

Which Way Religion?

By JOEL MANDELBAUM

For a Traditional or Observant Jew, the religious conflicts posed by life in a non-Jewish environment, such as the United States, are well-known. Consequently an increasing number of Observant American Jews are looking to Israel as the place where they can uninhibitedly express and act on their religious feelings. But this alternative of living in a Jewish state raises its own set of problems for the Observant Jew, especially if he (or she) is committed to the basic principles of social democracy. And considering the clashes between the "dati" (religious) Israelis and their non-dati neighbors over the definition of who is a Jew and now over Jerusalem's Saturday bus schedule, Israel is facing an identity crisis: whether to be primarily a religious, Jewish state or a completely democratic, Jewish state.

In the United States, the problems of the Traditionalist range from the task of complementing progressive secular education with quality Jewish instruction, to the discomfort felt wearing a Yarmulka while working in the offices of a prestigious New York law firm. One of my pet peeves is the Sunday NEW YORK TIMES is unavailable before Saturday night, though Shabbat afternoon, particularly during the summer, is the best time to try handling that

weekly barrage of words.

But those in the diaspora cannot really expect the situation to be any different. On the other hand, high expectations of what MIGHT BE in a Jewish land lead to greater disillusionment with what IS. So in Israel, the sight of large numbers of Hebrew speaking, knowledgeable Jews violating the Shabbat can be terribly disorienting. Yet in order to grant the non-dati Israeli the freedoms inherent to a democratic society, the Rabbinate's control over everyday life has to be limited to those areas which must be regulated only in order to maintain the religious integrity of the dati Israelis.

Thus, for example, the state's definition of Jewishness must be guided by halacha because any other criteria would undermine the entire religious framework of Observant Jews. However, the state ought also establish the separate classification of nationality ("Israeli"), to include even those not considered Jewish according to halachic standards, and enable them to live totally secular lives if they want to. It does not say much for Judaism in Israel if the only reason people get married by rabbis is because the state's laws require them to.

Similarly, Israel's identity as a free, democratic society is as much comprised when the minority religious forces are allowed to halt bus service throughout a city during Shabbat as it would be if busses were forced through communities within the city where Observant residents didn't want them during Shabbat. It is imperative that the Army serve only

Kosher food, but it would not be acceptable --nor realistically possible--to bar all soldiers from going out of the mess hall and having milk right after a meat meal or buying non-Kosher meals while on leave. Common denominators have to be agreed upon by the dati and non-dati, difficult as they may be for both groups. And when possible, as in schooling, each group will be able to go their separate way with government cooperation and financing.

Unfortunately, however, there are many Orthodox Jews both in Israel and the United States who would like to see the Israeli Rabbinate's control over the daily lives of the non-dati maintained and possibly increased. Of course it is easier to observe Shabbat if no one were to be seen violating it by taking public transportation to the beach. But the desire to arbitrarily dictate the life-styles of others with parliamentary legislation and executive orders may actually reflect a lack of confidence in the strength of one's own religious convictions. Halacha, for those who accept it, is not a democratic system; it cannot be altered by popular vote. But many Jews can and do make the choice not to adopt its rituals. They have the social right to violate such halachic dictates without losing their fundamental civil liberties. And although the Israeli government should be guided by the humanistic concerns of the Tradition, the state should not be God's enforcer of rituals.

Dati Israelis will have to learn to tolerate the "deviations" of the non-dati Jews and cooperate with them socially in the same way that a group of Observant Jews who settled in Hebron are currently cooperating with that city's Arabs.

(ED. NOTE: Mr. Mandelbaum a June graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism is working in JTA's summer intern program.)

WASHINGTON -- Businessman, bankers, brokers, and lawyers will be able to participate this summer in an unusual two-week seminar in Israel on "Investment, Finance and Trade." The program, sponsored by The American University Law School, will run Aug. 14-29 in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

NEW YORK -- Ralph Cohen was unanimously elected President of Ampal - American Israel Corporation.

NEW YORK -- The fourth annual Joseph Ross Award for "creative achievement in urban affairs" was presented to the Los Angeles Chapter of the American Jewish Committee.

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