

Little Boxes

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was brought up to be an outsider. My late father, Kopul Rosen, was born in London, educated primarily in Mir in Lithuania, and served as the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues in London. In 1948 he resigned to establish a Jewish residential school in the English countryside. That's where I was brought up. It was outside of the established Jewish community, in a fiercely and proudly Orthodox atmosphere, in splendid isolation. My father was a contrarian. A passionate Zionist, he resigned from the Religious Zionists when they went into politics. He was fiercely proud of old yeshiva (my Hebrew name, Yerucham, is that of the Mashgiach, the spiritual advisor who had a profound impact on him). Yet he had no patience for obscurantism or narrow-mindedness. My father believed in our getting the best education possible, Jewish and secular. So I went eventually to the best yeshivot in Israel and to study philosophy at Cambridge University.

But I did not really belong in either completely. My spiritual life was on hold during my university years, and my rational, intellectual life shut down while I concentrated on fitting in and studying hard in yeshiva. But I knew I loved Judaism and that I wanted to represent it in an alien and unfriendly world.

My distaste for politics in Israel, particularly religious politics, drew me back to the diaspora. My antipathy towards religious establishments meant that I sought out independent Orthodox communities rather than the "big jobs". I had no interest in committees, politics, or manipulation. I particularly disliked the way religious, not just rabbinic, organizations tended to be bureaucratic, insensitive to individual needs, and concerned more with power than spirit. So I reinforced my sense of not belonging, of being an outsider even as I strived to teach and represent an established religion.

My philosophical training meant that I could not just accept cliches or religious dogma without examination or questioning. And my passion for Torah meant I could not disregard or stand aside when anyone was suffering in the name of, or because of religious exclusivity. I tried to become a champion of the alienated and the disenfranchised. This was as true of the outside world as it was of my inner Jewish world; I joined and rose within the ranks of the anti-Apartheid movement in Britain.

So after all these years of being a rabbi, a lecturer, a teacher, on three continents, I am still fundamentally a misfit. I have spent time in and amongst the most extreme Chasidic sects and rabbinic courts and loved them. Not a day goes by when I do not delve into Talmudic intricacies and concepts, when I do not feel close to God. Yet few days go by without classical music, philosophy, and Western ideas. I am all but none exclusively. Reform Jews do not understand my commitment to Jewish law, and many ultra-Orthodox Jews do not understand why I care so much about those who are not. I can sit at any

table and feel relaxed and happy, but only part of me is there. My late mother used to call me a chameleon. I am more Jewish than non-Jews, more non-Jewish than many Jews. I am more secular than religious and more religious than secular. I am more left than right and more right than left.

Let me just give you a snapshot of my discombobulation.

In the USA I feel repelled by Tea Party Republicans and by evangelical Christians who want to convert me and by Muslim extremists who want to kill me. I do not trust protestations of Left Wingers who claim to be disinterested. I do not trust Bill De Blasio not to undermine the wonderful and safe atmosphere of New York that I enjoy so much. Yet I know I am exceedingly privileged and fortunate to be able to live the life I live. I agree, the gap between rich and poor is unacceptable, and big business dictates spending, rather than need and poverty.

Now switch eastwards. I do not understand why Jews would still want to live in a European world increasingly antagonistic towards Jews and Israel. Further eastwards I badly want peace in Israel and an end to occupation, and yet I cannot bring myself to believe that Hamas will ever tolerate a Jewish state right there in the middle of the Dar al-Islam.

I read that Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu is back in Israeli politics, having been exonerated of charges of corruption, money laundering, and deceit. I feel an overpowering sense of despair and disgust that the Jewish state will be represented by such an unsavory, thuggish, tub-thumping, neo-racist. When I read that Chareidi thugs can go and beat up an old rabbi because he supported another candidate to be Mayor of Jerusalem, I want to have nothing to do with such people. When I read of corrupt dayanim, of recalcitrant husbands, of rabbis who are sexual predators, all getting away with it, how can I possibly recite the same prayers as they do?

When I see the hypocrisies of politics, the sexual corruption of modern life, the abuses and misuses, the pursuit of money as the ultimate value of most societies, I find it terribly depressing. Yet at the same time there is so much good. Socialism has brought us not just the corruption of unions but the protection of the weak and the social welfare without which Orthodoxy would never have been as strong as it is today.

I feel just like one of those silver pinballs in the machines in the old entertainment arcades of my youth (now it's all computerized and we don't have jukeboxes any more, only iTunes). Why do I have belong where I do not feel comfortable? Why cannot we make our own choices and live our own lives according to our own decisions? Why can't religion accept that its role is to provide services and inspiration, not control? Why not appreciate and nurture the individual souls instead of looking at the exterior conformity, the shells? Every single denomination and variation of every religion, as far as I can see, is as guilty of exclusion and pettiness as every other.

I am no model. Lord knows I've got it wrong as often as not. But we have to try to be honest with ourselves. We can and should keep our own boundaries and preferences. But we need to stop trying to impose them on others.

Sometimes, it is true, the other side just won't let us. Human conflict, the desire to appear to be better, morally superior, holier seems endemic and universal. Yet if small groups, ethnicities, religions don't fight for their own space they will disappear. I fight to keep Judaism alive because I believe it matters and has something good to say. But I feel that most of my coreligionists don't seem to care.