

Divide and Conquer?

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Leonard Fein

Ha'Aretz, November 5, 1977: "The Sephardi Chief Rabbi is prepared for compromise and dialogue on issues of conversion and marriage, but only with the Conservatives."

Staff Memo to the Chief Rabbi:

You wanted a summary of where we are in the battle with the heretics. By and large, as you know, we're doing fine. Obviously, no real "compromise" is possible -- not now, not 90 days from now when the Ne'eman committee is due to report. The Reform clowns and the Conservative wannabees will never accept our authority, and we, of course, will never accept them as colleagues.

As to Netanyahu, he won't force the issue, for fear we'll quit the government. Your recent conversations with Barak and other Labor people have made him quite nervous. He knows that in the end, if we propose a deal to Labor, they'll buy it without blinking. And now that he's botched his relationship with just about all the other government ministers, he needs us more than ever.

That leaves only the question of our relationship, and Israel's, to the Diaspora. That's a bit trickier, since what we've been hearing about how agitated American Jews are is, on the whole, accurate. (I say "on the whole" because, while most American Jews don't care about how we here order our affairs, their leaders do, and their leaders will continue to stir up controversy.)

In that connection, I applaud your tactic of trying to split the Conservatives from the Reforms. There's a powerful right wing among the Conservatives, people who genuinely believe that they are *halachic* Jews. More than they care about what Israel decides regarding its own internal affairs, they want to be patted on the head by us, taken as full-fledged partners whose only

difference from us is on women's issues. But: May I urge subtlety upon you? It would be best to seduce (if you'll forgive the expression) them quietly, without calling attention to what you're doing, lest you arouse the yammerers.

Are there enough wannabee Orthodox to wreak havoc inside the Conservative movement? I'm inclined to think that with continuing quiet encouragement from us, the answer is "yes." My hunch is that if we offer those of their rabbis who observe the commandments -- say, who are punctilious in observing the *Shabbat* -- the right to convert and officiate at marriages, very many would flock our way. That would leave a weakened Conservative movement and an abandoned (and confused) Reform movement. And if, say, half the Conservative Jews in America were to feel comfortable with us, that would immediately quiet the American federations.

I wouldn't fight the proposals for greater government or Jewish Agency support for Reform and Conservative institutions in Israel. Sure, I'm bothered by the inroads they are making, but these don't represent a real threat to us. If parity among the movements on money matters is their goal, let 'em have parity. We'll still be the overwhelmingly dominant group. Most Israeli Jews will see them as foreign imports, and we'll continue to benefit from the rising tide of fundamentalism around the world. (The C's and R's thought time was on their side. Fancy that.) After all, more Israelis have identified with Scientology than with Conservative and Reform Judaism (some Judaism!) combined. And we'll still have both the immense financial advantage that comes of controlling the ministries we control and the political clout where it counts.

The serious problem would arise if they got together to demand an end to our monopoly when it comes to public policy. But we can beat that one back with a quiet reminder to our colleagues in the government. The other danger is that they'll go really public with the issue, ask the U.S. State Department with its new concern for religious discrimination to monitor Israel. But do you really think that members of Congress are the American Administration are going to take the chance of criticizing Israel on religious freedom grounds?

And don't worry about the critical reaction when you call the Reform ones "clowns." That's how we see them, and treating them with respect would be hypocrisy. Nonetheless, you'd be wise to

be a bit more adamant in condemning the violent ones on our side. They don't help our cause at all. (Not only that, your calls for an end to the violence won't be heeded. So the intimidation will continue, but you'll look like a statesman. Neat.)

Bottom line: Steady as she goes. God is, after all, on our side.