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A TIME FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Eliezer Schweid

The Common Denominator Between Jews from Arab Lands and the Orthodox / The Closing Social Gap / One Must Not be Over-Victorious / Reaction to Religious Coercion / Changes to Heal the System / A Call for Responsible Leadership

The Common Denominator Between Jews from Arab Lands and the Orthodox

The impressive growth in the strength of the religious parties and, in particular, the rise in the strength of Shas, reflecting an expansion of its pool of voters (at the Likud's expense), represents a continuation of the social process that began with the Begin "realignment" of 1977. Two major groups within Israeli society, immigrants from Arab countries and their children, and the Orthodox, especially the ultra-Orthodox religious community, have been engaged in a process of rehabilitation and self-confirmation. These two groups are, of course, quite disparate from a number of standpoints, but during the 1988 elections their common denominator -- an aspiration to extricate themselves from a deficient socio-political situation and thoroughly overhaul a defective external image --

loomed large. In both cases the traditional-religious link served as the focal point of their efforts to reinforce or renew their identity. It would appear that the tapping of Agudath Yisrael's voter reservoir, as well as the expansion of the strength of Shas and Degel Hatorah at the expense of Likud, reflect this simultaneous process of "returning to oneself" while "establishing oneself on the political map."

The Closing Social Gap

Indeed, if this process is viewed in perspective, we must concede that historical justice has been done. The veteran secular community has long forgotten the factors which led these groups to feel that they suffered from discrimination and repression. Perhaps the secular community is justified in shrugging off pangs of guilt. From its standpoint the socio-economic gains and the political rehabilitation of both the

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
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Orthodox religious public and the immigrants from the Arab countries and residents of development towns has continued apace for nearly a generation. The gaps are progressively being closed. On the other hand, the veteran secular community has managed to accumulate a vast store of bitterness towards the Orthodox religious community as a result of the former's assertiveness and aggressiveness in the struggle over the allocation of resources and what the secular community sees as the expansion of "religious coercion." Nevertheless it remains a fact that both groups are still motivated by a sense of discrimination and a desire to break a state of siege deriving from the attitude which they experienced from the secular community. They viewed this attitude as both injurious and insulting and even the most militant secularists must concede that this impression was not solely a figment of the imagination. It is therefore understandable why these two groups have not forgotten what the veteran secular community may have elected to ignore from the very outset.

The self-rehabilitation of major social groups and the achievement of greater social and political justice is an inherently positive process. In the long run, the change in the status and self-image of the two groups can bring in its wake an integrative current leading to their assumption of an all-embracing social and political responsibility and even to a greater openness towards other groups. It is clear that the genuine internalization of common cultural values can proceed only from a sense of equality and a perception that the threat to personal identity and self-esteem has been lifted. These values can, in turn, give rise to a full sense of national responsibility and a readiness to understand and respect other groups with a different form of Jewish identification.

After the fact -- and this finding must be emphasized since it can be distorted by the political confrontation -- the very procedures of organizing, and gaining strength and a position on the political map, are significant processes transpiring within these social groups. These processes would have been impossible save for the fact

that, for better or for worse, those groups have learned and internalized many fundamentals of the social and political culture from the environment. Amidst these processes a number of significant social and cultural changes have already occurred and will recur in the future with redoubled force as a result of the internalization of the national culture: its stratification, techniques and mores together with its values (and problems). Indeed one should emphasize that this is applicable as well to the Orthodox religious groups, which most of the veteran secular community perceives as totally closed off and belonging to another alien milieu. These religious groups have likewise metamorphosed appreciably from their previous condition, they too are undergoing a revolutionary social change (particularly with respect to the status of women), although they still refuse to concede and admit its repercussions. Therefore, they too may evolve from the power struggle which they are presently waging to a stance of responsibility which will mandate cooperation.

One Must Not be Over-Victorious

All this, however, is a long-term possibility, and the prospect for realizing this possibility is decisively tied to short-term developments. With respect to the short term, the dangers are major and the concern is warranted. This concern is aggravated because the internal socio-cultural process is complicated by the external war with the Palestinians and the internal struggle over solutions to the conflict. The complication introduced by these two conflicts which appear critical for the future of the State of Israel tends to exacerbate positions and transform partial confrontations into total collisions. The immediate dangers are in any event quite tangible, and they are rooted precisely in what the religious parties have already managed to learn and enthusiastically internalize from the political culture of their environment. One cannot elude the fact that the success of the religious parties in tapping their electoral potential and expanding their reservoir of voters, as well as the deftness of maneuver which they have displayed in securing most of their

political and economic interests, is a product of the "homework lessons" to which they had applied themselves assiduously. The religious parties learned from the secular parties, and in some areas they already surpass their mentors. The organizational methods, propaganda techniques, and the style of socio-political thought (yes, in its mass and shallow nature) were all learned quite well, and it is all too human that the religious parties have not yet apprehended (just as the secular parties have still not apprehended) one thing, although they could have been expected to derive this lesson from their own experience: one must not be over-victorious. The plucking of the fruits of victory together with the branches and the leaves, the crass bargaining and display of insensitivity towards the feelings and rights of one's rival, with whom one is expected to coexist and exercise joint responsibility in the future, leads to total failure. This is due to the damage which this approach inflicts upon the common good, the harsh and vengeful backlash which does not tarry and, indeed, because of the inevitable superimposition of norms of conduct towards rivals on the framework of internal relations. The "victorious" religious parties are not immune, they are not only fragmented but embroiled. No surplus of mutual respect exists either between them nor within them and their success in maximizing their electoral strength stems in no small measure from the bitter competition between them and the fierce rivalries raging within them. A sagacious leadership must not ignore such a telltale warning signal as: "they have slain you because you have slain."

Reaction to Religious Coercion

In any event, the price to be paid for exploiting the victory "to the hilt" by amending the Law of Return with regard to "Who is a Jew," by expanding religious legislation, by infusing additional economic resources disproportionate to the needs of existing religious institutions, by capturing positions of power to which they were not entitled given the size of the population which they represent, and especially by the

prolongation of a situation which is intolerable to a majority of the Israeli public, including many religious people -- the military exemption for yeshiva students -- was a clearly foreseeable price. First of all, the bitterness and rage of the secular public was vented by an initiated disobedience of religious legislation and violent responses. Much worse than these two phenomena was the deepening alienation and revulsion towards everything connected with Judaism: its sources, symbols and ways of life. The extreme religious parties are seemingly undeterred by the possibility that they are pressuring an increasing percentage of the Jewish public in the State of Israel to abandon their Jewish identification. It emerges that amidst loud war whoops concerning the "Jewish character" of the state they are turning half of that state into outsiders and aliens. Second, the reservations of most Jews in the diaspora towards the State of Israel will intensify, given the brutal and insulting rejection of the Conservative and Reform/Liberal trends. Third, the political polarization will deepen due to the unavoidable inferences regarding the question of Jewish identity for questions regarding Israel and the Palestinians. Fourth, the trend towards cultural shallowness, which is caused by diminishing an essentially spiritual confrontation by transposing it to the realm of ideology and power politics, will continue. Finally, instead of accomplishing the change requisite for laying an infrastructure for a culture of tolerance and mutual respect, which is the sole solution for preserving the unity of the Jewish people, the divisions will intensify and the rift will be unmendable.

Changes to Heal the System

These outcomes are not inevitable. Even if their emergence is all too human, that emergence can still be blocked. For years discussions have taken place regarding reform of the electoral system, in a manner that would give rise to a governmental majority confronting an efficient and responsible opposition. This would deny the small parties, which represent parochial interests and extremely partisan

positions, the ability to maneuver the majority of the public and drag it along. Is it not time for the major parties to collaborate in implementing those conclusions which already enjoy majority consent?

For years as well, there has been talk of structural changes that would moderate the excessive centralization of authority in the State of Israel and the overinvolvement of government in social processes. The award of a large measure of independence and prerogatives in the cultural and educational sphere to a communal rather than a governmental framework would allow those who maintain different outlooks and viewpoints regarding culture and ways of life to express themselves internally in a full and free fashion, without resort to coercive over-imposition upon the joint "national-public domain." Such a policy would thereby ratify the existing pluralism in Israeli society, moderate the political struggle between varying religious positions, and bolster the creative spiritual struggle. Is this not the moment to act in such a direction, by adopting a policy that will foster every social movement in the communal, cultural, and educational spheres while intensifying the initiatives of the social and cultural groups themselves?

A Call for Responsible Leadership

More than anything else, the present moment calls for a display of responsible spiritual leadership by all trends, and their readiness to undertake rigorous educational work in the profound intellectual domain. Undoubtedly the intervention of intellectuals who can grasp the complete picture and who are prepared to moderate the power struggles in their camps in order to further compromise will be mandatory. Beyond all else, it is precisely the moment that educational work -- literary, scholarly and theoretical -- addressed to the young generation, takes on especial urgency. We need to plow a deep furrow, i.e., confront the fundamental issues surrounding outlooks, values and ways of life.

Such a statement issued while we toss about in the maelstrom of crass power struggles may be quixotic in appearance. Nevertheless the issue which we are dis-

cussing is anchored in the spiritual realm, and therefore the greatest menace which threatens the Jewish state on this front and for the long term is the menace of spiritual shallowness, simplification and one-sidedness which are the well-springs of extremism. We are not threatened by disagreements. Disagreements over spiritual questions may be painful but they are always fecund and positive. The superficiality, ignorance, one-sidedness and oversimplification which characterizes all those involved in our country's debates constitute the real danger that the ensuing clash will prove destructive. Whoever seeks to forestall destruction must therefore raise the standard of the struggle and shape the practical sphere from a more exalted standpoint.

As aforesaid, a time of political bargaining and exultations over booty is seemingly not the most propitious time. However one must bear in mind that any time will appear inopportune for a spiritual confrontation. What other option is open if we desire to influence the long term, save that of beginning forthwith in this inauspicious present moment, when all hope appears lost? Then perhaps we will discover the ability to listen that lies behind the deafness, the sensitivity that lies beyond obduracy, and the good will that lies beyond the rugged imperviousness. In the last analysis the danger threatens us all.

If one can locate a group of intellectuals, representing all camps and currents, who would be willing to initiate a joint educational action program which will address the general public and especially the youth, and if the basis of such a program will be a willingness to define the ethical infrastructure which unites Jews and citizens in the State of Israel, then it may emerge during the course of action and in light of its results that this was indeed the moment of opportunity.

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Eliezer Schweid is Professor of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University and a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.