

# Secularism in Israel

By Rabbi Ezra Boyarsky

For twenty-eight years now, since the founding of the Third Jewish Commonwealth in 1948, the vexing problem of religion vs. secularism and their long-term impact on Israel's formative society, is a topic of absorbing concern in World Jewry and of academic interest to many non-Jews. To pose the question more precisely: which of these socio-religious, colliding forces, seemingly engaged in a tug of war for supremacy is apt in the long run to outdo the other and cast its die on Israel's body politic?

One can bet his last bottom dollar that the average American Jewish tourist returning from the customary whirlwind visit to Israel will invariably report, that except for a number of ultra religious enclaves (such as B'nai Brak etc.), the predominant and pervasive character of Israel's overall community is irreligious and secular. These observations are not only myopic and erroneous but are glaringly unfair and do damage to the reputation of the State; they are partially due to the widely circulated misguided information and preconceived notions on this subject. Not infrequently tourists carry along these misconceptions with them in their luggage on their flights to Israel.

But even being sterile of this predisposed prejudice, in order to form an educated opinion and gain an authentic impression of the general religious tenor prevailing in Israel today, one needs to be possessed of two qualifying prerequisites: (a) an intimate knowledge of the Hebrew languages at the various stages of its development and (b) a more than a superficial acquaintance with the demographic and ethnic background of the approximately seventy-four different communities of exilic origin (the various edot) that comprise the major portion of the nearly three million Jews in Israel.

Modern Hebrew, employed in present day Israel as the official and dominant medium of communication, has, in its reincarnation as a spoken language been changed chiefly only in rhythm, style and tempo. Otherwise its spiritual flavor has been retained and is principally a linguistic conglomerate of Biblical, Talmudic and Medrashe literature with all their inherently religious concepts remaining inviolate. Basically, it is a replica of Lashon Hakodesh - the Holy Tongue - liberally garnished by the absorption of twentieth century technological and scientific terminology and constantly revitalized through colloquial usage and scholarly research. Upon close scrutiny it will be found that etymologically, even an appreciably large number of these scientific terms can be traced to and are ultimately derived from our ancient and relatively modern, religiously based literature.

Presently we are perhaps too close to the pic-

ture to fully and accurately appraise the religious influence that the Hebrew language, even in its mundane, secular usage, is wielding in molding the emergent Israeli personality. Among other constraining and contributory factors, Hebrew, as an all embracing vehicle of expression in Israel is beyond a doubt or question a significant deterrent to secularism.

On the other hand to blink at reality and adamantly maintain that Israel is not afflicted to some degree by the scourge and threat of secularism, would be a flagrantly obvious distortion of the facts of life. It does exist. But what should not be lost sight of is the often overlooked fact that whatever inroads secularism has made into Israel's society-politically, socially, culturally or otherwise - is by and large an imported commodity and not indigenous in origin.

Up to 1948 Israel's Jewish population totalled between six and seven hundred thousand. Since then it swelled to the roughly estimated three million mark, with 26.8% of them having emigrated from the Middle East and North Africa and 28.1% from Eastern, Central and Western Europe and the Americas with only a dribbling from the latter.

The Oriental Jews who stubbornly stuck to their "spiritual guns" and observed Jewish tradition almost in its entirety for many centuries, in the face of the most adverse circumstances and racial persecution, easily adapted themselves to Israeli life; animated by their newly found freedom in the Jewish State, their religious life deepened all the more. They along with the pre-1948 religious Yishuv (settlement) and the East European Jews who emigrated to the land from Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and Rumania as survivors of the Holocaust, now form the religious superstructure whose foundation had been laid by their predecessors of the Yishuv Hayashan.

In sharp contrast to these religion-oriented immigrants, the olim from the Central and West European countries and the Soviet Union compose the secularized element in Israel. The former are the heirs to the voluntary submission of their ancestors to the eroding and consumptive assimilation epidemic that engulfed European Jewry in those countries, during the Enlightenment period from the end of the Eighteenth to past the middle of the Nineteenth Century; the latter are the victims of the Kremlin's relentless, suppressive measures since the October Revolution to stamp out every aspect of Jewish Culture in the Soviet Union and in the satellite countries since the end of World War Two.

Whereas the various religious groups are extremely well organized, each promoting its own particular "Articles of Faith" through a nationwide network of educational and social institutions and political action - the secularists are an amorphous, disjointed group of free-wheeling individuals with no program or plat-

form to speak of. Except for Shulamit Aloni's Citizens' Rights party with less than a handful of Knesset members representing the secularists' ideology - it has no political following in the country.

Moreover there are straws in the wind that are proof positive indications that a process of assimilation in the reverse is beginning to percolate in Israel. A few examples of bold systems, reflecting this backtracking trend should serve to illustrate - although moving at the beat of a slow cadence - the rising tide of traditional Judaism in the Jewish State.

The persistent Gideon Hausner Bill to permit civil marriage for incompatible parties (according to established Jewish Law) has been defeated by an overwhelming vote in the Knesset last summer. A recent survey conducted on the observance of Kashrut in Israel disclosed that over 80% of the sample interviewed, responded in the positive.

But I think that the most striking and convincing example of a winding down of secularism can be adduced in the gradual return to tradition in many free thinking kibbutzim, established by the diehard, socialist-laborite pioneers of the Second Aliyah. During my last tour of Israel when I had the opportunity to meet with a number of veteran members of this type of kibbutz, I have been informed that Sabbath, holidays and a host of other religious observances have been steadily on the rise in their collective settlements.

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