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Full religious equality is the Zionist dream of a reborn Judaism

By MARK H. LEVIN
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Only three Jewish commonwealths in three millennia, and we live embraced by one of them. Nineteen centuries of Jews would have endured gut-wrenching suffering to partake of our unearned privilege: a sovereign Jewish state in the Land of Israel. The responsibility of the historic conclusion of 2,000 years of exile lands squarely on today's Jews.

Somewhere Elie Wiesel wrote that had you told him there'd be a Jewish state in his lifetime he wouldn't have believed it, but had you told him he wouldn't live there he'd have called you a liar. Yet here we are, living on the outer rim of the national wheel, the very incarnation of Ahad Ha'am's Cultural Zionism, connected by destiny and cultural spokes to the hub: the State of Israel. Many of us travel there frequently, flying casually back and forth on what was once termed a pilgrimage, barely giving a thought to the miracle that has radically transformed Jewish existence.

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I was born nine months after the Jewish state was declared. Baby boomers grew up with a threatened, weak state that appeared to be the last refuge for our beleaguered people.

Israel was democratic politically with socialist economic tendencies, mostly secular, and the fulfillment of Jewish nationalism. Virtually no one spoke of settlement on the land as the fulfillment of a divine promise.

We justified Israel's right to exist as a nation/state among nation/ states. If the Germans and Italians deserved a state, why not us? We never envisioned today's mighty Israel, or our ambivalence about the nature of her governance and inequality. After the Holocaust it would have been absurd to think of Israel as the only democracy in the world in which only the ultra-Orthodox enjoy full religious freedom. I personally led a number of worship services with a combined male and female congregation in the Western Wall Courtyard in the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties.

And given the centrality of Israel to American Jewish life after the Six Day War and Yom Kippur War, who could have foreseen the abandonment of or disinterest regarding Israel among a significant percentage of American Jews? Yet the seeds were there, as sociologist Simon Herman wrote already in the Sixties, of the split between American and Israeli Jewry. We read, but we did not act. Now the challenge looms before us: creating a Jewishly diverse Israel with no controlling, central religious authority, a welcoming homeland for Jews of all streams, determining Jewish destiny according to their beliefs.

In the years following the Holocaust ultra-Orthodoxy was thought to be disappearing, a pre-modern relic, a remnant community decimated by the Holocaust and on its last legs. The existential threat to Jewish life was the surrounding Arab states, and in the wake of the Six Day War we waited for those states to trade land for peace.

With privilege comes responsibility.

Our contemporary reality is so different, and our historic obligation profound: to join hands to ensure the future of our Jewish state as one that cultivates the seeds of a reborn Judaism and world-wide Jewish people, a state that practices the ethics of her Declaration of Independence: “[C]omplete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience...,” and rises to the vision of her founders.

To shrink from this challenge is to evade our historic responsibility, no less than had the pioneers refused to drain Israel’s swamps claiming that the physical challenge surpassed their abilities.

The irony is that without full religious equality the Zionist dream of a reborn Judaism cannot become real. The politicized religious establishment intervenes with laws to prevent it. Only a free atmosphere to experiment with Judaism will enable Judaism’s rebirth.

Ignoring the Jewish state is to refuse God’s task; and there is no allowing the Jewish state to exclude the vast majority of the Jewish people from fulfillment as Jews. Our God-given privilege is the challenge to complete the vision of the founders: a democratic homeland for the world’s Jews who choose Israel as their home, and a spiritual homeland for us all.

The sole pathway to success is for world Jewry to demand a Jewish state that allows full religious freedom: where every Jew who claims Judaism can marry according to his/ her beliefs. The only way forward is for Israel to recognize the rabbis of all streams, as well as civil marriage.

Had the priestly caste remained in control after the destruction of the Second Temple, there never would have been a rabbinic Judaism.

Allowing rabbis who accept only the past as their authority to control Jewish life is to condemn Israel and Judaism to the dustbin of history.

Israel will never grow Jewishly with a Chief Rabbinate in absolute control.

This is our historic responsibility: to renew Israel as a Jewish state for all Jews.

If you will it, it is no dream.

The author heads the editorial committee of Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel, a trans-denominational rabbinic network.



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