

Chaim Amsellem

I do not know Chaim Amsellem MK personally, but here is a man unafraid to speak the truth. This is an extract from an article that appeared in Haaretz this week:

The Shas leadership ousted Chaim Amsellem from the party on Monday, but the so-called renegade lawmaker continues to make waves. Three weeks ago, Amsellem made controversial comments to the newspaper Maariv about the Shas leadership. Inter alia, he condemned strictures against conversion, growing joblessness and army evasion among yeshiva students and an absence of non-religious education for children.

In the Haaretz interview, Amsellem says he opposes the subordination of politics to the party's spiritual leadership. "It's an MK's right to say he accepts the ruling of a rabbi or rabbis...I really believe the place of rabbis is the world of Torah, and they shouldn't deal in politics. We can and must follow rabbis, but this whole style, which is a copy of the Ashkenazi style, a confederation of rabbinical courts, just doesn't appeal to me," he said.

Amsellem has two targets in mind. The first is that the ultra-Orthodox world is behaving in a morally ambiguous way, relying on politics to encourage a culture of dependency and entitlement that is divisive and corrupt. Polls consistently show that most Israelis object to the political role of religion in the state.

If the argument was that outstanding scholars should be allowed to concentrate on their studies, whether secular or religious, and should receive scholarships for excellence, I do not think anyone who recognizes the importance of academic excellence would object. It is an ideal fewer and fewer countries can live up to, to subsidize further education. If the argument were that devoting oneself to a life of spirituality and study adds to the Jewish spiritual component in a Jewish state, and helps the morale far more than a life of dissolution and indulgence (although some who do not share my religious views might object) I would support the idea wholeheartedly. But where hundreds of thousands of young men with no aptitude or interest in study are granted years paid for idleness in the name of religion, I can think of absolutely no moral or halachic justification.

For a major sector of the Israeli population to rely on others to protect it, to fight and to die for it, but refuse to shoulder any responsibility for its defense, I find morally and halachically unacceptable. As if an invading army or suicide bombers are going to differentiate between an Israeli with a beard and black hat and one without. Halacha has always insisted that we do not rely on miracles and be proactive in meeting our physical needs and the

protection of community.

Even if the argument is that in modern states millions are supported by welfare, whether they work or not, and therefore why shouldn't one take advantage of what is on offer, I reply that moral leadership should encourage adults to take responsibility for their lives. And rabbis who refuse to take a moral stand for those they have influence over shoulder the blame for the decadence of those they can influence (Shabbat 54b). Dependency is scorned if there are alternatives."It is better to eat on the Sabbath the same modest food you eat during the week than rely on handouts from other humans."
(Pesachim 112a)

The Charedi world will answer that ordinary people have no right or qualification to challenge rabbinic authorities. Not on learning perhaps, but anyone can detect when something is simply morally unacceptable. Whether it is in the UK, Israel, or anywhere else, decisions based on realpolitik and bargaining may be justified pragmatically but not ethically or religiously. This involvement of religion in politics is what Amsellem is objecting to though it must be said that that is the only *raison d'être* of religious parties on whose ticket he was elected. If he really believes this he should have resigned rather than wait to be pushed.

The second issue is the Sephardi-Ashkenazi divide. I am not going to deal with prejudice here, it is too big a subject for this piece, but I believe a prejudiced mind starts offending "the other" and then turns on itself. This explains the virulence of the internecine hatred that exists within rival religious groups. It also explains the banality of censorship that tries to exclude any opinion they disagree with or feel threatened by and the reckless way too many 'major Rabbis' excommunicate anyone they disagree with.

There is a fundamental feature that distinguishes Sephardi attitudes from Ashkenazi ones. Because in the Sephardi world there was no Reform movement, their rabbis had to tolerate the full spectrum of Jewish observance or the absence of it. Sephardi communities have always been far more tolerant and open than Ashkenazi ones, and Sephardi rabbis far better at turning blind eyes. The sad process of Sephardi Orthodoxy taking on board the worst aspects of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy is one of the tragedies of our age. And this is what Amsellem also excoriates.

Sadly, he will be mown down by the establishment. But I wish him well. I hope his spirit and independence survives the inevitable humiliations he will be subjected to. It is supposed to be a Christian ideal, but you can find it in the Talmud—the modest and the humble will inherit the world.