Major Developments in Jewish Life over the Past 50 Years

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Introduction

In 1968, I returned to Britain from yeshiva in Jerusalem to take on my first full-time rabbinic position as rabbi of the largest congregation in Scotland, the Giffnock & Newlands Congregation in Glasgow. It was a thriving community that had just moved into a new palatial synagogue and center that reflected its position in a community of nearly 20,000 Jews. Glasgow, at that time a community made up primarily of Jews from Lithuania, had several large synagogues and many smaller ones, a Bet Din, a yeshiva, a Jewish Day School, and a full array of welfare agencies and cultural societies.

Today the community numbers several thousand. Former congregants of mine can be found in London and Manchester in the UK, and in the United States, Israel, Canada, and Australia. Glasgow’s decline is symptomatic of the

demographic changes that Jewish communities have always gone through. Who remembers that a thousand years ago Bari and Otranto in Southern Italy were among the largest and most learned Jewish communities in the world?

Jewish communities have always experienced political, physical, and spiritual cycles. The innovations of Karaites, Kabbalists, Hassidim, Maskilim, and Reform have all affected the character of Jewish life at various times. They have challenged and enriched, risen as innovative movements and then sunk back into conservative establishments. Life is cyclical, both in nature and in human affairs. Jewish life, like all others, has gone through periods of creative innovation and then retrenchment and back again. So the changes that I have experienced in my lifetime are merely blips in the history of humankind and are not the final story.

Israel

Looking back at my 50 or so years as a rabbi to Orthodox congregations in various countries, without any doubt the single most important external factor for change, for better and for worse, has been Israel.

Since 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel, the feeling in Europe that Jews were not wanted and had nowhere to go, nowhere to flee to, has disappeared from the Jewish psyche. Nevertheless, the sense of insecurity, even alienation, that many Jews felt did not begin to disappear until 1967. The early years of the State were years of hope, but also years of anxiety and fear that the amazing achievements of ingathering and state-building could be snuffed out at any moment by its surrounding enemies. They were years of deep divisions; between the secular and the religious, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, and between different ethnic communities and political parties in Israel. This was something that was a completely new phenomenon for most Diaspora Jews. All of this continues of course, but it is not as dogmatically intransigent as I recall in the 1950s and 1960s, when Mapai and the secular parties ruled the roost.
Until 1967, Jewish communities in the Diaspora thought of themselves as self-sufficient, both religiously and culturally. They looked at the community in Israel with warmth and commitment, as a child that needed nurturing despite its behavioral problems. Those of us who were traditional to whatever degree found the strongly anti-religious atmosphere that pervaded government institutions, offices, and personnel in Israel at that time discomforting and troubling. In the Diaspora, Jewish communities tended to revolve around religious life to whatever degree. In Israel, aggressively anti-religious sentiment was something quite unique.

After 1967, so much began to change. Anti-religiousness began to soften. There was a tangible sense that the amazing military victories were to some degree inspired from On High. Idealism transferred from socialism to nationalism, and Sephardic communities began to assert themselves. Religious education and institutions began to expand, and for all its problems, Israel now represented security and confidence. In contrast to the secular Zionist, a new form of pioneer, the Messianic-inspired settler on the West Bank (to distinguish those who settled out of conviction as opposed to financial benefit), created a new sect in Judaism, the Chardal, Haredi Le'umi, the Pious Nationalist. Menachem Begin was responsible, more than any other leader, for eventually turning Israel into a Jewish State rather than just a state of Jews. As political parties with religious or traditional constituencies began to gain in influence during the 1970s, for the first time one saw employees with kippot working in government offices and institutions.

Israeli society continued to evolve in unforeseen ways. Before 1967, there were relatively few Diaspora students in yeshivot in Israel. Soon the trickle turned into a flood, and new yeshivot of all colors, degrees, and ideologies began to mushroom. More Americans came to settle in Israel. The secular world was energized by the Russian immigration. But to the surprise of the Left, they turned out to vote for right-wing parties. Then came the Ethiopian immigration, who experienced all the difficulties of absorption and integration that previous waves of immigrants had. Meanwhile, the growing Haredi community, driven both by significant immigration and a high birthrate, began to expand beyond its original ghettos and assert itself more and more. At the same time, Israelis who left Israel rarely joined local Jewish communities.

Today, Israel has come to dominate Jewish life everywhere. All Diaspora communities are dependent on it for marriage, educational resources, religious scholarship, both yeshivish and academic, to a degree that was unimagined previously. Where once Bavel overshadowed Eretz Yisrael, now for the first time since the destruction of the Temple, it is Israel that overshadows the Diaspora. There is more religious creativity, variety, experiment, and depth there than in all of the Diaspora put together and doubled. The same of course can possibly be said culturally, in terms of literature, music, dance, and theater.

But at the same time, the pendulum of world opinion has swung dramatically against Israel. Whereas once Zionism sought to normalize Jews and solve Jewish problems, the contrary is now true. In the 1950s, Israel, a socialist state touted for its kibbutzim, communal settlements based on Marxist ideals, attracted left-wing

idealists from all over the world. Since then, Israel has largely turned its back on socialism. It was believed that Zionism would make Jews the same as everyone else and destroy the ghetto Jew. It has in fact resurrected the hatred that was too embarrassed to admit its pathology after the Holocaust and now has morphed from anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism and has spread unashamedly from Islam to fascism to left-wing liberalism. Ironically, it has only increased the sense of Jewish exceptionalism. Nevertheless, all this, together with Israel's economic success, has completely changed the Jewish self-image. Whereas once the Jews were disdained for being weak, rudderless, and rootless, now they are hated for being strong, chauvinistic, aggressive, and successful.

The numerical and financial power of Islam is making itself felt throughout the Western world, and its migrations are changing the characters of the receiving countries. The left-wing that once had the Soviet Union as its unifying symbol, now only has anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism to rail against. Israel is regarded as the symbol of capitalist imperialism, a proxy for the United States and therefore the symbol of everything the left detests. Logic or the facts have never affected prejudice—and prejudice against Israel is now the default of the intellectual world. Just as 50 years ago I could not have envisaged the dynamic impact Israel would have on Jewish life, neither could I have foreseen how hated it and we would become.

I am not sure all this is necessarily negative. If I had to choose (and I would not want to be put in this position), I would rather be strong and hated than weak and loved. But what I regret most profoundly about Israel is what I regret about almost every country I know, and that is its politics and its political culture, because it has invaded and infected the body of Judaism.

Religious Triumphalism

When I say that ultra-Orthodoxy is going through a period of triumphalism I am referring to attitude rather than birthrates. The nature of political bargaining has infected the religious world. I recall in the 1950s huge Haredi demonstrations in Israel against autopsies. The Ministry of Health in those days was in the hands of the ultra-secular left-wing Mapam party. Mapam eventually merged with Mapai, Ben Gurion's mainstream party of the left. Mapam's position was that religious objections to using bodies for medical practice or for autopsies to determine the causes of death, were both superstitious and retrograde; they stood in the way of progress. Initially, moderate religious parties negotiated compromises that three doctors had to sign off on any request for post mortems; only bodies donated by the deceased or the family could be used for medical practice; and remains would

be treated with respect and buried afterward. All these agreements were shown to have been ignored on the ground. The demonstrations were designed to curb the abuses.

The official position of the Haredi demonstrators was that all autopsies, post mortems, “Nituhei Meytim,” were absolutely forbidden by halakha. Now anyone familiar with halakha will know that this is not the case, especially where it can save life, and indeed organ donation to save life had been acceptable to the first Chief Rabbis of Israel. Here is not the place to go into the nuances of halakha. My point is that in order to bring pressure to bear on Mapam, and having seen that compromises had failed, a new modus operandi was established within Haredi circles. Because one was dealing with politics as much as religion, one could present an extreme position as normative in order to achieve one’s ends. In other words, knowing that compromise at some stage would be necessary, you do not start negotiations with concessions, you start with maximalist demands in the hope of settling halfway. This explains the implacable opposition of the Haredi world nowadays, the refusal to even consider limited military service, basic minimal secular education, all things that some of the greatest rabbis of the 1950s were in favor of.

The Zionist pioneers, the Sabras, always prided themselves on their no-nonsense, “dugri” approach to people and life. None of the effete, Germanic exaggerated false politeness. This produced the notoriously arrogant Sabra. Although Israelis are much less arrogant and more nuanced nowadays, that old arrogance can still be felt in the public arena. From the start of the State the political climate was poisoned by the antagonism between Ben Gurion’s left and Begin’s right. The Altalena affair was emblematic. On Ben Gurion’s orders the Haganah destroyed the ship commissioned by Begin’s Irgun (as the two armies were being integrated) to bring badly needed arms to Israel during its War of Independence. It set the tone for political debate. Which soon descended into recrimination and confrontation in the Knesset; rudeness, shouting abuse and occasionally throwing punches. This culture of “he who makes most noise usually wins the point” or at least gains credit from his constituency, soon became the norm in Israel—as indeed it did in most democratic systems. But in Israel, because religion and politics were intertwined, this aggressiveness infected religious discourse, too. Religions usually are affected by the prevailing culture. To use a totally inappropriate term, pork barrel politics, the world of political payoffs and bribery, soon became the norm in Israeli political society, and it has become thus in ultra-Orthodox society too, with its strident demands, blackmail, and cash for votes.

It is the Israeli tendency of confrontation in debate that has given religion an aggressive and combatant aura and its reputation for graft and importuning. But it has also fueled the desire for greater and greater strictness, as if this were the only response to the challenge of modernity and secularism. It is true that putting up barriers, refusing to compromise, and disregarding obvious inequities is the natural knee-jerk reaction of a beleaguered minority. The ultra-Orthodox used to see themselves this way and claimed that any reaction against them was an example of Nazism. I can't think of a more ridiculous and inappropriate epithet, but again, as is the norm in political conflict, words are intended to hurt, not communicate. Similarly, in disputes on religious issues it is common to hear perfectly Orthodox committed rabbis who take a different approach, described as apostates, enemies of the Jews, and betrayers of the faith.

If once the Haredi population saw itself as discriminated against, in many parts of Israel today the boot is now on the other foot. The tables are beginning to turn. The vast amounts of money given each year to religious education, welfare, and institutions has fueled the growth and power of this significant minority. But it seems the more they get, the less they are prepared to concede. The Judaism of sensitivity toward the less observant, inclusivity, and tolerance is fast disappearing. Even the Sephardic world, once symbolic of tolerant inclusive leniency, is increasingly aping the worst aspects of the Ashkenazic communities. It is true that such dismissal of other points of view goes back to the days of the Old Yishuv and the way the Sonnenfeld camp behaved so crudely toward Rav Kook. But whereas once it was an occasional aberration, now it has become the norm.

The Holocaust

The Holocaust is another crucial feature of Jewish life. Its influence has been felt in several different areas. In Israel, after having been largely ignored and psychologically repressed during the early days of the State, it has become the core component of Israel's identity. Masada was once the icon from the Roman period of the Jewish struggle for self-determination. The Holocaust has now become the modern icon—with some justification of course. Because had Israel been an independent state during the rise of Nazism, millions could have been offered sanctuary where no other so-called civilized country was prepared to take on the moral obligation.

During the 1950s, the Holocaust lurked deep in our psyches. But it was in the next decade, after the Eichmann trial, that the Holocaust became the compelling narrative of Jewish identity. Israeli society embraced the tragedy as a compelling

justification for a Jewish State and much of Diaspora society as a substitute for religious commitment. Ironically, over the succeeding years it came to be regarded by anti-Israelis of all kinds as proof that Israel was founded only because of the sins of the Imperialist world, and even Obama used it as the justification for Israel's existence in his now infamous Cairo speech in 2009.

The Haredi world had always resisted the formal state Holocaust narrative and remembrance days instituted either by the Knesset or the Chief Rabbinate as mere tokenism. Indeed, they argued that secular Zionism remembered the fighters of the Warsaw ghettos as the ideal response. Haredim on the other hand offered an image of spiritual fortitude and dignified martyrdom rather than pointless physical resistance. The Holocaust for them was such a catastrophic and traumatic event because they were overwhelmingly the majority of those murdered. Their response was to make the image of the destruction of the ghettos the compelling reason to focus entirely on rebuilding and restocking the wells of Torah that had been so brutally destroyed. Looking back to the mythical past became their animating narrative as they reacted by having as many children as possible and devoting their time to study and prayer.

Added to this was the sense that Western cultures, so vaunted as the symbol of the moral superiority of educated mankind, had either actively participated in the rise of Nazism or turned a blind eye to the fate of the Jews. Anything that reeked of secularism was therefore self-evidently corrupt and to be avoided. The only response to the Holocaust was to ensure that Judaism did not disappear and accord Hitler a posthumous victory. Any nod in the direction of secular culture was a betrayal. Meanwhile for many Jews, mainly in the Diaspora, remembering and teaching the Holocaust became an alternative way of expressing one's Jewish identity without having to deal with the demands of religious behavior.

The Hassidic Model

Slowly and imperceptibly, more than ever before, Hassidism has proved to be the dominant internal influence, whether consciously or not, on ultra-Orthodoxy today. Its influence has not just been through its political and financial power or even so much in the fact that non-Hassidic branches of Orthodoxy have adopted its business model. Rather it is in its anti-intellectualism, in its absolute rejection of anything non-religious way beyond anything seen in Europe before the Second World War.

Most of the Orthodox survivors of the Holocaust were Hassidim who came from the Carpathians, with its longstanding tradition of resisting any secular, cultural,

or Zionist influence. The Hassidic opposition to secularism and rationalism came to dominate the Haredi world. Its anti-intellectualism, with its emphasis on “simple faith,” made it resistant to any form of rational religion. Chabad Hassidism, which expressed the more cerebral aspect of Hassidic thought, resisted rationalism and adhered internally to fundamentalism, even if its acceptance of other Jews, no matter how far they had strayed, made it appear more receptive. Its use of modern methods of public relations and promotion often belie its underlying conservatism and fundamentalism. Chabad has identified with the State of Israel far more than most other Hassidic sects, and its aggressive maximalist attitude toward territorialism has set it apart from most of the the Hassidic movements.

Ironically, the massive growth of the Haredi world was dramatically aided by the much disparaged socialist policy of welfare. Whether in Israel, Europe, or America, state aid boomed after the Second World War, inspired by civil notions of welfare rather than religious ones. This product of secular values was crucial in enabling a culture of dependency. It also reduced the need to earn a living, along with its requirement for secular educational skills of varying degrees.

Its system of disciplined authority with the rebbe and his court at the summit, its exceptional commitment to charitable works, and its encouragement of the accumulation of wealth helped it become so dominant that eventually even the anti-Hassidic Lithuanian community, the yeshivish world, soon adopted all its trappings of power and authority. But that world was also one in which violence was tolerated—against recalcitrant members, against anyone trying to challenge the authority of the rebbe, and against other groups perceived as threats. Such violence has been seen increasingly in both Hassidic and Lithuanian circles, whether at election time or when rival camps of supporters of candidates for power or leadership battle it out, either in yeshiva halls or the streets of Haredi neighborhoods.

In suggesting that Israel itself plays a major part in all of this might seem unfair, when we have witnessed similar trends elsewhere in other religions. But the nature of Israeli society, its tone and character, as well as its welfare, have certainly played a crucial part in the processes I have outlined. The confrontation, the aggression that now characterizes debate within the Haredi community, is undermining its amazingly positive qualities of social welfare and support, not to mention religious devotion, study, and strong sense of group identity. Similarly, its reluctance to deal with abuse within families reflects both a suspicion of the outside world and an overly protective attitude toward male perpetrators

precisely because as Haredi men they are often given a pass.

All this is of course to be seen elsewhere, but the Israeli version is all the more disturbing to us who care. They make Orthodox Judaism less welcoming to challenge, difference, and individuality, and less tolerant.

The competitiveness within Orthodoxy has also led to increasing stringency, both with regard to the letter of Jewish law and trappings of outward identity and separateness. Each new generation seems to be stricter than the previous one. I used to think once there would come a moment when the next generation of religious leaders would make their personal mark on the Jewish world by being more lenient. In fact, over time it has gotten worse. The new generation of Hassidic rebbes I encounter are stricter than their forbears. This is true in America as much as it is in Israel. This cannot go on forever; eventually it will change. Only my time scale was wrong.

My predictions were wrong on this issue as they were, too, with regard to the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. In the 1950s, the Haredi world completely ignored the State Rabbinate. This meant that dynamic Chief Rabbis like Rav Shlomo Goren could make halakhic decisions more attuned to the needs of Israeli society in general. The Haredi authorities cared only for their communities. I expected that this would continue, and the State Rabbinate would hold the line of moderation and concern for the wider public in Israel. But as the Haredi world needed more jobs for its growing population, ideally in religious occupations, and as employment in the Rabbinate and the religious courts offered excellent remuneration, they began to infiltrate the system to the point where they now control it. Only rabbis sympathetic to their authority and dictates will be elected to senior positions. This has completely undermined the moderate rabbis who increasingly have to create their own organizations, such as TZOHAR, outside of the Chief Rabbinate and often in conflict with it. This is getting worse. The only hope is that things get so bad that the Chief Rabbinate will undermine itself and be reformed. But if my record of poor predictions holds true, the opposite will happen.

One of the features of modernity is easy communication. Once upon a time a rabbi was master of his own community, and it might have taken months for news of any decisions he made to reach other communities. By then, a local tradition and authority on the ground would have been established. Nowadays there is instant global contact. A decision made on Tuesday night in New York will be challenged on Wednesday morning in Jerusalem. Pressure can be brought to bear in anyone thought to be undermining religious authority instantaneously,

including through physical violence. The fortitude required to withstand a sustained campaign of abuse, de-legitimization, and charges of heresy inhibits innovation and new ideas. New usages of old words like “masora” (tradition) are used to argue against change. This has prevented creative solutions to halakhic problems that still plague our society—issues such as the agunah, conversion of Russian Israelis, and problems of Jewish identity. The world is indeed smaller and as a result more challenging and dangerous. To disagree nowadays in the Haredi world courts humiliation and insult. Only the strongest can resist.

Outreach

Another significant new feature of Jewish life over the past 50 years has been the growth of outreach. The first modern example of outreach in Judaism was Hassidism itself in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But their evangelical beginnings were soon diluted. It was Chabad, under the leadership of its last rebbe, that dramatically changed the Jewish world. It led the way in outreach to all Jews, regardless of degree of commitment, contrasted most noticeably with the inward-looking exclusivity of almost all the other Hassidic sects.

Regardless of its special and often peculiar ideology, Chabad is in fact the primary resource for Jews of all degrees around the world seeking some measure of Jewish religious provision. Their open attitude to every Jew regardless of background contrasts with their own very strict internal pressure to conform and powerfully fundamentalist approach to Judaism. But their unfailing willingness to serve communities and universities despite this, indeed despite their excessive predilection for vodka, has given them a dominant role in Jewish life both within and beyond the ghettos.

Chabad pioneered outreach in the 1950s, and in Israel came to be associated both with the State and with territorial maximalism. After 1967, their methods of communication and salesmanship were copied by a number of non-Hassidic outreach movements. Suddenly a whole range of movements mushroomed from within ultra-Orthodox yeshivot and institutions serving the newly religious, or ba’al teshuvah community, proliferated. Israel itself became the destination of thousands of young men and women spending a year between high school and college to explore their religious identity in Israel.
Although the numbers returning have not replaced the greater number assimilating, these movements have helped regenerate many areas of Jewish life. In addition, they have been in the forefront of the battle to combat rising anti-Semitism and the almost universal movement to delegitimize Israel. The trouble

is that the “newly persuaded” often take matters much more literally and without discrimination than those brought up in the confident atmosphere of established tradition. This tendency to go by the book rather than through the absorption of different family practices and customs has led, in many circles, to a rigidity and inability to compromise, a reliance on the letter of the law rather than its spirit.

Individuality

But in my view there is another countervailing and no less significant feature of modern Jewish life that owes its existence both to Israeli society and Western secular society. I refer to the culture of individuality and choice that can be detected both within ultra-Orthodoxy and more evidently beyond. Of course “individuality,” like most words, can mean different things to different people. I do not mean the unbridled power of the ego to insist on doing whatever a person wants to do. But I do mean the right of the individual to pursue important goals and to make important decisions for himself or herself.

In religion, the primary challenge is to encounter the Divine and then use that encounter to improve the quality of one’s life on both the spiritual and the physical level. After all, I am the one who is commanded to encounter God. I have to do this in a way that satisfies my own specific mind and brain. That is the command implicit in the Shema and in the first of the Aseret haDibberot. But this is something I have to do. No one can do it for me. Most human beings are either unable or unwilling to embark on such a challenge, and so they accept without question dogmas, rules, conventions, and habits. We live in a world where we have the opportunity and are encouraged to explore and to challenge ourselves and to decide whether certain experiences are having the desired effect or not. We live now in a world where we can experiment, and even within defined religious structures, we have choices.

Ultra-Orthodoxy, like all conservative movements, is by its very nature resistant to change and individual choices. Quite the contrary. One of its mantras is “Bitul haYesh,” the importance of completely suppressing any materialism or individuality. But in practice there is evidence of much more individuality. There is greater fluidity and movement between the different sects than ever before. Even within the boundaries of the Haredi world, there are signs that many of the faithful, while not openly challenging the centralized hierarchy, do in fact choose to not always accept the authority of the leadership on every issue. The proliferation of smartphones and the internet in Haredi society, despite repeated bans issued from their religious leadership, is one obvious example. More and more young men are choosing to do military service in Israel, to qualify for

careers, even entering academia and combining religious life with commercial activity. All of this inevitably takes them out of the ghettos and opens their minds to other ways of life and thought. Within the Haredi world itself, the growth of media activity, professional organizations, industries catering to Haredi needs, and the engagement in local and national politics have all introduced them to different ways of doing things and thinking. One even often sees examples of Haredi women who are better educated than their husbands, agitating for more of a say in the way their communities are run. All of this is bound eventually to filter through.

But it is beyond the ultra-Orthodox world that religious creativity and innovation can be seen more clearly. Within the major centers of Jewish life, more and more committed religious Jews chose to move between congregations, sometimes belonging to several simultaneously and sometimes none. They choose where to go and when. This flexibility, or as some might say fecklessness and lack of responsibility, is an increasing phenomenon. In one way it is parasitic because it takes advantage of those who pay for and actively maintain congregations. But in another it underscores the zeitgeist of freedom to choose and move between different examples of Jewish experience in search of what succeeds in attracting them.

There are in addition communities that experiment themselves, with giving greater opportunities to women both to participate and to take on roles as educators and service providers, different minyanim expressing different styles and methods of worship, unique characteristics, praying at different times and appealing to different age groups. There are new kinds of minyanim that come under different rubrics, women’s services, partnership minyanim, and if one moves further away from the traditional wing, egalitarian and experimental. At the same time, Reform services have tended to become more traditional than they were. The fact is that Jewish religious life beyond established structures is very vibrant and dynamic. As old communities die, new ones spring up. Nowhere is this dynamism more in evidence than in Israel, where the richness of its spiritual life in both religious and secular communities and a renewed interest in traditional texts and Torah study is often inspiring. Critical mass is of course essential for variety, and nowhere in the Diaspora nowadays is critical mass anywhere as strong and rich as it is in Israel. There is greater freedom of religious expression within the Orthodox Jewish world than in the past.

Conclusion

The past 50 years have been exciting and have seen the expansion of committed Jewry. But the challenges have increased, too. Not the least is the alienation of the majority of the Jewish population from its commitment to its religious roots. On the other hand, the opportunities to return to them are greater and more varied than ever before.
One might argue that in Judaism, both during Temple times and later, there has been a creative tension between community and individuality, between sanctuary and home, between prayer and study. The commandments fall into categories of communal and private, as they do between those commands designed to reinforce one's relationship with Heaven and those with mankind. Just as one is often torn between obligations to family and those to community, so one is often torn between individuality and conformity. These tensions are rarely completely reconciled. They coexist and the challenge is up to us to find room for both.

The era we are living through is one in which individuality has never been more fashionable and stronger, and this has inevitably led to increased tension with community and conformity, particularly in one's younger years. The pressures of secular society are so great and all-pervasive that one can readily understand the protective sentiment that only in a ghetto of the like-minded and like-behaving can one survive with one's own culture or religion intact. But for those who cannot or will not conform, the options now are so much greater than they ever were to find somewhere where one can feel at ease with one's Judaism and with oneself. That to me is the most important feature of religious change I have witnessed over the past 50 years.