

Yossi Sarid, Frenemy?

I was in Israel when Yossi Sarid died. Who was he? Most Jews in the diaspora have no idea. On the face of it, he was another left-wing secular Israeli politician, a former Knesset member and government minister. But he was also a weathervane of Israeli society. He witnessed the transformation of Israel from a European, secular Zionist, socialist experiment into a predominantly right-wing, more religious, and successful capitalist state.

He was stridently critical Israel's drift to the right, politically and religiously. He was against Israel's invasion of Lebanon. He believed that Israel should only respond to aggression defensively. But he was much more than just another left-wing politician. As I watched his funeral on Israeli television when I was in Israel two weeks ago, I was moved by the secular ceremony and very conscious of what a loss he was to Israeli society.

When I first came to Israel in 1957 as a fifteen-year-old, I was seen off by my parents at Victoria Station in London and traveled by train to Marseilles. Then I boarded the Zim Line's SS Theodor Herzl. And after four days of sailing I reached Haifa Port. No four-hour flight in those days. As I disembarked, the local dockers stared at me with disgust. One of them yelled that I should take off my kipa because in Israel one did not need the religion of exile any more.

I arrived at my yeshiva in Jerusalem and on the first Shabbat went to see the local blood sport. Ultra-Orthodox youngsters were throwing stones at policemen, protesting against traffic disturbing their quarter on Shabbat. There was a counterdemonstration protesting the serious injury to an artist who, in the darkness of the Shabbat night, had driven his motorbike into a chain that some pietists had placed across the road to block traffic coming into their area from the outside. All of a sudden a tender, an open-sided truck with wooden seating, a common vehicle in those pre-luxury days, stopped near the religious demonstrators, and out jumped a gang of secular kibbutzniks, who started beating them up as the Border Police stood by and did nothing.

A few months later on a trip to Tiberius, I was staying at the youth hostel and asked for candles for Shabbat. The director told me that such religious nonsense was unnecessary in modern Israel, and if I wanted to persevere with out-of-date customs I should return to England.

I mention these incidents because they were typical of the mood in much of Israel in the 1950s, and they explain why I felt such antipathy to the ideologically secular. Secular Zionism had always dreamed of consigning religious Judaism to the world of the ghetto. It wanted to establish a modern, socialist, religion-free utopia in the Land of Israel. The extreme left wanted nothing to do with Judaism. They rejected Jabotinsky's attempt at synthesis. There were moderate secularists like Berel Katzenelson who offered a middle approach. But they were marginalized.

I had met plenty of nonobservant Jews before, and I never thought there was only one way of being Jewish. But I never had time for those who resolutely opposed Judaism on principle and actively undermined religious life wherever they could.

Now, over 50 years later, it is clear that secular Zionism as an ideology has failed to replace tradition and on the contrary has lost support and numbers. It has certainly not offered either a spiritual or institutional alternative of any significance. This does not mean, of course, that Orthodox or Charedi Judaism has won the battle. Too many Israelis are completely disaffected with tradition. But the religious have grown, not disappeared, as the secular pioneers once hoped. Once the standard-bearer of secularism, Ben Gurion's Mapai party that ran a command economy on socialist lines, dominated Israel. Nowadays its heirs are struggling to challenge to the Right Wing and a dynamic culture of enterprise and innovation.

Yossi Sarid was the standard-bearer of secular, left-wing Judaism in Israel. Unlike most of his colleagues, he was well versed in Judaism, a master of sources, and an elegant speaker and writer in literary Hebrew. But above all he was a man of principle, idealism which I respect even when I disagree with the ideals. He always expressed himself openly and honestly and calmly, no matter how controversial or unpopular his views.

He, as indeed did I, objected strongly to the role of religious parties in Israeli politics. He attacked their politicized manner of blackmailing and refusing to take responsibility for every aspect of the country's activities. He despised corruption of any sort, both secular and religious, and everything he did he measured by the ethical standards of Judaism.

It was typical of him that he insisted that no rabbi or cantor or representative of institutionalized Judaism be present at his funeral. Yet his two sons and daughter joined together in reciting the traditional Kaddish most movingly.

Sarid strongly supported the idea of a state for all its citizens and of the peace process. He was an opponent of the occupation. He was a strident critic of Israel's moral and political failures and thought more should have been done to accommodate Palestinian aspirations. But he also recognized the failings and limitations of the Palestinian people and their leaders.

He was, in other words, a Jewish renaissance man, a man for all seasons. As I listened to Amos Oz's dirge (in which I sensed too much negativity and bitterness) I felt a powerful sense of regret and loss that Sarid's much more balanced and softer voice would no longer be heard. I can respect the left's opinion even if I disagree with them. But I think they have abandoned a Jewish commitment for the neo-Marxism of many of their forbears. This, I believe, is a luxury we cannot afford at this moment. Any more than we can afford right-wing fanaticism. But I still think that for the health of Israeli society the honestly held voices of the left need to be heard as an important counterbalance to check the extreme jingoistic intolerance of much popular support on the right.

We need different voices. His was unique, because for all his criticisms he was still overwhelmingly committed to the survival of Israel, Jewish culture, and Jewish morality. We are increasingly reverting to tribalism and tribal conflict. We need voices that can inspire our tribes to work together. He was a man I admired, and there are not many of those left nowadays.