

The Great Divide

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

On March 7, David Brooks published an article in the New York Times about the rising presence and confidence of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn. Here are some of his points:

“Nationwide, only 21 percent of non-Orthodox Jews between the ages of 18 and 29 are married. But an astounding 71 percent of Orthodox Jews are married at that age. And they are having four and five kids per couple. In the New York City area, for example, the Orthodox make up 32 percent of Jews over all. But the Orthodox make up 61 percent of Jewish children. Because the Orthodox are so fertile, in a few years, they will be the dominant group in New York Jewry.

“For them the collective covenant with God is the primary reality and obedience to the laws is the primary obligation. They go shopping like the rest of us, but their shopping is minutely governed by an external moral order. The laws, in this view, make for a decent society. They give structure to everyday life. They infuse everyday acts with spiritual significance. They build community. They regulate desires. They moderate religious zeal, making religion an everyday practical reality. The laws are gradually internalized through a system of lifelong study, argument and practice. The external laws may seem, at first, like an imposition, but then they become welcome and finally seem like a person’s natural way of being. But there are still obligations that precede choice. For example, a young person in mainstream America can choose to marry or not. In Orthodox society, young adults have an obligation to marry and perpetuate the covenant and it is a source of deep sadness when they cannot.”

He concludes:

“Mostly, I notice how incredibly self-confident they are. Once dismissed as relics, they now feel that they are the future.”

That is correct, in that they are the one sector of our people that does not worry about survival or whether their children will remain Jews. Of course, this idyllic picture disguises multiple flaws. Nevertheless, throughout the Jewish world today this is the new reality. It must be galling for the vast majority of Jews, who dismiss Orthodoxy as irrelevant to their Jewish identity, to witness in their lifetime this seachange in Jewish life. The pressures on Jewish identity are so great, the opportunities to simply leave through default or companionship are so easy and available, that we are

rapidly approaching a tipping point in which there will be two Judaisms: one of practice, that puts community over individuality; and the Judaism of sentiment and casual affiliation, which is rapidly losing touch with both Judaism's religious experience and the commitment to peoplehood and homeland.

It is so sad to see so many people abandoning our heritage and our people because they have simply lost interest and commitment. And it worries me more that the most intense core of our people does not seem to care. Apart from a few evangelical Orthodox movements who try hard and often do wonderful work, there is a complete disconnect, as wide as the gap between Catholics and Protestants, except in matters of fundraising.

Judaism has never been more secure. The current fad of extremism will wane as it always has. It is the divide between those who practice at whatever level and those who do not which is becoming the faultline in our people.

Despite the valiant efforts and deep pockets of men like Felix Posen to support rigorous secular Judaism, it is a struggling underdog both in the diaspora and Israel. It is not entirely a lost cause, but it's a weak one. There is a lot of creativity on the fringes, and academic Judaism offers another paradigm, but none of it has created a vibrant alternative Jewish life. The alternatives are buoyed by talented individuals, but with no communal hinterland, no significant religious or cultural institutions. For literature to flourish, it needs committed readers and writers who actually do read and do write. For a vibrant Judaism at any level, you need people who study and practice.

A similar divide exists in relation to Israel. Once it appealed to almost the complete spectrum. Now the non-practicing are becoming less and less committed to the Land or State of Israel. The recent AIPAC conference in Washington was dominated by the more traditional, while its competitor, J Street, is in the hands of the secular.

This divide is not new. Consider the two kingdoms nearly three thousand years ago. Judea was dominated by the tribe of Judah and led, for better or for worse, by its kings of the House of David. The Ten Northern Tribes of Israel turned their backs on the Jerusalem sanctuary and in the few hundred years of their existence they struggled for an identity and a religious core. Inevitably, it disappeared after the Assyrian conquest. Judea was not at all a completely religious ghetto. But it had a religious core that enabled it to regroup in exile, recreate itself both in Babylon and when it returned, in part, to Israel. The religiously committed of both kingdoms survived. Those who cared less did not.

Or consider the Talmudic era. There was a massive divide between the Am Haaretz, the Jew who had no knowledge and little commitment, and the religiously motivated community of scholars and practitioners. They usually lived apart, rarely ate together or even married each other. Both were infected by irrational nationalist zeal. But it was the scholars who rebuilt after the destruction.

In the Talmud itself there was a debate between those who wanted to include

the Amei Haaretz, the ordinary Jews, and those who wrote them off. On the one hand there are over a hundred different references to not associating with an ignorant or non-observant Jew, and on the other hand there is the repeated declaration that every Jew is responsible for every other Jew: "Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh LaZeh" (San. 27b, etc.).

I deeply regret the divide and have tried all my life to help bridge it, largely ineffectually. The Orthodox world has been preoccupied with its own survival. But now that the tide has turned, it is time to look beyond the ghetto. The exclusionary attitudes towards conversion, towards concessions on rigid standards, and the refusal to come halfway to meet the needs and challenges of the other side simply exaggerate differences and push the others further away. It is time to reverse this trend. If we have a winning ticket, we should have the confidence to share it.