

**PRIVATE FAITH AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION
ORIENTAL IMMIGRANTS AND THE ORTHODOX SECULAR POLARIZATION OF ISRAEL**

*by NISSIM REJWAN**

An attempt to describe what impact the hasty mass transfer of Oriental Jews to Israel had on their life and outlook can only be undertaken with a great deal of apprehension and hesitation. It obviously requires a wide-ranging and long-term sociological investigation. What I will try to do in this short article is to give the reader just an idea of that impact, observed and documented in a somewhat superficial impressionistic manner and drawing on the writer's own knowledge of Jewish religious life and practices in his native city of Baghdad.

A paramount factor in a religious Oriental newcomer's integration into Israeli society has been a kind of dual pull exercised by two opposing forces within that society, with manifestly negative reactions and producing arguably detrimental effects. These two forces are those of an overwhelmingly secularized society and political establishment on the one hand and a deeply-entrenched, diehard and highly institutionalized religious community on the other.

How these two contrary pulls were to manifest themselves, and the effects they had on the religious as well as the day-to-day life of our immigrant, can be comprehended only by placing them in the general framework of the Israeli concept of "immigrant absorption." In his book, *The Absorption of Immigrants*,¹ Professor Eisenstadt of the Hebrew University makes three general assumptions on the subject of absorption which seem to faithfully reflect the prevalent official attitude on the subject. These are:

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1. S.N. Eisenstadt, *The Absorption of Immigrants: A Comparative Study Based Mainly on the Jewish Community in Palestine and the State of Israel* (London, 1955).

- 1) that the core of the Israeli nation is the Hebrew-Zionist tradition;
- 2) that the adaptation of other groups to that nation can, therefore, be indicated by measuring the degree to which they have accepted this tradition;
- 3) that the range of cultural differences among the various sectors of the Israeli population is less wide than might appear on the surface, and that the prospects of achieving a homogeneous nation are good.

Thus the impact of the secularized Israeli society on the religiously-oriented immigrant from a Middle Eastern or North African country was bound to be one of disorientation. For the fact – as Professor Eisenstadt shows – was that, in contrast, for example, to Serbian and Bulgarian Jews who fit into Israeli society without difficulty, the Middle Eastern immigrants adapt less readily, *partly because they hold on to their traditional norms*. Eisenstadt is fairly specific on this point, asserting that the ease with which immigrants from Serbia and Bulgaria adapt themselves to Israeli norms springs from their “lack of traditional, nonformal Jewish identification . . .” A most fitting commentary on this phenomenon was made some two decades ago by an American sociologist in the course of a review of Eisenstadt’s book. “Thus,” he wrote, “Orthodox Jews, ‘returning’ to Israel after long exile, are welcomed with the request to shed some of their ‘less assimilable’ Jewishness. It is a measure of Eisenstadt’s partisanship that he appears to have no inkling of how strange this looks to the outsider.”²

This being the situation, it is evident that an observant, tradition-oriented immigrant from a Middle Eastern or North African land begins at a disadvantage. The subtle but always present pressures he confronts in the society as a whole are intensified by what he faces in his own family and home. If he happens to be a parent, the odds are that he will gradually lose all control over his children. In most cases these children – sons and daughters in their teens and barely out of high school – have had to support their parents and their younger sisters and brothers. Outside influences and pressures to which the children are subjected have a detrimental effect upon relationships within the home and parental authority becomes ineffective and often irrelevant. Thus, our immigrant loses hope of maintaining a truly *kosher* household and has to watch in subdued anger how his children enthusiastically embrace the culture and norms of the secularized, “post-Jewish” society outside.

But if, as a factor in his spiritual life, the secularized society has proved detrimental to the religious practices and continuity of the Oriental immigrant, Israel’s institutionalized and completely politicized religious establishment cannot be said to have been any more help here either. This is obviously not the place for anything like an exhaustive survey of the factors responsible for this state of affairs; but three of them strike me as having been crucial in this respect. These are: loss of the synagogue as a social-communal meeting place and institution of the first order; the increasing polarization between orthodox and secular in Israel; and the

2. William Petersen, *The Politics of Population* (New York, 1965), pp. 220-226.

growth of the political parties – religious and secular – as patrons and guardians of religious life.

As with all other Jewish communities, the synagogue in Middle Eastern and North African cities was far more than a mere house of worship, tending as it did to absorb and to develop the social life of the Jewish community. To quote a great Jewish scholar and historian: “It is not enough to say that the Jew’s religion absorbed his life, for in quite as real a sense his life absorbed his religion. Hence the synagogue was not a mere place in which he prayed; it was a place in which he lived; and just as life has its earnest and its frivolous moments, so the Jew in the synagogue was at times rigorously reverent, and at others quite at his ease.”³ In more concrete terms the synagogue, besides being a house of prayer, was also a house of study and a house of assembly. (It is interesting to note, in passing, that it is from this third function that the name of the synagogue is usually drawn in Israel: *bet hakeneset* means “the house of assembly.”)

Physically and architecturally, the synagogue in the Diaspora was designed to fulfil these functions. In a sense, the synagogue was the administrative centre as well as the community centre, and most of the announcements that concerned the community as a whole were made there, whether issued by the Jewish communal organizations or the secular authorities.

For the synagogue-going Jew from the Middle East and North Africa – more than for others – all this suddenly changed upon his arrival in Israel. What happened, especially in the first years of immigration, is that in addition to being physically separated from relatives, friends and immediate surroundings Oriental immigrants who sought houses of worship in their new neighborhoods had to content themselves with synagogues in which they tended to be and feel like perfect strangers. Even where there was a “Sephardi” synagogue to go to, this in no way was the cosy, friendly gathering of neighbours and relatives the immigrant had been used to and in which he could chat with friends and acquaintances in between prayers. And in those rare cases in which he could find a synagogue used by members of his own community – Iraqi, Yemenite, Sephardi, Moroccan and so on – our newcomer found that he had a good deal of adjusting to do. A host of outside factors, influences and pressures had in the meantime intervened to increase the confusion: the political parties (“Are you Mapai or religious?”); the virtual impossibility of separating personal piety from publicized conformism; the fact that organized religion became a state business and a subject for endless bargaining and squabbles.

Not surprisingly these factors – and above all the politicization of religion – led many of those who used to go to synagogue occasionally but regularly to stop the practice altogether. One such immigrant, a newcomer from Baghdad, tells me that soon after he arrived in Israel he stopped going to synagogue even on Rosh Ha-

3. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Meridian Edition (New York, 1958), p. 15.

Shanah and Yom Kippur, not because of any sudden loss of belief but because “every time I am in a synagogue here the first thing that comes to my mind is how political party functionaries and government employees seem to be running the whole ‘Jewish’ show.” He has no confidence, he says, in the sincerity of either the one or the other when they profess faith and piety or urge the believers to prayers and donations, since their very livelihoods depended on such professions and sermonizings.

The inter-party row created in the early years of the State by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries, and the hard bargaining which took place when they were divided over the “spheres of influence” of the various parties – as if it was a matter of “sharing the booty” – depict the extent to which the religious scene was politicized. The high proportion of observant Jews among these immigrants gave rise to hopes among the religious parties for a coalition between the active, politically organized and highly motivated Ashkenazi religious group and the masses of the passive but religiously oriented newcomers from the Orient. Such a coalition, in the words of an Israeli sociologist, “could have turned the religious Ashkenazi minority into a dominant majority and changed the character of the State.”⁴ However, “Driven either by hope or fear of forming such a union, religious and nonreligious Ashkenazim fought the big ‘battle for the immigrants’ in the early 1950s. The nonreligious dominant group had much more patronage to dispense to the new immigrants as well as direct control over their absorption arrangements (where to settle them, what schools to set up for them, etc.) It used its power, therefore, to shield the Oriental immigrants from the religious political machine. The religious group, which cooperated at the same time with the non-religious ruling group in the government and the Jewish Agency, was forced to accept a deal to divide the new immigrants into spheres of influence. In this way, the *status quo* in religious-nonreligious relations was preserved.”⁵

One of the ways in which the polarization of the religious issue affected the Oriental newcomer is adequately illustrated by the following real-life case. Eliahu, in his early forties, was the father of four when he came to Israel from Basra, Iraq, early in 1951 – two sons and two daughters whose ages ranged between 9 and 13. Back in his native city he was what in Western Jewish parlance would be termed a Conservative – observant without too much strictness, occasional synagogue-goer, a *kosher* home but with few restrictions on activities as travel, using the telephone and the refrigerator, and shopping on Sabbath.⁶ After some valiant

4. Sammy Smooha: *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (London, 1978), p. 101

5. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

6. It is worth noting here that, although it could safely be termed “Conservative” both in outlook and by practice, the liberal, easy-going traditional Judaism of these immigrants had no “ideological” articulation of any kind but was the result simply of a gradual and natural process of modernization. In Israel, many of these immigrants managed to preserve this informal brand of religiosity in their households, and it is interesting to note that strictly observant Ashkenazi inhabitants of religious neighbourhoods and housing projects have often complained

attempts, however, Eliahu stopped going to synagogue altogether and became even more liberal in his Sabbath observance. His most acutely felt loss in this respect, however, was that he and his wife Lulu found it easier and more natural first to cease lighting Sabbath eve candles, then to dispense with the age-old tradition of Sabbath morning *kiddush*, then the Sabbath eve *kiddush* and, finally, the whole family ceremony of a Sabbath eve meal that they both cherished and would have very much wanted to continue.

“But why?” I asked Eliahu, feeling a little distressed myself. “Well, it’s like this,” he said. “First, with the exception of my first-born who couldn’t be accommodated in any high school in sight, all the children went to the nonreligious school in the *ma’bara* (immigrant transit camp), and this meant that their outlook and attitudes became strictly secular. Mind you, even if I had been better informed about the intricacies of the educational system here I would in any case have sent the children to a regular state school, since sending them to religious school would have resulted in disruption of our household. The trouble, you see, is that unlike what we had in the past in ‘primitive’ Basra there is no half-way house here in matters of religious observance. It seems that you are fated to be either strictly orthodox or totally non-observant, a professed ‘heretic.’ Had we sent the children to religious schools they would have expected us, their parents, to run a far more orthodox household than we are able or willing to do. On the other hand, sending them to a non-religious State school meant that we have been deprived of any feeling of religious fulfilment and identification we had in the old country.”

Eliahu was profoundly unhappy about the current state of polarization between orthodox and secularized Jew. “In such a situation,” he explained, “people like me and my wife, who all their lives had led an untarnished traditional Jewish existence based on the principle of ‘live and let live’ cannot find their bearings. I simply refuse to be either a fanatical, strictly observant Jew or a totally secularized one who would not even spare the feelings of his orthodox neighbour. What is worse, I find no way of refraining from being one of both and at the same time maintain a semblance of the Jewish religious tradition.”

It is estimated that in the early 1950’s some 50 per cent or more of the newcomers from Middle Eastern and North African countries were religious. In 1963 the proportions were: 35 per cent among the North Africans, 44 among the Asians and 18 percent among Israeli-born Orientals as a whole. As Smooha points out: “These figures show that religious observance in the foreign-born generation is greater among the Orientals than the Ashkenazim, but the differences tend to level off in the Israeli-born generation. This is probably due to the cumulative secularization of the Orientals, especially those born in the country.”⁷

about this phenomenon. Their most frequent complaint is that their Oriental neighbours are “not sufficiently observant” – going to synagogues but not minding to watch TV on the Sabbath, sending their children to religious schools but letting them go to Saturday football matches, allowing their daughters to walk around in what the neighbours consider immodest clothes, and so on.

7. Smooha, *op. cit.*, pp. 117, 101.

Since the late Forties and early Fifties, when the wave of mass immigration from Moslem countries reached its peak, a new generation of native-born Orientals has grown — a generation of men and women most of whom must have become parents of third-generation Israelis. Research on this new generation of Orientals and their attitudes to religion and religious practices has been scant and far between; but what emerges from the research actually done in this field can be summarized in simple enough terms.

Of all the findings of this research, the most instructive from the point of view of our investigation are the ones showing the very low proportion of strictly non-religious men and women among the Oriental population compared to their Ashkenazi neighbors. Of a representative sample of Israeli high school pupils queried in 1974 as to the extent of their parents' religiosity and their own, the results indicated that among the Orientals 10 per cent only of the parents were described as "non-religious (*lo-dati*), compared to as much as 45 per cent among Ashkenazi parents — while of the pupils themselves 23 per cent of the Orientals considered themselves non-religious, compared to 51 per cent of the Ashkenazim.

No less striking is the rather high proportion of the "traditional" Jews among the Orientals, parents and children alike. ("Traditional" *massorti*, is used here to denote the equivalent of "Conservative" as used in the Western diasporas.) Of the Oriental parents, 57 per cent were described as "*massorti*", compared to 27 per cent of the Ashkenazi parents. The division among the pupils themselves, too, was very wide indeed — 56 per cent among the Orientals describing themselves as traditional Jews compared to 21 per cent of the Ashkenazim.

As to the proportion of those who designated themselves as "religious" (*dati*), meaning Orthodox, the proportions were: 33 per cent of the Oriental parents compared to 38 per cent of the Ashkenazim and 21 per cent of the Oriental pupils compared to 28 percent of the Ashkenazim.⁸

The first and most important observation to emerge from these figures is that among the Oriental half of the population in general there has been a marked and steady decline in the proportion of those who can still be described as observant Jews. Research as well as observation make it clear that, all in all, most religious Jews in Israel — irrespective of their ethnic origins — no longer hold the traditional, all-inclusive Jewish outlook. "The forces of secularization compartmentalize their life and bring them nearer to nonreligious Jews . . . Although there is no doubt that religious Jews share on the whole different social attitudes from nonreligious Jews, the unanimity in specific matters of religious observance simply does not exist on other issues. The religious minority has neither a uniform set of social values to transmit to its members nor an apparatus with which to police conformity."⁹

8. Uri Farago, *Stability and Change in the Jewish Identity of Learning Youth in Israel* (Hebrew), The Eshkol Institute for Social and Economic Research, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1977, p. 54.

9. Smootha, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

Needless to say, this phenomenon tends to be more pronounced where the new generation of Israelis is concerned. The primary finding here, as one Israeli scholar put it recently, is that religiosity among Orientals as a whole is grasped in terms more of simple, on-going traditionalism than of a strict, inviolable set of precepts. A related finding has been that the children of Oriental immigrants tend clearly to be less religious in outlook and in practice, compared to their parents, than children of observant Ashkenazi parents, who actually tend to be more rather than less observant than their parents. This is generally explained by the fact that far more care and much better facilities are available to these children than to their Oriental peers — such as *Yeshivot* (Talmudic schools), synagogues, youth clubs and so on.

This explanation does not seem quite adequate. A more balanced analysis of the situation would take two further points into consideration. The first is that, as in almost everything else, the Oriental newcomers and their offspring experienced, and continue to experience, a feeling of estrangement, of foreignness almost, in the predominantly Ashkenazi culture — and this regardless of the religious-non-religious dichotomy. To give only one example: The word “*doss*” is used pejoratively by Israeli *sabras* to designate an orthodox Jew. However, among young native-born Oriental youth the term signifies an orthodox *Ashkenazi* Jew. No matter how pious he is and even when he is clad exactly like his Ashkenazi counterpart the orthodox Oriental Jew does not manage to earn the name “*doss*” among young Oriental boys and girls.

The second factor to be considered here is that, whether religious or secular, political party leaderships in Israel continue to try to exclude the Orientals from positions of real power and influence, ethnic considerations apparently being more decisive than matters of mere religiosity or observance. This state of affairs has resulted in some very concrete disabilities for the orthodox Oriental community, such as the lack of adequate talmudic schools and seminaries and the consequent shortage of Sephardi and Oriental rabbis. The same is true of synagogues, youth clubs and other facilities.

Despite all this — or rather because of it — students have noticed that the acculturation process undergone by the Oriental newcomer and his children in the religious field has been as fast and as wide-ranging as that they have undergone in other spheres of culture. Many specifically East European religious customs and mores which with the passage of time became completely identified with Jewish religious precepts have been adopted by the Orientals and their rabbis with no objections voiced. Among these: the universal use of skullcaps, in and outside the houses of prayer, at the dining table and away from it; burial rites, gravestones and visitations of the dead: the religious — as against the State’s — ban on bigamy; and many points of differences in the liturgy, minor matters of *kashrut*, etc.

In all these fields, the Sephardi rabbinate and population embraced the norms of

the dominant group unquestioningly.¹⁰ Without necessarily implying any value judgement on the matter, this readiness seems to this writer to be a measure of the frailty of the Oriental newcomer's cultural power of resistance confronting a dynamic and aggressive dominant culture. As such, it can be seen as merely part of the general pattern of the Oriental's attempt to make the best of a difficult and trying situation.

10. This, it is to be remarked, despite the fact that in Israel differences between the two large ethnic divisions – the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi – are practically the only cultural differences tolerated and indeed institutionalized by the society. Hence, perhaps, the relatively slow pace of acculturation in this field.