

Jew Versus Jew

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There's a cute joke doing the rounds in Israel at the moment that my friend, Edward Cohen, sent me. It's an adaptation of a very old one, as most jokes are, recycled to meet current issues. But it is highly emblematic and actually explains why, despite all the ghastly negative press religious life in Israel has been getting of late (and indeed the actions of fanatics of all sorts), I am surprisingly sanguine, even optimistic.

It's on a bus, crowded with Charedi young men travelling from Benei Brak, the Charedi enclave outside Tel Aviv, to Jerusalem. It's packed with young men who devote their lives to study. And all of a sudden a very scantily clad young lady gets on and sits down next to one of the students, who shows no sign of registering her presence. After a while, to her surprise, he takes out an apple and offers it to her.

Here's an interlude! Dramatic effect! In the current Israeli version it is an apple. This only goes to show that the originator of this version was a secular Jew with limited knowledge of Talmudic or indeed historical sources. The Torah itself does not mention what fruit it was. The version of the joke I received actually adds the text as a footnote, so the secular narrator at least knows a Biblical text in the original Hebrew. In Western culture the fruit is always an apple. Why? Because in Latin apple is "malum" and "malum" also means "evil" and this fits the Christian concept of Original Sin. Eating the fruit condemned all humanity to be sinners from birth unless redeemed by accepting Jesus as their savior. Hence adam and eve ate the apple. But in fact there were no apples in the Middle East in Biblical times. The Hebrew word "tapuach", means "swollen" or "blown out" and the most likely fruit that was readily available would have been an orange, a fig, or a pomegranate. The Greek myth of the Golden Apples of Hesperides that Hercules had to gather also suggests oranges rather than Cox's Pippins (or the ubiquitous cardboard Golden Delicious).

To continue with the joke. The lovely, scantily dressed young lady on the bus then asks him why he is offering her a fruit. He replies, "Before Eve ate the fruit in the Garden, she did not realize she was naked." A snide reference to her revealing attire!

The next week at the same time, on the same bus, the same young girl boards, but this time very modestly dressed, and sits down next to the same yeshivah bochur, and in due course offers him a fruit. And he asks her why she is offering it to him. And she says:

"Before Adam ate of the fruit of the garden, he didn't know he would have to work for a living." Her dig back at the Charedi man in Israel who studies and never gets a job.

Of course, this gives away the age of the original joke, because nowadays she

would have caused such an uproar just trying to get on the bus altogether that there would have been a riot that would have brought it all to a halt. But still, nothing better exemplifies the current situation. Two different world outlooks, both fighting for supremacy in Israel today. One based on Torah to the exclusion of all else and one based on secular values to the exclusion of the religious and yet both drawing on a great deal more of each other than they are often prepared to admit.

The fact is that Israel has always been divided between those who wanted to shut the page on the Ghetto past and those who wanted to keep its flame alive. And both sides have always had their extremists, their provocateurs, their louts and thugs. I remember the 1950s when I first experienced Israel; in those days the secular Zionists were totally in control. You would not find one person wearing a kippah in any government employ or office. Now the pendulum is swinging the other way.

In all such culture wars the strongest, the most single-minded, the most ideologically certain gain control of the battlefield initially and then, regardless of which side, over time there is a reaction. Sometimes the reaction comes because people do actually put up a fight and push back. Sometimes it's because of the zeitgeist, the mood of the times. Think of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter Reformation. Think of Georgian England and Victorian. Think of the attitudes that led to the witches of Salem and think of the Founding Fathers and their open-minded, tolerant utilitarianism. Think of the French Revolution and then the Reign of Terror. Think of the Czar, Lenin, and now, Lord help them, Putin. That's how human society has always worked. Sometimes the process takes longer than others, but always there is a reconciliation before the next cycle starts again. Even the collapse of Rome was followed by a reconstructed Holy Roman Empire. History never ends. It always revolves.

I believe the unsavory battles going on in Israeli society today mirrors what is going on around the world. Once "The God that Failed" was communism, now it is liberal self-centered materialism. Wherever you look in Europe or America groups with a mission—be they Muslims, Baptists, Libertarians, pro-lifers, pro-choicers, Tea Party activists or unionists—are all fighting their grounds, giving absolutely no quarter, paralyzing the legislature, starting from an extreme rigid and unbending position, knowing full well that in the end they will have to modify and compromise. This will happen in Israel simply because you can no more impose religious standards on a significant section of a population any more than you can try to force them to give up their traditions.

The problem is in the meantime. Most rabbis are not willing to compromise on divorces or conversions. Muslims demand the rule of Sharia everywhere not just in Muslim countries. Occupy Wall Streeters wanting to dismantle the financial sector, and unions resist any modification to educational practice in the name of protecting teachers while their very charges suffer. That is the nature of humans and human society. We admire freedom and we admire choices, while at the same time we want control and we want black-and-white solutions. All or nothing situations never last forever. Eventually Mugabe, Assad, and Ahmadinejad will go the way of Mubarak and Gadhafi.

Look at us. From Moses through the Judges we were divided, contentious, and rebellious. A brief united kingdom under David and Solomon split into two warring countries of Jews. We were divided geographically and between Israel authority and Babylonian. Then came the Sadducees, Pharisees, Karaites, Rabbinates, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Eastern European, and Western, Orthodox and Reform, Zionist and anti-Zionist. We have had plenty of our own Savonarolas, our Pinchas zealots. Intransigent rabbis have always been driven out of town, attacked for their views, and ostracized.

Yet we have always adapted, survived, and found a way of coping—not without our tragedies, but we have come through. That very struggle has kept our tradition alive, as well as our divisions and our varieties. We are forged in fire! “And that, My Lord, is the case for the defense.” It is why, for all our crimes and misdemeanors, we are so bloody good and I wouldn’t change us for anyone!!!!