A View from Israel

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Living as an observant Jew in Israel is comfortable - almost too comfortable . The comfort level stems from the reality that Israel is, indeed, a Jewish state. Its culture, its calendar, its rhythm of life is fundamentally Jewish. These are the elements that express our national personality and which contribute to the feeling that “we are at home.” The special atmosphere on Shabbat and holidays is felt in most Israeli cities. Offices and shops are closed, the buses do not run and most people are at leisure. These are the elements, which contribute to this sense having created a Jewish society. Language, greetings - Shabbat shalom, hag sameach, tzom kal, mazal tov, b’sha-ah tova, b’ezrat ha-shem, baruch ha-shem, shevah la-el, all contirubute to the sense that this place is truly ours – our culture is the culture of the land. All shops have a mezuzah. Every hospital room, every government office and virtually every home has a mezuzah on its door. These elements of life are reinforcing and comforting to the observant public and indeed, to all Jews who feel a connection to tradition. There is no word in Hebrew for Saturday other than Shabbat. Language influences behavior.

But I worry about feeling such comfort. It creates complacency. It seems to me that this warm and fuzzy feeling of "Jewishness" also contributes to a sense of superiority and arrogance. It is this arrogance, which angers those amongst us who are not observant. The religious community in Israel knows what is right. Those who don't comply, who don't observe, who don't tow the line are simply misguided. They are more than misguided They lack values which obviously stem from a halachic way of life and so it quickly follows that those who are not religious are simply wrong. The non-observant population hears this and responds with anger and with considerable resentment.

If the religious population often engenders anger I would like to say that there are. thankfully, those individuals who serve as superior role models encouraging and even inspiring others to greater observance in their personal lives. It is interesting, however, to see how fluid the lines of religious observance are in Israel. There are many many people who are seeking to deepen their observance (hozrei b'tshuvah) as there are many who are in the process or have already completed the process of leaving their religious life style behind them (hozrei b'sha-ala) and so, it seems, that there is quite a lot of movement in religious terms. The continuum of religious observance is great and subtle; It is, therefore, difficult to label people as orthodox or not orthodox. It seems to me that the term shomer mitzvoth (religiously observant) or yir'at shamayim (God fearing) are more accurate.

We often hear that the largest numbers of Jews in Israel identify themselves as traditional – they observe mitzvot within a long continuum - Jews who pray every morning but ride on Shabbat, those who observe kashrut but not Shabbat, those who believe in God but do not observe Kashrut or Shabbat. Nonetheless, Shabbat is part of their week. Indeed, Shabbat is undoubtedly the focus of their week as it is for all of us.

Religious sensitivities are delicate. I once described a close relative of mine as being secular - hiloni. I wasn't using the term as an insult, only as a description. He was furious " Me? How can you call me secular? I believe in God, I light candles on Hanukkah, I fast on Yom Kippur, Me? Secular? God forbid. "

The people with whom I work – my electrician, plumber, painter and others – define themselves alternately as hilonim, secular or mesortiim, traditional. Most of them put on tefillin every morning, go to the synagogue Friday evening and perhaps in the morning as well, observe the holidays , but

they go to the beach on Shabbat morning. They always have a kippah in their back pocket or at least in the glove compartment of their car and they are consistently pleased to be asked to be counted in a minyan when needed. They certainly observe kashrut although they may not wait the requisite hours between meat and milk. These people are, for the most part, Jews whose origins are from North Africa – sepharadim. Sepharadim most typically don't discard their religious practices with the same vengeance as their ashkenazi counterparts. This very large segment of the population is most often ignored by the conventionally orthodox specifically by the American orthodox, the olim, who seem to have an even greater sense of "knowing what God wants" than the home grown variety of religious Jews. The orthodox world doesn't take these Sephardi Jews seriously. I see this as a tragedy. This community is in danger of losing their very close ties to tradition and if we don't somehow reach out to them with reasonable alternatives, with open tolerant acceptance of their life style and without arrogance I believe that we will see a greatly diminished observance of Jewish traditions. There are those who are working hard to relate to these issues. More power to them!

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Lastly, I would like to discuss the issue of kfiah datit, religious coercion, a subject that alienates a significant portion of the population here. It's a tough one. It may be a problem to which there is no just solution. How is it possible to preserve the very Jewish atmosphere which we so cherish without depriving the non-observing population of their rights to live their lives without religious coercion? The issue of marriage is at the top of the list of what is regarded by many as religious coercion. There is a significant number of Jews who do not want to marry in an orthodox religious ceremony. The only approved marriage is the one authorized by the offices of the Chief Rabbinate. What are they to do? I would hope that there could be an alternative to getting married in Cyprus for people who are alienated from Jewish life. Is it better for them not to be married in any formal ceremony at all? The topic of civil marriage in Israel has been around for years. On the one hand, a system of civil marriage seems civilized. On the other hand, for observing Jews, it is divisive and potentially dangerous to say nothing of halachically treacherous. Who will be able to marry whom? The question of civil marriage has been bantered around for years with no good solution.

And how can people get around on Shabbat to visit their friends and relatives if there are no buses running? Not everyone has a car and taxis are prohibitive for most of the population. But buses would surely harm our Shabbat atmosphere. Someone is going to be the object of discrimination..

There is much more: conversion, burial rites, divorce …We know that there are inequalities. And we also know that there are no good solutions.

On the upside, allow me to tell you about the superior Jewish education- free!! or nearly free - that my children received and the equally fine education that my grandchildren are enjoying. They are, as Jews and as Israelis, comfortable in their skins. They don't need to be defensive. They are good Jews who have a strong sense of identity and responsibility to their people and their country. Their "Jewishness" is as natural to them as breathing. I suppose that that makes all the strife, the stress, the security dangers, the economic difficulties, the dreadful driving culture, the political instability and all the rest, worth it. We truly are at home.