

July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010

## ***The Rabbinate Is the Problem***

**By Leonard Fein**

In *Pirkei Avot*, “The Ethics of the Fathers,” it is written: “Love work, hate holding power, and do not seek to become intimate with the authorities” (*Pirke Avot* 1:10). Now, let’s imagine that all the fervently Orthodox rabbis in Israel were men of unassailable virtue, wise like Solomon, gracious as Avraham, learned as Maimonides, humble as Moses, selfless as Mother Teresa. Surely they would eschew office, derive their power from their incorruptibility. Surely it would never occur to them to traverse the conventional corridors of power, to walk in political paths rather than the ways of pleasantness and paths of peace that characterize the Torah. Surely they would then be honored throughout the land, seen by all as embodiments of the Torah values they study and teach.

An old Yiddish song tells of a shopkeeper who sings to himself a song of yearning and consolation: “*A yiddishe m’lukhe, raboysay, tzi kent ir dos grintlekh farshteyn? S’vet zayn a m’lukhe fun m’lokhim, a m’lukheh fun ge’oynim aleyh.*” “A Jewish state, my friends — can you fully grasp it? It will be a state of kings, a state of only geniuses.”

Yearning, still. But consolation? The rabble of rabbis who are the State of Israel’s official owners of Judaism are a counterfeit product, pretenders to a piety they daily demean.

Those are easy words to write just now, as the latest travesty in the rabbinate’s crowded chronicle of arrogant hypocrisy makes abundantly clear. The issue that’s attracted the most attention in recent weeks is a bill introduced by one David Rotem, a member of the Knesset from the Yisrael Beiteinu party, the same party that boasts as its leader Israel’s foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman. The bill, approved by the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, comes, according to Rotem, to solve the problem of the more than 300,000

immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not considered Jews under Halacha but who have come to Israel and been received as citizens under the Law of Return because they or their spouses are of Jewish ancestry. Since they are not halachically Jewish, their children can easily get tangled in an unforgiving bureaucracy on issues of marriage, birth and burial. The Rotem bill would empower local rabbinic authorities to handle formal conversion, with the Chief Rabbinate being the supervising authority. In effect, the bill would shift power from Israel's Supreme Court to the Chief Rabbinate, with potentially profound implications for how the Law of Return is interpreted. The Chief Rabbinate could, and presumably would, limit conversion to those who vow to live according to halachic requirements, their conversions being revocable should they violate its provisions.

Not to worry: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced his opposition to the bill ("The bill could tear apart the Jewish people"), and it is likely for the time being to be shelved, if not killed, this as a result of the immediate and vociferous opposition it stirred up in mainstream American Jewish organizations, which made urgent representations to the Israeli government. They correctly saw the bill as an insult to all non-Orthodox Jews both in and outside Israel.

That opposition was praiseworthy — but in the end, it misses the point, for the Rotem bill is only the latest such insult. Others like it will continue to crop up from time to time, and women will continue to be shunted aside at the Western Wall, and more than a few rabbis will continue to preach rebellion against civil authorities, to pronounce that a Conservative synagogue is not a synagogue and a Reform rabbi is not a rabbi, and the principal victim of all that sectarian agitation will continue to be... Judaism itself.

The underlying issue here is the entitlement of the Chief Rabbinate. Which means that the core issue is the decidedly unholy alliance between synagogue and state that is a distinctive feature of the Jewish state.

But isn't such an alliance a part of what is meant when we refer to Israel as "a Jewish and democratic state"? No, it is not. That phrase surely does not and ought not mean a state in which a particular understanding (or misunderstanding) of Judaism is invested with political authority and subsidized from state coffers. It is sufficient to know that in the Rotem affair, people on both sides were eagerly searching for some sort of compromise that would offer a fig leaf of dignity to

Jews who are outside the Orthodox ambit yet, at the same time, preserve the power and priority of the Orthodox establishment. Such a compromise compromises all.

Yet the visible consequence of that power and priority is the contempt for Judaism — for Judaism, not just for Orthodox Judaism — that is widely felt in secular Israel. Very many Israeli Jews see Judaism as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Orthodox rabbinate, see it as an oppressive and intrusive imposition, hence see its ways as decidedly unpleasant and therefore choose to resent Judaism itself. A rabbinate too insecure to compete for the respect of the people or too arrogant to believe it matters whether it is respected (so long as it is subsidized), that enthusiastically participates in the pursuit of political power is, however, no greater a hazard than a political system that invites such participation. For Judaism's sake, it is time to put the separation between religion and state — too often considered unthinkable — on the table.