

Religious Politics

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The personal attacks on Naftali Bennet coming from the Charedi parties in Israel because he has been instrumental in excluding them from power and has stood up to their blackmail are disgusting. They offend every principle of Jewish morality. But it's not surprising. This is why I am delighted they have been removed from positions in government in the latest political developments in Israel.

Here is the text of a letter of resignation my late father Rabbi Dr. Kopul Rosen wrote to resign from his leading position in Mizrahi, which was at that time, the leading religious Zionist Organization both in Israel and the Diaspora. It was published in the *Jewish Observer and the Middle East Review* on September 18th, 1953.

"After much consideration, I have decided to resign from being president of the Mizrahi Federation. You are well aware that this was my intention three years ago, but deference to certain personal factors and ties with a movement with which I have been actively associated since the age of 14 made it difficult for me to take this step. Much thought and experience however have deepened my conviction which compels me to resign my membership of the Mizrahi movement.

I have the greatest admiration for the part that Mizrahi played in the Zionist movement, but with the establishment of the State of Israel, the situation changed radically. I am convinced that a political party with religion as its sole *raison d'être*, far from furthering the interests of Judaism, is a serious disadvantage to it. More could be achieved in the religious life of Israel if religious matters were considered outside the arena of party-political strife.

In my opinion, it would be better to have a worldwide religious and cultural movement not attached to any party and seeking no parliamentary representation. It would seek to educate and influence not bully or coerce. It would stress the valuable contribution that religion can make to the health of the State in general. It could do much more to strengthen the religious and cultural institutions of Israel and gain the goodwill and support of Jews of all parties, even those not themselves religious, than is possible in the present circumstances where religion tends to become the vested interest of one political group.

Yours sincerely, Kopul Rosen."

I knew nothing of it at the time. My father never wanted to discuss politics with me because he said he wanted me to make up my own mind about such matters. But when I went to Israel as a teenager I encountered two new disturbing experiences. One was the tremendous even visceral antagonism of many secular Jews to religion. The second was religious politics.

In the Yeshivot that I attended it was considered obligatory to get involved in supporting a religious party. The heads of the Yeshivot, although trying to distance themselves from the shenanigans, still insisted on participation. If like me you were so put off by the corruption you did not want to get involved with any one of them, your only option at the time was to claim you had rabbinic approval to join Neturei Karta, the aggressively anti-Zionist party which refused to have anything to do with the Zionist state. It comprised then, and I suspect it does today, some of the craziest, most challenged people you could encounter in Jerusalem. And given the number of people infected with the Jerusalem Syndrome in the Holy city, this is saying something. But at that time this was my only way out. And it was a decision I took without consulting my father

In other words, it was my own experience, not persuasion or conditioning, that led me to believe that religious parties had been so corrupted by power and money that they would besmirch the good name of the Torah. Whatever they may gain in handouts from the government, they would lose any moral authority and alienate large numbers of Israelis from religion altogether. And so it has.

It is not just in Israel. There is a universal mindset that sees nothing wrong with corrupt politics. Protecting villains and lauding fraudsters. It has been going on for years. At the root of it of course is money.

In Israel, its worst manifestation lies in massaging the figures of pupils attending religious institutions because the more you have the more you get in State subsidies. In the Diaspora, it is fiddling government agencies either by massaging figures or by falsely claiming benefits, or using government grants for your purposes. In truth, this is the culture of all welfare societies everywhere. But that is no excuse. And to make matters worse, the bigger the swindle, the greater the hero you are and the more recognition you get from people who ought to aspire to a higher standing. I am concerned for the religion I hold dear and whose reputation matters to me.

Here is yet another recent report from the ***United States Department of Justice***

A certain Charedi gentleman aged 72, of Flushing, New York, was sentenced today by U.S. District Judge Janet C. Hall in New Haven to 30 months of imprisonment, followed by three years of supervised release. Between approximately 2011 and 2018, he stole approximately \$4.1 million from the BHCC Pension Plan, over which he was the trustee, principally by diverting the money to a purported charity, he controlled, as well as to himself and other entities. And misapplied \$305,608.06 from BHCC Health Plan by diverting the money from a stop-loss insurance plan that was intended to pay for an employee health claim, and instead used it for other purposes, including personal use.

And in another report, this same man is celebrated

“A rare and unique assembly took place on Tuesday this week, in the great

Hall of Vizhnitz Chassidus in Bnei Brak. The Rebbe sought to glorify and support the greatest supporter of their institutions who would be entering prison the next day for tax fraud. The Rebbe surprised everyone with his words." Tomorrow, our precious fellow Chassid does not go to prison for something that he did for himself. He goes for something about which I can attest was all for the place that we are in right now – it is all in his merit.. “

The attitude that sees nothing wrong with this is another reason I object to religious intervention in the political system. So I am delighted that a new Government will not include religious parties because it opens up the possibility for change. Yes, I know there will be backroom deals, and corruption is not confined to religious parties, but the principle needs to be established, that Israeli society should not be held hostage to corrupt religious interests. Judaism should be a spiritual and moral religion. To see people masquerading as religious, but are either being liars and crooks, encouraging others to lie and cheat and all in the name of religion should offend us all. In the same way that the good and wonderful things so many of them do is and should be a source of pride.

Habits will not change overnight. But this might just be the moment that Israel learns that removing religion from politics, will benefit both the secular and the religious parts of Israeli society and remove one of the biggest causes of friction.