

Education for Immigrants

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Ever since the Greeks, the Romans, the Christians, and the Muslims tried to impose their cultures on us, Judaism has had an uneasy relationship with other value systems. It is not that we want to say that ours is the only way and everyone else is wrong. Just that our values and our religion are worth preserving and fighting for.

Yet going back some two thousand years we have always accepted Shmuel's famous principle that "The Law of the Land is the Law". There were only two caveats. One was that this applied only to civil law. And secondly, that the law of the land was applied equally and fairly to all citizens. This has been the condition of our flourishing in the free countries we have emigrated to. Even where we set up our religious courts, they always abided by the civil laws of the land.

We now live in a world in which numbers of immigrants into Western secular societies actively seek to maintain values that conflict with those of the host societies. Whereas once immigrants tended to adapt to the host societies, increasingly host societies are being asked either to change laws or not to interfere when their values are flouted.

Naturally there has been pushback. In France notably insisting on its secular division between State and Religion, followed by others, immigrant groups have been called upon to learn about host country values and to accommodate to them. The argument being that if they want to enjoy the benefits of welfare and subsidies, they need either to accept the standards and values or go elsewhere. But in practice both options have been ignored.

We think of it as a mainly Muslim issue, but it affects ultra-Orthodox Judaism too. Ultra-Orthodoxy, unlike much of Islam, has no interest in conquering the world. But it does reject many of its values. It argues that it is committed to Torah education, and anything else is going to undermine its spiritual integrity. I have some sympathy for such a position in theory. Why shouldn't there be people who choose to devote themselves exclusively to their religion, as many Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and others do from a very early age? If they are going to happily spend their whole lives in seclusion, there is no good argument against it.

Ever since the "Enlightenment" there has been a battle within Orthodoxy between those who have rejected it out of hand and those who have tried to accommodate to it. Some Jewish institutions in every community actively tried to assimilate and acculturate Jewish immigrants. Others tried to insulate them. And this struggle continues to this very day.

The problem is that so many men (it's more of a problem for men, because even the most extreme tend to allow women to work, if only to support their husbands) are simply not prepared to live outside their closed worlds and

have no way of earning a living to support themselves if they choose to leave. Even if they stay but want to have a career and earn instead of being dependent on family, charity, or welfare, they need skills. Many do not speak English. If one wants to be reliant on government welfare, whether you are Christian, Muslim, or Jew, shouldn't you be prepared to make certain concessions that will facilitate independence?

Many Charedi schools inside and outside Israel tend to ask for state aid in one form or other. Until recently, in the UK you had to accept the national curriculum if you wanted state aid. Most Charedi schools chose not to. But as the costs of education and numbers rose, many of them got caught on the horns of a dilemma. They wanted government money, but not interference. So many of them lied, deceived inspectors and tried to get away with as little as possible. This mentality of deceiving and swindling has sadly become endemic in a Charedi world where not enough of them are equipped to make money legally.

But there is an internal debate about whether one should "snitch". There are some who see the absence of basic secular education as a serious threat to the longterm survival of their communities and want to do something about it. So they believe that by telling the authorities that they are being flouted, they bring about pressure for change. As a reaction the Charedi establishments seeks to brand them as traitors. Is there a difference between "snitching " on sex abusers, husbands who beat their wives, financial swindlers, Ponzi schemers, and lying school administrators? Should one never tell?

There is an age-old idea of the Moser (Musser in Yiddish)—someone who betrays you to the authorities. It goes back to Roman times. It was reinforced under Christian and Muslim oppression and again under Communism. Where you were dealing with an anti-Semitic, evil regime, it was indeed considered bad to betray your coreligionists. So much so that some even suggested you could kill him to prevent a catastrophe. Yet even in the Talmud there are stories of rabbis who did cooperate, when they thought their coreligionists were behaving badly and such behavior might endanger the community. I accept the principle in Jewish law that you should at first rebuke, warn, see if you can bring about change softly and reasonably. But if that doesn't work, you do have a religious obligation to take steps to force a change. "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor sheds his own blood."

So I do not accept that one should not tell the authorities in a law abiding country where everyone is (in theory at least) treated equally if some recognizably Jewish and religious institution is knowingly and intentionally breaking the law. All the more so, where more and more young Charedi men who do not want to remain cloistered and studying all their lives and do want to earn a living legitimately, themselves protest that they lost out because they got no secular education.

The issue has become more nuanced. Because now governments are demanding more than basic numeracy and literacy. They would like to impose this on Muslim fundamentalists in their Madrassahs. They are also doing the same to Jewish fundamentalists in the Chedarim (yeshivas). They are requiring them to teach

such subjects as civics, other religions, etc. If it is government policy, and if one wants to live in Europe or the US, the "Law of the Land" must be obeyed, and whoever does not like it should go somewhere else. This is not like nineteenth century Russia, when the state was trying to forcibly assimilate or convert Jews. The government is only trying to help them!!! But that is not how they see it.

This issue is being played out around the Jewish world. In the end, politics usually leads to compromise and accommodation. But, to my mind, the principles are as clear as daylight, and we have an obligation to help those who need additional tools to cope with life.

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