may not seem that important to the diaspora, particularly in North America where religious differences are of a different order, but these are the differences that speak to Israelis.

Finally, there are Conservative, Reform, and humanistic Jews, a very small number but with their own functioning and successful congregations and associations, normally undisturbed in their worship even by the most fanatic of the Orthodox establishment.

### Bleak Prospects for Reform and Conservative Judaism

All of this should help us understand why Reform and Conservative Judaism have had so little impact in Israel and are not likely to improve their position in the near future, despite the fact that both movements can freely establish congregations and have, and can even get funds from the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government.

The conventional explanation blames the limited impact of these movements on the refusal of Israel's government to recognize Reform and Conservative rabbis, for political reasons. Yet the real answer lies in the overall Israeli outlook regarding Jewish religious practice.

Secular Israeli Jews and at least some traditional Jews, if asked, would not object to official recognition of Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel, but, except for a minuscule handful, would not seek either for themselves, nor do they respond to them positively. One example of this attitude was seen recently in *Kol Ha'ir*, a Jerusalem weekly newspaper which hardly ever misses an opportunity to take a poke at ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Orthodox establishment. The paper has a weekly column which "reviews" the prayer services at a different synagogue each week, as a critic would review a performance or a play, giving each one a rating at the end of the review. The number of different kinds of synagogues that the columnist has identified is overwhelming, ranging from a classical Sephardic "minhag Yerushalayim" congregation in Talbieh, where the President and Prime Minister of Israel reside, to a Moroccan Bratslaver hassidic synagogue in the Katamonim, a working class neighborhood, to the various non-Orthodox congregations, and he has hardly scratched the surface. However, the reviewer, who himself is not Orthodox and is writing for a paper that is even anti-Orthodox, wrote his most critical review about one of Jerusalem's Reform synagogues, saying in essence that he thought he was in a church and he did not understand what was Jewish about the service, for better or worse, a typical Israeli attitude.

If the truth be told, Conservative and Reform Judaism, after more than 60 years of struggle, remain confined to a few public institutions supported by and principally serving their diaspora adherents and little known in Israel at large, and a few dozen small congregations, some with devoted members but many active only for the High Holidays, primarily serving *olim* from English-speaking countries plus a few others attracted to them. They may also include a few distinguished intellectuals who are attracted to the particular combina-

tion of ideas and observances that those movements promote, whose presence often gives the movements even more visibility despite their minuscule size. Try as they have, they have been unable to broaden their appeal among religiously moderate, traditional or secular Jews.

The issues that dominate the Conservative movement today, especially those of egalitarianism and liturgical reform, simply do not speak to many Israeli Jews. Israel's Sephardim, many of whom are traditional, moderate, and more accepting of the contemporary world than the more militant Ashkenazi Orthodox, are not concerned with either of those issues. Even those who are traditional do not seem to want to end separate seating within the synagogue itself, much less accept even Bat Mitzvah, not to speak of active women's participation in the service. Most do not even like changes in traditional melodies, many of which originated in Spain over 500 years ago.

Reform, with its notions of voluntary individual religious choice, is simply incomprehensible for them both in concept and design. For most Israelis, an individual may choose what he or she will observe, but the religious tradition itself is fixed by Divine law. This is the dominant view among the vast majority of traditional Israelis and even among those who reject the tradition in their own lives but have a certain view as to what "real" Judaism is. While there have been exceptions, of course, they have been too few to make a difference.

#### Israel and the Nature of Mediterranean Religion

The ideas that lie behind Reform and Conservative Judaism can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, to a need that arose in Central and Western Europe not only to purify the Church but to reconcile belief and practice in a way that never found expression in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean world, or the Islamic world. In Eastern Europe and the Christian Mediterranean world, for the average person, the emphasis was more on impressive church rituals and not on personal piety or doctrine, while the Islamic world, like the Jewish, emphasizes the communal, legal, and traditional character of religious behavior over matters of individual attitudes. Thus, Northern European Protestantism influenced the Jews in that part of the world to seek greater consistency in their religious lives, something which became absolutely critical in the United States where anything less is considered hypocrisy.

In Israel's part of the world, what counts are critical behavioral acts such as birth, marriage, and burial rites, and not necessarily for reasons of belief. In Judaism this is compounded by the intimate connection between nationality and religion which has been so substantially severed in the Protestant world and most especially in the United States. Thus Israeli Jews can perform acts for national reasons that would be deemed "religious" in the United States. On one hand, this eliminates the need for them to confront disparities between belief and action. It also makes it more difficult to change tradition without damaging national as well as religious ties.

In short, most Israeli Jews accept the legitimacy and support the maintenance of the continuity of Jewish tradition, even though they may not care to observe every jot and tittle of it. Nor would they change the forms of that tradition, which is what non-Orthodox Judaism does to make the tradition more attractive to its potential constituencies.

I realize this is very hard for American Jews in particular to understand and I must confess to great hesitation even trying to write about this subject analytically for fear of being misunderstood. There is so much emotion invested in it. Not only that, but objectively in the American setting, the various forms of non-Orthodox Judaism proved vitally necessary to enable Jews to reconcile their Jewishness with the other aspects of their lives. While they may not have succeeded in bringing about the kind of Jewish commitment that their own leadership and activists would like, they have generated solid groups of highly committed Jews whose strong religious commitments are based upon the teachings of their movements. One can understand the feelings of people whose own paths to Judaism mean so much to them yet are not as fully recognized in Israel as they would like to be. Nevertheless, as they wage their campaign for full recognition, fairness alone requires that they understand the situation as it really is.

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