

Embarrassed to be Israeli?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week I met someone just back from the Greek islands who told me that they kept on meeting Israelis who confided to them that they were embarrassed to be identified as Israelis and preferred to hide it. (I have heard that Americans abroad, ashamed of their government, do the same, preferring to be known as Canadian!) It reminded me of stories my daughters told me years ago of Israelis they met on their travels who claimed they were Italians. Anything but Israeli. Although at the same time there were stories of Israelis being unwelcome after trashing hotels and behaving badly from Turkey to Greece to South America to Thailand. Not unlike, *mutatis mutandis*, boorish, drunken British sex tourists.

And I have heard so many stories of Israelis at universities around the world who tell me they try to hide their identities or avoid wearing any outward signs that might give them away, because to be identified as Israeli is uncomfortable.

At the same time, I have heard more and more stories of Jews saying the same thing about identifying themselves as Jews. Of course, this is all anecdotal and not scientific (though I have never trusted surveys of public opinion), but it takes me back to my own past.

I was brought up in an era in which one was expected to be a Jew at home and a good citizen in public. Not to stand out in a crowd. To hide rather than expose. It was an era of excessive conformity. Just look at crowd scenes in the 1950s in England, where each class had its expected codes of dress, hair, hats and handbags. I was always instructed not to wear a kipa in public, but a hat or school cap. Religion was a private affair. Like sex, you did not speak about it in polite company.

Things began to change very slowly with black immigration into post-war Britain. Blacks replaced the Irish as the unwanted underclass. Then the Beatles challenged public conventions of dress, with collarless jackets and longer, floppy hair. That was the extent of my rebellion in the early sixties. Then came the Six Day War, and for the first time that I can recollect, Jewish pride burst out of its cocoon into the public arena. If other minorities could not hide their appearance, their skin, their identity, why, I thought, should I? So for the first time I wore my kipa wherever I went and have done so to this day. In all the years since, the only times I exchanged a kipa for a baseball cap was on a very cheap Kuwait Air flight from London to New York and on a local train from Charles De Gaulle airport into Paris, where I think I was the only non-Muslim in the carriage. I guess we all have our bad hair days.

But then, I am a very committed Jew, a rabbi to boot, so why wouldn't I wear my Judaism on my sleeve? After all, every single Haredi man is instantaneously recognizable, and they are to be found all around the world

nowadays, and the number who have been assaulted, I venture, is relatively few. I know they get lots of stares and comments, and so do I, even on a New York subway (mainly tourists). And plenty of Israeli family and friends seem to have no qualms about traveling the world wearing their kippot and signs of Israeli identity.

It is certainly easier to be a Jew in New York than in London. There they still pretend they are not. Here everyone likes to pretend they are. Even so, things are changing. In a supermarket, the checkout girl, wearing a Hamsa I complimented her on, confessed she was Jewish too, and told me she found it safer than wearing a Magen David, less political!

So, what is this hiding all about?

People are surprised when they read of Israeli anti-Semites, or Israelis who deny Jewish identity or claim there is no such entity as the Jewish people or who hate Israel and want to get out as soon as they leave the army, and indeed an increasing number who just do not want to serve. And all those Israelis who simply want leave and enjoy the fleshpots from Berlin to Hollywood to Phuket Island. And why not? Does not every free country have those who hate it as much as love it? Who feel embarrassed and let down when their electorate defies their wishes in free elections? Don't we all long for a mythical, pristine, noble, honest era, unlike the present corrupt, money-grabbing, selfish, climate-change-denying, bribe-taking gangsters?

Israel as a political state was founded predominantly (not by any means exclusively) by Eastern European socialists or Marxists and semi-assimilated Middle European reluctant refugees. All hoped to set up a secular, liberal paradise without rabbis or religious coercion. Many identified Judaism with the ghetto and wanted it to have no place in this Brave New World in which they had more in common with Christians and secular Arabs than with Orthodox Jews.

It is no wonder they mourn the loss of simple idealism, of socialist command economies, of a society with no very rich and no very poor, even as they grubbed and scrambled for as much of the honeypot as they could. The secular Kibbutz was the perfect paradigm of the New Israel. Why do not the Sephardis, the Russians, even the Haredi Israelis have the right to a different vision?

When I first set foot in Israel in 1957, I was spat at for wearing a kippa in Haifa. I was told there was no need to keep Shabbat any more in Tiberias, that Judaism had no future in Tel Aviv. It was enough to be an Israeli living in Israel. So said Ben Gurion.

Why am I not surprised if some of these people's descendants hate religion, hate Israel, hate settlers, hate rabbis, and even hate the very idea of a Jewish state?

And in the Diaspora, what about those Jews who were already detached from Judaism when their immigrant parents struggled to make a living amongst the tenements and slums and jettisoned anything that might hold them back? Or desperately wanted to be accepted by the aristocratic, moneyed classes and

ape them to the point of losing anything but a visceral commitment to Judaism? What if they joined denominations that reduced their commitment to Judaism to three days a year and rites of passage? If Judaism was only a social club, why should not their children prefer a bigger one?

There were substitutes. Secular Zionism, giving money to little Israel, Holocaust memorials, historical Judaism, secular Judaism. All legitimate, but fashions that had their moments, then faded for lack of coherent, identifiable lifestyle, daily commitment as opposed to the occasional.

Haven't we always lost the greater part of our numbers, from Joshua to this very day, except when we were forced to be kept together by our enemies? Yet we, as a people, survived. Didn't the Bible already tell us that we would be the smallest of all nations? Yet we would survive? As my father liked to say, "The individual Jew might disappear, but the people won't."

The fact is that for all the intermarriage, scary as it is, all the defection and disillusionment, Judaism has never been stronger. Never before have we had so many people really educated in Jewish scholarship of all sorts, so many studying Torah full-time, so many young men in kipot fighting to protect our homeland? Occupying the highest positions in society and government, sitting in the boardrooms of the largest companies, heading the largest firms in Israel and the Diaspora, all now proud to be wearing kipot in public? It was not this way fifty or a hundred years ago!

Yes, we are a fratricidal mess. But tell me, pray, who isn't—politically, socially religiously?

We beat up on ourselves. That's our nature. Perhaps it is the conditioning of the Day of Atonement. Of blaming ourselves for our defeats, instead of others. I am so proud and happy to be a Jew at this time in history, and I don't care who knows it. Of course, I regret that so many Jews and Israelis want to leave. But good luck to them. They must do as they feel. I have always preferred quality to quantity, and I am more optimistic about our future than I have ever been in my entire life.