

# Ghetto Life

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am always surprised that whenever I am critical, no matter what the subject, some of my readers assume that I am depressed. So let me admit that this piece is indeed influenced by spending time in one of the world's great ghettos, Antwerp. But I hope you won't think this another "angry" piece. In purely material terms, life here is as different as life in a Saxon village was to living in a king's palace. But I concede that the mental claustrophobia is not very different. However, Antwerp has its very good points, too. So if you'd rather blame depression then be my guest.

Life in ghettos, whether under Christians or Muslims, was nasty, smelly, cramped and suffocating. That was one of the reasons why in medieval times synagogue services started to expand exponentially with additional poems and extra prayers not part of the Talmudic tradition. If your home is an unsanitary, overcrowded, poverty reeking, stinking hovel, of course you'll want to spend as much time in shul as possible. The synagogue was likely to offer some relief, for the men at least, in terms of space, activity, intellectual stimulation, an escape from the pressures and demands of home life and crying children. Amongst the several legal arguments for the Medieval predilection for adding extra prayers onto the very basic structure was the need to wait for everyone to finish the essential parts so that they could all go home together afterwards for safety. Otherwise, gangs motivated either by religious hatred or by financial gain would lie in wait for unsuspecting stragglers. The ghetto offered protection sometimes. But it was just as likely to become one's funeral pyre.

Nowadays ghettos are voluntary and, as a general rule, such attacks are rare, though not unheard of, particularly in Antwerp with its rather aggressive new Muslim population. The indigenous Flemish anti Semites prefer to confine themselves to verbal abuse. The advantages of ghettos are the provision of services, commercial, religious, educational, and social, with convenient access. In Antwerp this is combined with proximity to work because the ghetto starts with the diamond bourse area and spreads out for a mile or so to its south. Even those well-off Jews who want freedom tend to escape no further south than Wilrijk, the distance between Golders Green station and Hendon. Of course, if they really want to escape there is also the half hour commute to Brussels.

But the mental claustrophobia is a real problem. On one level this can be no more than the desire to conform and the lassitude and intellectual paralysis that comes from having things too easy, uncomplicated and culturally exclusive. Gossip is a huge problem, despite all the strict Jewish laws against it. Chinese whispers can make sinners out of saints or saints out of sinners. Everyone seems to know the exact personal and financial position of everyone else, including their Swiss Bank accounts, the profit on their latest deals, how much each wife's jewelry cost, and exactly how much they give to charity and which husband shouted at his wife and what scores the

neighbor's kid got in school even when the information is totally wrong. The good side of this speed of information is that emergencies, tragedies and crises are dealt with quickly, generously, and usually anonymously. The charitable deeds of Antwerpenaars are legendary, and rightly so.

Antwerp's ghetto is minute territorially compared to North London's but it contains all the rival cliques, sects, politics, and nutcases that any Londoner or New Yorker, not to mention any resident of Benei Brak or Jerusalem, is familiar with. A local Hassidic rebbe has recently instructed the faithful to buy spectacles one degree weaker than they really need, so as not to be distracted by what goes on in the streets. He has not, it seems, instructed the normally sighted to be blinded! Yet.

Last week two important visitors, well known and revered rabbis from Israel, very different in ideology and attitude, came to town with their retinues in the now obligatory private jet. One was a Lithuanian rabbi, the other a Hassidic rebbe (an impressive team, covering both bases, like the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, l'havdil). As is the custom they were taken round to all or nearly all the Orthodox schools and institutions and paraded at huge public gatherings and the local rabbinate danced in attendance. Just seeing the great man even if for a second, or getting an apple or a token is supposed to have a profound spiritual impact on all the fortunate recipients.

There is a school in Antwerp called Tikvatenoë, which is an admirable institution for children challenged in various ways and with learning difficulties. Being informed at the last moment that a great rebbe is honoring them with his presence, all the children were hauled back into school from their various external activities, sports, therapies and trips and gathered to greet the saint. Two hours of waiting ended with a message that he's not coming. This would have been more difficult for these special children, than it was for the good pious folk in Paris who waited even longer in a large synagogue to greet this rebbe before being informed that he was skipping Paris altogether and going on straight to Antwerp. No doubt he will put things right in the World to Come. As they say, you don't question a rebbe!

The other visitor was the renowned and saintly Rabbi Steinman who is often ferried around the world to bestow inspiration and blessings wherever he goes. I strongly believe it's more beneficial, or shall we say spiritually uplifting a great Rabbi, than ogling pop stars, footballers' wives, or film stars. Rabbi Steinman is a controversial rabbi for various reasons, not least is his approval of sending lazy or intellectually challenged yeshiva students into the Israeli Army, albeit into special religious units, and even encouraging some girls to go into National Service in Israel, which is all about social and educational welfare, not military activity. This is anathema to the anti-Zionist extremists of Neturei Karta and others on the lunatic fringe of Jewish life. So as he was arriving, a car with black-dressed, black-hatted and black-bearded "gentlemen", to use a totally inappropriate term, drove round the ghetto synagogues distributing leaflets calling Rabbi Steinman the Satan (taking the letters of his name in Hebrew (S-T-N) as the proof)! Fortunately that didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the majority. But I was ready to write about how typical of Antwerp this was when I was reliably

informed that the blackbirds were all well-known Londoners! Obviously they had nothing better to do or anything more charitable to spend money on than this. The Antwerp police arrested them for littering!

Dear reader, it doesn't matter what ghetto you live in; they all ought to carry warning signs that say "Living here can cause serious brain damage!" It won't stop anyone living there, any more than warning signs on cigarettes have stopped rabbis smoking. Besides sometimes the benefits really do outweigh the drawbacks. But there's always a price to pay.

(And as my second daughter Natalia has just got engaged— Mazal Tov!—I'm in a very good mood!)

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