Beit Shemesh Syndrome

At last there is outrage, even within their own circles, at the extreme ultra-Orthodox fanatics who think they can bully to achieve their aims. This kind of crude, religious anti-social behavior has been tolerated for too long. Let us hope now the line has been drawn.

Some background. Fifty years ago in Israel there were only two ultra-Orthodox enclaves, Bnei Brak and Meah Shearim. Busloads of tourists and truckloads of kibbutzniks used to come down into Meah Shearim to ogle at the weird inhabitants dressed like denizens of a medieval world. Israel has always been a land of contrasts, extreme secularism and extreme religiosity. And they have often clashed.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the ultra-Orthodox community has spread as numbers have grown and space was at a premium. Completely new exclusively Charedi settlements grew beyond the Green Line, such as Immanuel where they established their own rules from the start. Sometimes in mixed neighborhoods like Har Nof, non-conformists were slowly squeezed out. There were complaints of harassment. No one seemed to bother with the inexorable spread of these communities. People who didn't like it or felt unwelcome simply moved on. But now the threat is spreading. It's turning into a Hollywood horror movie.

The foul behavior of the bullies in Beit Shemesh has brought the issue into the open. Why just now? Hasn't the Charedi community always had its bullies and loonies throwing stones, spitting, and screaming obscenities? The sad fact is that wherever you look in Israel, bullying works. Israel is like that. You push me. I push you. Whether in politics, sport, or religion, Jew or Arab. And, sadly, as the Charedi world has expanded and spread well beyond Israel, it has taken its bullies with it. Indeed, last year in the village of New Square, in New York State, a Charedi man was set on fire for going to the wrong synagogue! And when the locals were asked their opinion, they shrugged and said on TV, "He disobeyed the Rebbe."

Beit Shemesh and Ashdod are two "new towns" that were originally open to everyone, regardless of religious degree. As the religious areas expanded, they fought to create their own ultra-Orthodox ethos. The more aggressive, less civilized, were allowed a reign of terror until they achieved their ends. Now the internet enables us to see the Youtube clips showing Neanderthals who claim they are the true and best Jews, the personification of Torah, throwing feces and terrorizing Orthodox young girls on the way to school, simply because the girls are not as covered up from tip to toe as they want. I suppose we should be grateful they are not throwing knives and bombs.

The problem is serious when any community uses violence against others—other religious communities even—to achieve its ends. It's equally disgusting, when extreme settlers encourage delinquent "Hilltop Kids" to attack vulnerable Arab targets (and Israeli army outposts). Genuinely religious Jews are bound

to wonder what they could possibly have in common with those hirsute primitives. What worries me most, as an Orthodox Jew, is that up to now I had not heard the so-called "great Rabbis or Rebbes" publicly condemning these betrayers of their values. And worse, some extreme Rebbes even encouraged them. Now at last the publicity, thank goodness for a free press, has caused a reaction.

It is alas a sign of the times. In Britain, France, the USA, or the Middle East, religious communities expand, funded by political interests who want their votes. They colonize inner cities, or build their own secluded townships, and insist on their peculiar and specific rules of dress and behavior. Whether it is Hackney, the suburbs of Paris, Cairo, or Riyadh, the Morality Police patrol and enforce their standards—hijabs, long sleeves and skirts, or black hats and frock coats. Interesting that almost everywhere else it is the women who have to cover up not the men; at least, cold comfort, in Charedi Judaism the men have to be equally uncomfortable.

It has always been thus. Communities—aristocrats, priests, merchants, and peasants—have clung to the security of their own communities, rules, conventions, and standards. Whether it was Versailles or the Frankfort Ghetto, if you didn't conform you were out. In those days you either had to find another community to conform to or you were literally an outcast. The same applied to the Middle East, the Far East, and indeed the Americas. You always had undesirables moving into your neighborhood, driving down the price of houses, which brought more of them in, which in turn caused another migration out to newer, more mono-social areas where the like-minded, the like bank-accounted, the like-genetically-modified, or the like in religious practice could feel comfortable together.

There is nowhere in the world today where this struggle between conflicting ideologies and social standards is not taking place. The only differences are that nowadays most of us have far more choices as to where we can live and so we can move.

Modern liberal democracies have created this very situation of pressure groups by creating political systems in which religions can exercise power through the ballot box or coalition bargaining. Above all, abused welfare systems indulge and enable irresponsibility, indolence, and intransigence. Or in the case of other societies, so neglect the needs of the poor that it is left to extreme religious organizations to fill the void. "Rent a crowd" always draws on the unemployed or those who have nothing better to do.

You cannot force people to live with those they do not wish to. I do not agree that multicultural societies have failed because of multiculturalism, but because of overindulgence and political correctness, and a lack of will in imposing civil values. You can't have freedom and then tell some citizens they can't be fanatics. But we can show the fanatics how unacceptable their demands are.

The only thing that gets competing groups to modify their antipathy towards each other is when they actually have to work together or interact in the

city chambers or the workplace. Welfare without obligations discourages interaction. State support should be dependent on helping to build the state, build tolerant communities, not on trying to destroy them.

Thank goodness for free societies. But just as we need to combat political extremism, be it fascism or Marxism, for the sake of freedom, so we must prevent minorities from imposing their will on others. The only way to do that is so stand up to them, cut off funding, and push back until they learn to treat others with respect.