

REVIEW OF ISRAELI LIFE

RELIGIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES: THE CHALLENGE FROM WITHIN

Most of Orthodox Jewish society regards the state sanction of religious political parties in Israel as positive. There are dissenters, most notably Yeshayahu Leibowitz (professor of chemistry at Hebrew University), but most Orthodox Jews subscribe to arguments best formulated by Rav Aharon Lichtenstein¹ and more recently by Gary Schiff.² The Orthodox consensus is not undifferentiated, however. While the interaction of religion and state is supported, its negative impact on Orthodoxy is not ignored. In this review we assess Orthodox attempts to cope with that negative impact. A number of new institutions and programs in Israel affirm, in principle, the importance and the work of religious political parties, but take great trouble to reject funding by these parties and to reject formal affiliation with them. These new institutions testify to a growing ferment within Israeli Orthodoxy, to a belief that when politics reaches down into the daily operation of vital religious programs, these programs become subject to dilution or corruption.

To say that certain new programs dissociate themselves from the religious parties does not mean that a neutral religious regrouping is emerging. Quite the contrary, it is specifically within the cultural ambience of each separate religious party that attempts at formal dissociation are occurring. There are programs of the Mizrachi type which do not formally affiliate with Mizrachi, programs of the Agudath Israel type which do not formally affiliate with Agudah, and programs of the Neturei Karta type which do not formally affiliate with Neturei Karta.

Each of these programs constitutes something of a thorn in the side of the party faithful. This is because these independent programs tend to be very successful, innovative, and hence attractive to a growing number of the party constituents. Attempts by party officials to bludgeon the programs out of existence by formal bans or violence, or to pull these programs into official party structures through tempting offers of financial support, have been made—but firmly resisted. It is to be stressed that there is no open revolt against religious parties. But there is the felt need for greater diversity and

creativity than party structures allow. Part of the feeling stems from dissatisfaction with the religious parties on account of their alleged failings of one sort or another. Another part of the feeling, and the concomitant growth in religious, politically unaffiliated institutions, stems from a growing diversity and integrity within the religious community itself. Before we assess the felt need for new outlets for expression, let us look at the outlets themselves.

I

Within the Mizrachi ambience the Noam educational network has grown within the last nine years into two fulltime elementary schools (grades one to eight) and into a high school now in its second year. That there are two elementary schools is the first indication of Noam's dissociation from Mizrachi-supported state-religious (*mamlakhti-dati*) schools. Furthermore, in Noam boys and girls are educated in different frameworks—different buildings, different principals and staffs, different curricula (no Gemara learning for girls).

Noam was founded by students of Yeshivat Mercaz ha-Rav Kuk. It became almost an instant success because of its stress on high educational standards and its non-coed education. In other words, a significant minority of Mizrachi-oriented parents who otherwise would have sent their children to the coed state-religious schools were interested in a better and a maximally halakhic framework for their children.

The rapid growth of Noam and similar institutions sheds light on a recent exchange between Louis Bernstein and Charles Liebman whether “left” and “right” in American Orthodoxy is to be defined by the degree of adherence to halakhah (Liebman) or by positions on Zionism, Israel, and secular studies (Bernstein).³ In the Israeli context (at least in Jerusalem) the trend is clearly against Liebman and for Bernstein. *A lá* Bernstein, increasingly it is neither the degree of adherence to halakhah nor secular studies about which the modern and non-modern (“left” and “right”) Israeli Orthodox are arguing.

It is precisely the demand for greater halakhic observance which gave impetus to the modern Orthodox Noam school and sustains it to this day. At Noam there is an unwritten rule that mothers of Noam children cover their hair; there is no coed education; there are—and this has been a particularly sharp bone of contention with formal Mizrachi structures—no coed youth groups; there are additional hours of school (beyond Ministry of Education requirements) set aside solely for sacred studies.

Yet Noam can in no way be considered part of the “right” or

“non-modern” Orthodox spectrum. This is because Noam is staunchly in favor of army service and staunchly supports religious Zionism and settlement on the West Bank. That is to say, Noam is modern Orthodox only because of its attitude to Israel and Zionism and not because of its attitude to halakhah or secular study. On both halakhah and secular study, increasingly the modern and the non-modern Orthodox in Israel do not significantly differ – both attempt to live by halakhah maximally; and both downplay secular studies. Secular studies at Noam are weaker than at the Horev school (another independent, non-coed, non-Agudath Israel school in Jerusalem).

If one observes classes in both the girls Noam school and in Agudath Israel’s Beth Jacob schools, one discerns few differences in curricula and virtually no difference in degree of halakhic observance by both teachers and students. But one does find a distinct difference in attitude toward the State of Israel.

Some of the original founders of Noam are upset even with the relatively small amount of secular studies at Noam. They have broken off and founded still another school, a “heder” for boys. Walking into that heder and into one of the hadarim in Meah Shearim, and one observes only two differences: one, the use of Sephardi-accented Hebrew in the heder run by Yeshivat Mercaz ha-Rav Kuk students and the use of Ashkenazi-accented Hebrew and of Yiddish in the Meah Shearim heder; and, two, the stress on Zionism in the former and the hostility or neutrality to Zionism in the latter. There is, then, an urge from within Mizrahi circles to found independent educational institutions which differ from party schools by criteria of greater observance of halakhah, but not by criteria of greater adherence to Zionism and Israel.

Noam is pressured from two constituencies. From within Mizrahi educational circles it is accused of being “elitist,” that is, destructive of Mizrahi state-religious education, and discriminatory against underprivileged students in admission policy.

Noam is regarded as destructive of state-religious education because it refuses to lower its educational standards and its standards of halakhic observance. This is the extent to which religious party considerations adversely affect education in Israel: a parent who teaches in one of eight particular state-religious schools in Jerusalem, and who then enrolls his child in Noam, is no longer permitted to teach in one of those eight schools. Party loyalty and educational free choice are mutually exclusive.

Noam is regarded as discriminatory because it does not admit students according to the criteria of the municipality of Jerusalem.

An underprivileged student is defined as one whose parents are from Asia or Africa (that is, Sepharadi), who has many siblings, and whose parents have no higher education. In other words, a child of an Ashkenazi *cannot* be regarded as underprivileged. Noam admits students according to three criteria: one, adherence to its religious standards; two, student ability to cope with the work load; three, preference to siblings of enrolled students and to children of students at Yeshivat Mercaz ha-Rav Kuk. With these criteria, 25 percent of the students in Noam boys school are Sepharadi. From within parent circles, Noam is pressured to upgrade its secular curriculum or to introduce more traditional learning (such as Gemara) into the female curriculum. Such pressures have been resisted.

Noam is *not* attended solely by children of immigrants. The desire for a more strictly observant but still strongly Zionist school is rooted in both immigrant and sabra families. The recent successful opening of the Noam high school for girls is a clear indication that this new trend from within the Mizrachi ambience will continue to grow and develop.

II

Within the Neturei Karta ambience, the Hadar Zion heder has grown within the last six years from a handful of students into a six-grade program with 300 students. The heder is within the Neturei Karta ambience in the sense that many of its students and teachers come from homes in or near Meah Shearim, eat food only with the *hashgakḥah* of the Eida Haredit rabbinical court, and consider themselves non-Zionists or anti-Zionists. Also, the language of instruction at Hadar Zion is, except in prekindergarten and kindergarten levels, Yiddish. Yet the heder is to be distinguished from Neturei Karta in a number of respects.

First, the heder has no official links to Neturei Karta or to any other religious grouping. It receives no funds from any religious party. It also takes no funds from the State of Israel, yet it does take funds for educational facilities from the municipality of Jerusalem. One wing of Neturei Karta believes that because they pay city taxes, they do not subject themselves to the “danger” of outside control by taking funds from the city government. They are simply taking their own money—so goes the argument.

Second, the heder accepts students without respect to Orthodox creed or preference. Students *are* from religious families, but these include Mizrachi, Agudah, and Neturei Karta families, as well as all shades in between.

Third, there is no anti-Zionism pursued within the curriculum, though within the student body itself there are instances of anti-Zionist songs and slogans. On the other hand, certain staff members privately regard anti-Zionism in its most well-known version in Israel as being uncritical and strident. All of these views play little role in the daily operation of the school, which scrupulously attempts to teach Torah and nothing more.

Fourth, the heder deemphasizes study of Gemara. In this it is different not only from other Neturei Karta schools but also from the Noam boys school and the vast network of Agudath Israel's *Hinnukh Atsmai* system. The stress is on Mishnah, Gemara is not introduced until age 10. Students are expected to learn all six orders of Mishnah before beginning serious study of a Gemara.

Two additional factors set Hadar Zion apart from Neturei Karta-type schools. First, at the lower lever, Hadar Zion has a truly gifted teacher who alone attracts many parents. Superbly he inculcates technical reading skills, quantities of knowledge, as well as more subjective, and more crucial, feelings and emotions like identification with the Patriarchs, love of Torah study, regret over the destruction of the Temple, etc. Second, the school welcomes students who, in other schools, have been classified as borderling retarded. Hadar Zion does not establish separate classes for these students but integrates them into the normal structure. Contact with pediatric neurologists and other professionals in medical and psychological fields are actively maintained. Students who were classified as "beyond hope" in other schools find themselves with quite normal or near normal performance in Hadar Zion. (At the same time, old-time heder methods of light corporal punishment are maintained.)

Hadar Zion's unusual combination of sensibilities and commitments elicits both admiration and strong condemnation. At certain times in its history, Hadar Zion has been subject to formal bans by the rabbinical court or the educational committee of the Eida Haredit. (The sin: acceptance of facilities from the Jerusalem municipality.) Hadar Zion's building has been defaced with abusive slogans; one of its teachers has been attacked. Funding from various sources has been withdrawn. With all this, the school continues to grow and flourish, slowly picking its way forward in the overheated, polarized atmosphere of religious Jerusalem.

III

The Jerusalem College for Women (Michlalah) was founded by Rabbi Dr. Yehudah Coperman 16 years ago with 23 students in two

apartments in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Bayit Vegan. Now it has 650 students in fulltime programs in 10 fields: Jewish studies, Hebrew language and literature, English language and literature, mathematics, science (biology and chemistry), paramedics (in cooperation with Shaare Zedek Hospital), guidance counseling, special education (including the teaching of students with learning disabilities), library science, and music. All students, whatever their major, must take a full program of Jewish studies. Students receive a Bachelor of Education degree which enables them to teach in Israeli schools. There is, in addition, a one year, twofold foreign students program—one for Northern Hemisphere students (September to June) and one for Southern Hemisphere students (January to September).

Because of its manifest success, Michlalah in particular has been strongly pressured to affiliate with one or another religious party in Israel. The school has stoutly resisted this pressure in order to attract a diverse student body. What does political non-affiliation have to do with diversity? Everything. Were Michlalah affiliated with a given party, the daughter of a leading official in *another* political party would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to send his daughter there. Put another way, political affiliation by parents restricts the child's freedom of educational choice. Because Michlalah is unaffiliated, daughters of parents from diverse political parties can attend the school without raising eyebrows about party loyalty.

Nonetheless, there has been a certain narrowing within the student body through no fault of its own. Some years ago, certain Agudath Israel leaders instructed graduates of the Beth Jacob system not to attend Michlalah, partly because of reservations over a single course in the curriculum (which was quickly modified in accord with the strictures of one preeminent Agudah leader), and partly because Michlalah's high educational level rendered the school a strong competitor for Beth Jacob graduates.

To this day the high standards at Michlalah subject it to certain pressures, though perhaps of a more healthy sort. Schools which are politically affiliated have attempted to raise their standards in order to keep students out of Michlalah and within the party institutions. There has also been competition of such a radically different kind that "competition" might be the wrong word for it. Certain schools, especially for foreign students, have been founded and have grown with the aim of *not* demanding the standards of excellence which are demanded at Michlalah. These schools are not out simply to dilute educational standards, however. No single educational program can accomplish everything. When the highest academic standards are

maintained, time for personal reflection and growth by students is sometimes restricted. Other schools have stressed the latter and have drawn potential Michlalah students. In any case, Michlalah now has a "no-growth" policy (it will accept no more than 650 students at any one time) and it has resisted all attempts to lower its academic standards. This surely earns it a unique place not only *vis-à-vis* certain party-affiliated teaching seminaries in Israel but *vis-à-vis* certain universities as well.

IV

People generally have much less contact with a rabbinical court (*bet din*) than with an educational institution, but the same ferment within the educational community exists within the community of those who seek redress, or divorce or *halitsah*, before a rabbinical court. The present incarnation of the rabbinical court once headed by Rabbis Shmuel Salant and Zvi Pesach Frank, is, unlike the educational institutions discussed, a small, quiet institution.

The court meets twice weekly. By the criterion of case load, it has long been eclipsed by the larger rabbinical courts of the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem, of the Eida Haredit, and of the Agudath Israel. Its three rabbinic judges serve without pay. One of them is Rabbi Rafael B. Levin, son of the legendary Jerusalem *tsaddik*, Aryeh Levin, who scrupulously avoided political partisanship throughout his long association with Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kuk, Hayyim Yosef Sonenfeld, Isser Zalman Meltzer and their respective constituencies and sub-constituencies.

Persons who would feel uncomfortable with one of the major rabbinical courts in Jerusalem attend the Salant-Frank court (officially dubbed the "Rabbinical Court of All Ashkenazic Communities in Jerusalem"). One recent illustrious figure to patronize the court was the present Gerer Rebbe, who needed to perform *halitsah*. His use of the Salant-Frank rabbinical court was an implicit commitment: the desire to align himself neither with the government-sponsored Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem nor with the anti-government Eida Haredit (the Rebbe did not use the Agudah Israel rabbinical court because it does not handle cases of *halitsah*).

V

There are a number of other outstanding non-party institutions and programs, among them the Jerusalem College of Technology, the Horev School, Boys Town, and Rabbi Yitzhak Grossman's Mig-

dal Or educational network in Migdal Ha-Emek. Their emergence in the 1970s as strong competitors to party-affiliated programs raises doubts about the future health of religious parties in Israel, even though it is not the desire of these programs to challenge overtly the party structures. When persons on all shades of the Orthodox spectrum feel impelled to earn their livelihood, to seek their career, to express their creative vision, outside party frameworks, it should serve as a danger signal to the parties.

The attack is from within, and it is offered not out of hostility but out of disappointment and disillusionment. The attack is not on the necessity of religious-party institutions but on the way they operate, not on the need for more than one type of religious party but on the deep animosity between them, not on the reality which makes certain necessary benefits in Israel impossible without a party structure, but on the utter subservience of much that is sacred and holy to that structure. The attack is not on the need for parties to maintain educational institutions but on the dilution of standards within those institutions.

Were the growth of party-independent institutions limited to the context of one party or another, it would be possible to seek local reasons for the growth. Individual weaknesses within that party, or, conversely, idiosyncrasies or unworthy animosities within the party-independent institutions, could be identified as the cause of that growth. But when the growth of first-rate party-independent institutions stretches all the way from Neturei Karta to Agudath Israel to Mizrachi, then it is clear that whatever idiosyncrasies or unworthy motives might prompt the foundation of one or another party-independent institution, the major reason for the efflorescence of new, independent programs is a legitimate dissatisfaction with religious parties as now constituted. There is something authentically wrong with religious parties in Israel when their most loyal and talented sons and daughters find themselves unable to work within the party framework and instead strike out in directions of their own. For Yeshayahu Leibowitz or Conservative or Reform Jews reflexively to attack the concept of religious parties is one thing. For talented Orthodox Jews of all stripes to attack it implicitly is quite another. Religious parties in Israel are in trouble.

One hopes that some neutral ground can emerge out of the various new party-independent institutions and programs, and out of the factious religious-party network, not in order facilely to smooth over legitimate differences of opinion, but to accept differences as less significant than the Orthodox commitment to the divinity of the Torah and its commands.

NOTES

1. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Religion and State—The Case for Interaction," *Judaism*, (Fall 1966).
2. Gary Schiff, *Tradition and Politics* (Wayne State University Press, 1977).
3. *Midstream*, January, 1980.