

# Missing Children

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the darkest episodes in the history of Israel is the ghastly story of the missing children of poor immigrants from Arab lands, airlifted to Israel (on the Wings of Eagles project) in the early years of State .

Suddenly Israel had to cope with a massive influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from very poor and often isolated communities. It was not equipped on any level to deal with the sudden, massive problem of this mass forced exodus from the Arab world, given its post-war footing and lack of financial and human resources.

The conditions that most of these families had to endure initially were tent camps (*Ma'abarot*) both primitive and remote. With poor hygiene and sanitary conditions, children often caught infectious diseases and had to be quarantined in hospitals. Many babies did die. But because of poor, bureaucratic communication, it would often take weeks for the parents to be notified and the hospitals did not have the resources to keep the bodies for long. But some babies died after being given experimental protein injections. A lack of respect for Jewish traditions meant that post-mortem examination were carried out without parental consent on children who were then buried in mass graves. Children's hearts were removed in some cases and given to US doctors researching, for example, the near absence of heart disease in Jews from Yemen.

There were also accusations that infants were given up for adoption or sold to childless Holocaust survivors. This helped create a climate of suspicion and cover-up that continued for many years. Conclusions reached by three separate official commissions set up to investigate the issue claimed that the majority of the children were buried having died from diseases. No one was satisfied with the conclusions. The most they conceded was, as one investigator said, "There was no crime, but there was a sin." Yet the Left secular establishment preferred to brush the issue under the carpet to avoid having their motives and actions impugned.

In 1994 a Yemenite Rabbi Uzi Meshulam and his supporters barricaded themselves in his home and resisted Israeli law enforcement demanding that the government establish an honest State Commission of Inquiry. Meshulam's efforts led to the creation of the Kedmi Commission which once again underplayed the extent of the problem. Finally, in June 2016, Prime

Minister Netanyahu appointed Tzachi Hanegbi to “right an historic wrong.”

The government opened up nearly all of the archives of the inquiries putting them online and re-examined the evidence of the three previous inquiries. It emerged that medical experiments had indeed been conducted on Yemenite children and many had died through medical negligence. Further investigation found that some poor Ashkenazi children had also vanished in a similar way to the Yemenite children.

Finally, in February 2021, after over 70 years, the government endorsed a decision to compensate and to “express sorrow... and recognize the suffering of the families” over the affair.

This sad episode reveals a much larger problem that has continued to dog Israel’s conscience to this very day. And that is the mindset of most of the founding mothers and fathers during the first fifty years of the State’s existence. It casts light on the political and social divisions we see today.

The modern Zionist movement was founded and was always dominated by secular, Central, and Eastern European Jews and heavily influenced by socialist principles. Because they dominated the movement, when the State became independent it was regarded as a great socialist experiment, with the Kibbutz as its ideal, and that it would cleanse the stain of the primitive, materialist, religiously fanatical ghettos. The fight for respect for religious sensitivities goes back to the way these early battles over religious values in Israel in its early years were fought. In fact, one reason the issue was shelved, was precisely because it was because the Anti-Zionist Neturei Karta movement had adopted the cause of the Yemenite Children, that it became an issue of State versus Religion.

Jews coming from very traditional oriental backgrounds were looked down on as primitive and regressive. Their religion was regarded as a danger to the socialist dream. Efforts were made to cure them of their backward-looking attitudes. They were treated as second-class Jewish citizens. Sadly, even in many religious institutions, such prejudice was rampant too. The way they were humiliated and patronized left a legacy of antipathy towards Left-Wing ideologues that runs deep in Israeli society today. Just as now the Left so resents the power of the religious right that has replaced the old Socialist State. New generations have little idea of how serious the tensions were back then. Far worse than now

Over time these prejudices have receded and although prejudice still exists as it does in every society, it is far less of a feature than it once was thanks largely to Menahem Begin whose empowerment of the Sephardi and religious communities, when he became Prime Minister in 1977, led to a complete change of direction. But as always happens, one action and re-action always cause another.

I recall when I first arrived in Israel in 1957 I was often told it was unnecessary to hold on to religious traditions in the new State of Israel. Religion was a Diaspora phenomenon, they said. Barriers were put in the way of religious education and religious immigrants were disadvantaged in the job market and government offices. I experienced the pervasive anti-religious atmosphere that existed in Israel during this period in the secular Ashkenazi world that only began to change after the Six-Day War in 1967.

I recently came across a poster I had filed dating back to 1965. "Citizens of Jerusalem, bring your cars and trucks to join a caravan of protest in favor of freedom of choice and against religious coercion. On Shabbat 27.11.1965 at 10 a.m." I often witnessed such Shabbat protests that drove down through the Ultra-Orthodox area of Meah Shearim through the barriers set up to preserve peace on Shabbat. They usually ended in violence. These were regular events. It is hardly surprising that over time the Haredi world got used to this sort of religious-political warfare and learned to fight back in kind.

It is true that it has always been a feature of Israeli life that each new wave of immigrants has suffered at the hands of those who arrived before them. In more recent times both Russians and Ethiopians can attest to this. It is amazing to what extent so many different groups of migrants from different cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds have been absorbed into Israeli society. A higher proportion than any previous migrant influx anywhere.

All of this contributes to the paralysis in Israeli politics today. To me, however, the most important lesson is that despite all the mistakes and wrongs, there is an almost universal determination to rectify the crimes of the past and go forward to create a positive dynamic (if too often dysfunctional society). Many Israelis give up and leave. But most stay and strive to make Israel a better place. The spirit of Israel is to be positive, forget recrimination and work to make one's country and the world a better, more tolerant, and more egalitarian place. We have a long way to go yet.