

The Epikoros and the Goy

- Basil Herring.

From the pronouncements of the Israeli leadership in recent days, there would appear to be a thorough and pervasive insensitivity to the spiritual and religious themes and traditions of Jewish life. Particularly with regard to withdrawal from Gaza and parts of Yehuda and Shomron.

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Moshe Waldoks and William Novak tell the story of a small town epikoros (or Jew who denies the faith) from Shklov who travelled one day to Warsaw to seek counsel and encouragement as to how to spread his heretical views among his fellow Jews, with the help of the then well-known "Great Epikoros" of Warsaw. Arriving on a Friday afternoon, he was told that the Great Epikoros had gone to visit the mikveh. He was amazed at the bravery of the Great Epikoros, who was evidently not afraid to enter into the midst of Jewish ritual observance. Arriving at the mikveh, the small town epikoros almost collided with the Epikoros of Warsaw, who was just leaving. "O Great Epikoros," he said, "I have come all the way from Shklov to learn from you." But the Great One resisted his introduction and said, "not now, we'll talk later. Come to my house for Shabbas dinner. Right now I'm going to the synagogue." Again the small town epikoros was amazed at the courage of his hero, and followed him to the main synagogue, where, to his astonishment, the Great Epikoros himself ascended the pulpit to lead the congregation in prayer. The small town epikoros was flabbergasted. Never in his life had he ever even considered such an act. What a marvelous way to sway the congregation from its superstitious ways! He was certain that the Great Epikoros would insert modern, enlightened prayers in the place of the original texts, but no, the service was unchanged, and the small town epikoros, puzzled and disappointed, followed the Great Epikoros to his home, hungry for an explanation. After a sumptuous Shabbas meal, the Great Epikoros asked his guest to wait until the end of Shabbas before discussing the details of his mission. The next day passed with its traditional peace and calm, and not before three stars appeared in the heavens signaling the end of Shabbas, would the Great Epikoros consent to discuss the younger man's agenda.

Finally the visitor was given permission to speak, and he unburdened himself in these words. "I don't understand. I come from a small town, and I observe absolutely nothing of Jewish ritual. I don't eat kosher food, I never visit the mikveh, and the idea of leading services in the synagogue is unthinkable. I openly desecrate Shabbas, and I lose no opportunity to influence young people away from the Torah and into the secular sciences. But you, Great Epikoros of Warsaw, you don't seem to violate any of the commandments. I just don't understand!"

The Great Epikoros thought for a while, and then looked over at the small town epikoros from Shklov. "You're right," he said, there is a difference between us. I'm an epikoros. But you're a goy!"

This story, humorous and biting in its satire, has been on my mind these past few weeks in considering the nature of what is happening in Israel right now. And with the return this weekend of the PLO's Yasir Arafat to the newly autonomous area of Gaza, in the face of massive Israeli,

but particularly religious Israeli, demonstrations and opposition, the sad truth in the words of the great Epikoros, has come to achieve unprecedented fulfillment in the life of the Jewish people, and certainly in the life of the Jewish State. For today in Israel the cleavage and the kulturkampf between the religious and irreligious, the faithful and the apostate, traditional and secular, has become a veritable chasm, to the point where it is questionable whether the policies of the secular government as they relate to the territories, to social policy, family law, and the like, are more goyish than Jewish in their substance. It is not that I am unalterably opposed to the autonomy arrangements with the PLO, although I do have real doubts as to their wisdom; and it is not that I have lost my religious Zionist ideology or beliefs, although in recent months they have been shaken. It is rather the entirely doctrinaire secularist principles that seem to be guiding the Israeli majority, its judiciary and its government at this point, that cause us to question and doubt the future Jewishness of the State, in its present drift.

For if we examine the actions and pronouncements of the Israeli leadership in recent days, there would appear to be a thorough and pervasive insensitivity to the spiritual and religious themes and traditions of Jewish life. First, and most obvious, in foreign policy: In contemplating the implications of Israel present and pending withdrawal from Yehudah and Shomron, from Aza and Golan, the exclusive considerations seem to be pragmatic and political. But what of the spiritual and Judaic character of those lands, their unsurpassed sanctity by which they have given meaning and substance to Jewish life over the millennia? Whence and why the scorn with which so many in government speak of Hevron and its sister cities and settlements, and the religious Jews who dared to settle there so that Jews should be able to pray at the Me'arat ha-Makhpelah, the Cave of the Patriarchs three times a day, and strike roots in the hills and valleys sanctified by our forefathers, and as recounted in page after page of the Bible and our sacred literature? Does all of that count for nothing in the cold calculus of the Rabin/Peres/Beilin mindset? Do you have to be orthodox to appreciate the pivotal place of those locations in Jewish history? And what of Jerusalem itself, the holy city regarding whose status and future disposition there are supposedly to be discussions with the PLO. We had thought that this was not a particularly religious issue but a national one, not a matter of epikorsus, but of goyishkeit. But apparently we were wrong. And my how the government leaders are quick to disparage the religious, especially the religious Jews from America! Do they not realize that such talk of "foreign implants" does nothing to strengthen the character and spirit of the people of Israel, but serves rather to splinter and weaken the sense of solidarity and unified national purpose?

But it is not just the politicians. There is also the recent decision by the Supreme Court of Israel that overturned all precedent and instructed the rabbinical courts that they were to follow not religious, but civil, law in many of their decisions. Or what of the Jerusalem councilman from the Meretz Party who this past week urged non-religious car drivers caught up in a Shabbas-demonstration by Hasidim, to "put their foot on the gas and get away, even if people are standing in front of them."

Now I know that the religious themselves are not exactly free of blame for this scandalous state of affairs. In recent years the public deportment of the religious leadership has often bordered on the disgraceful, starting with the preachings and teachings of Meir Kahane and his followers, the financial and political machinations of the religious parties, for which not a few religious politicians stand indicted or found guilty, as well as the occasional high-handed efforts to force

religious observance on the non-religious majority. Even so, the attempts by the secular leadership of the country to divorce the policies, as well as the public and civic life of the State, from any substantive linkage to Jewish faith and Jewish history, is tantamount to a betrayal of all that the State represents. As Rabbi Norman Lamm put it last week in speaking to Israeli President Ezer Weizman, at a conference he attended in Jerusalem, if the present Israeli government thinks that even if Israel loses its Jewish character we will support it, it is dead wrong. As committed Jews, we have no interest in identifying with another banana republic, even if it happens to have a majority of Jews, or happens to be located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Given the secularizing tendencies of so much of the Israeli populace and government, it is no wonder that so many religious American Jews have ceased to consider themselves Zionist, and even worse, have stopped contributing to Zionist charities such as the UJA, the Jewish Agency, Israel Bonds, and the like. Such non-Zionist trends in American Judaism must be reversed, and we must do our best to educate our young men and women to identify not just with the land of Israel but also with the State of Israel, but at the same time, it is for Israel's own leadership to put itself back in sync with the fundamental rhythms of Jewish life as they have developed and evolved over the centuries in Israel and in the Diaspora, in modernity and in antiquity, as a people and as a faith.

In truth, if the Jewish people and Jewish way are to overcome the massive challenges before us as we close out the 20th century, we must all cultivate a sacred partnership between the secularists who are in political power, and the religionists who embody the spiritual legacy and strength of our people. We must somehow find the way to renew the covenant that unifies the people of Israel with the God of Israel and the land of Israel, and to do so without compromising deeply held principles, but also without losing our mutual sensitivity and respect. Too much is at stake, our enemies are too powerful, our hold on the allegiances of our young too weak, for us to fail in this historic challenge, at this juncture of generational and centurial transition. For if we fail, God forbid, our descendants will not be epikorsim, but goyim.

Which brings me in turn to the parshah, most especially as it relates to the moment of transition as Joshua assumes the reins of power from his mentor Moses. In Numbers 27, Moses, told that he is not to lead the people into the promised land, implores God to find someone who will go before the people, take them out to war, and bring them back triumphant, that they not be as a flock without a shepherd. God responds by pointing out Joshua, saying "he is to stand before Eleazar the priest, asking him the law according to the Urim, before God, and according to him (Eleazar) they shall go forth to war, and return home." Now why was it necessary for God to say at this point that Joshua should consult with Eleazar on such matters of state? And if indeed the authority remained with Eleazar, by virtue of his knowledge of God's will via the wondrous Urim of his breastplate, why need Joshua? Let Eleazar be the supreme authority, as an Imam in a Muslim society? The answer, says Rabbi BenZion Firer, is that the Torah here teaches us (and God thereby teaches Moses himself) that from that moment and on there had to be a balance of power, a separation, if you will, between religious authority and temporal might. Only God Himself wields unmitigated force; but among men of flesh and blood there must, without exception, be accommodation and compromise, negotiation and mutual tolerance. Until that moment Moses had combined both portfolios in himself, insofar as he was indeed the lawgiver and prophet par excellence, transcriber of the Torah, and visionary who spoke for God. But with Moses' passing that had to change; from then on, leadership of the Israelites and the Jewish

people was to be, depending on the times, by a shared condominium between prophet and priest, judge and general, King and Sanhedrin, exilarch and head of the court, Gaon and Nagid, Posek and Shtadlan (court Jew), and so forth, over the millennia. Today, in Israel and beyond, it should be no different. We are all bound by history and destiny to share the burdens and blessings of Jewish life, as Prime Ministers or as halakhic authorities, each in a separate, but complementary realm. And if Israel, greater or smaller, is to survive and flourish, if its people is to remain true to the destiny vouchsafed us by God and by covenant, there will have to be a greater degree of solidarity and consultation, sensitivity to the religious and spiritual roots of Klal Yisrael, ba'asher hem sham, wherever they are, even in America.

In conclusion, let us hope, and indeed as religionists let us pray, that the leaders of Israel will find the wisdom and the courage to remain true to the roots and the character of the people of Israel throughout history, to appreciate the truth and the validity of the Torah in its applicability to the problems that beset them and us, to be able to find a path to peace that does not endanger either the bodies or the souls of the people and the State, with strength but also forbearance, with humility but also true mettle, so that, with the help of God, Jews will yet again respect, if not love, each other, not as epikorsim or adversaries, and certainly not as goyim or Gentiles, but, in the words of the Rosh Hodesh benching, spoken a few moments ago, as hֹaverim kol yisrael, who will be nigalim be'karov, redeemed soon, and forever.