

A struggle between religion and state

Israel must pay attention to the Hanukkah story

• By PINCHAS GOLDSCHMIDT

When Avi Maoz, a religious Zionist leader, took the stand in the Knesset last week, he compared the election victory of the right-wing parties to the Hanukkah miracle of the victory of the Maccabees over the Hellenists.

It is a valid parallel, since the Hanukkah story is essentially that of the conflict of the internal Jewish struggle between the traditionalists and the assimilationists.

The last elections were a surprise for much of the Israeli electorate, giving very strong representation of the religious Zionists and ultra-Orthodox. While the ultra-Orthodox are using their strength to ensure their cultural autonomy, the religious Zionists are trying to strengthen the Jewish identity of the state. But together, they both value the Jewish identity of the state more than its democratic nature, while liberal Israelis value democratic principles over the nation-state.

Israel has much in common with the US: Both people were formed through covenantal agreements and aspired to much more than just being a nation-state. But while the founding fathers of the US invoked God in their founding documents yet chose to separate church and state – Israel's founders did just the opposite.

In exhausting discussions between the religious minority and the secular majority, the founders of the Jewish state decided to omit God from the Declaration of Independence, but make no separation of synagogue and state.

Two moments at the onset of the newly established Jewish state defined its interdependence from religion, known as the "status quo." The first one was a letter from David Ben-Gurion, the founder of Israel, to Rabbi Yehuda Lev Fishman, the political leader of religious Zionism, establishing a state rabbinate with jurisdiction over the personal status of all Jewish citizens and guaranteeing the sanctity of the Sabbath in the public sphere. The other one was the meeting of Ben-Gurion with the ultra-Orthodox leader, Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz in 1952, granting cultural autonomy to Israel's ultra-Orthodox.

Ben-Gurion and Karelitz were intent on avoiding a bloody conflict between the secular state and its tiny ultra-Orthodox minority, but both were also convinced



RABBI PINCHAS Goldschmidt: The sages teach that kings should not be anointed from among the priests – that is, there must be a separation of spiritual and political power. (Eli Ikin/CER)

that this was a provisional solution. Karelitz thought that Israel was a short-term experiment, while prime minister Ben-Gurion was convinced that the ultra-Orthodox would eventually disappear.

However, 70 years later, Israel continues to thrive as a regional power, and the ultra-Orthodox grew to more than one million people, with 13% of Israelis describing themselves as ultra-Orthodox. By 2050, they are expected to be 30% of the population. At the onset of the state, the secularists were the great majority, while already today, the ultra-Orthodox, the religious Zionists and traditionalists constitute the majority of Israelis.

The ad hoc agreements of more than 70 years ago continue to create tension to this

very day – because there was no consensus about the role of religion in the state at its inception. Israel's ultra-Orthodox took part in the political process initially merely to ensure their independence and cultural autonomy. But this has led them to their involvement in the management of much of the government affairs.

Because there is no consensus, this secularism-religion war will continue to rage with every election – to the detriment of Israeli society, because each side reverts to the narrative of victimhood for the sake of survival.

ON THE heels of celebrating Hanukkah, we should not forget that the Hasmonean kingdom didn't last forever, but disintegrated through denominational

divisions and civil war.

Nahmanides, one of the major Jewish scholars from 12th-century Spain, wrote that a major reason for the failure of the Hasmonean project was the convergence of spiritual and political powers (very much akin to the church in his time) when the Temple priests who led the insurrection against the Greeks declared themselves as kings as well.

The lesson from the story is quite evident: The separation of power is necessary. As Nahmanides writes, "It was not for [the Hasmoneans] to rule, but only to perform the service of God." The sages teach that kings should not be anointed from among the priests – that is, there must be a separation of spiritual and political power.

The Hasmonean kingdom, the second Jewish commonwealth, lost its independence and denigrated into a Roman vassal state and developed Sadducean leanings, centering earthly and spiritual power to the temple priests. The Pharisees, locked in political combat with the Sadducees, replaced the spiritual leadership of the temple priests with those of the Torah scholars, the rabbis – the only Jewish denomination that survived the ensuing 2,000 years in exile.

The moment that spiritual leaders take political control, corruption ensues – and destruction follows.

David Friedman, the former US ambassador to Israel, wrote in his memoir *Sledgehammer* that the Abraham Accords were possible only because all interested parties decided to put decades of conflict aside and grapple with the question: How are we going to survive in the Middle East together?

So, too, for the sake of Israel's survival, both secular and religious Israelis must try to forget for a few moments the battles fought in the last century and instead try to find an answer to a more fundamental question: How will we survive together?

Every sector of Israeli Jews ought to do its own introspection. Ultra-Orthodox Jews must start thinking of others, and realize that if the project called the State of Israel falters, it will also mean the destruction of the world of the yeshivas and of the hasidic courts. It's time to take responsibility.

Religious Zionists must understand that religion is an exercise between the human being and one's Creator, and not between the state and its citizens. Secular Jews must urgently recognize the demographic shift and engage in a meaningful partnership with the traditionalist parts of Israeli society in order to ensure its existence.

Let us learn from the cautionary tale of the Hasmoneans. Let us remember that priests or rabbis should teach, speak up and fight for the identity of the Jewish people, decrying corruption like the prophets of old, but be extremely wary of the use of political power. A healthy tension between the spiritual leadership and the political one is essential not only for a functioning democracy, but for survival itself.

The writer is the president of the Conference of Rabbis of Europe. He served as the chief rabbi of Moscow from 1993-2022.

A year in columns

• By ANDREA SAMUELS

As the earth completes its orbit around the sun, I've been contemplating those things which have moved me to write about over the past year.

I kicked off with an article about Chaim Walder. Remember him? He was the celebrated, haredi author of children's books who took his own life after a number of serious allegations of child abuse, and rape of women and children were made against him.

He's probably someone who's best forgotten, such were the horrific crimes which he wreaked on so many. He may be gone, but sadly, the scars that he left behind still linger for his victims. Even more bewilderingly, his books are still available to buy online.

If nothing else, let's hope we can all learn from this appalling episode and ensure that abuse, in whichever form it takes, is snuffed out as soon as it rears its head and not covered up as it was in this case for so many years.

Then came an article titled "Get vaccinated or live with the consequences." It's hard to believe that COVID-19 was affecting our lives to such a degree as recently as the start of the year. Now its reach is peripheral at best, although some lasting effects, such as long COVID, are very real for many.

COVID is something which also played a significant role in the rise of home births, the subject matter of one of my earlier columns. Whereas I'd never even contemplated such a thing when I had my own children, having spoken at length to a lovely, British-born midwife, Sarah, who specializes in home births, I certainly wouldn't rule it out if I had my time again. My research for the article taught me to be open-minded and to listen to all the options before making a decision.

Aliyah is a subject which is close to my heart. The pain and heartache it can bring was a surprise to me when I started researching this topic for an article. Although we only like to think in positive terms when it comes to making aliyah, not every tale is one of success.

Coming to live in Israel isn't for everyone, but it's nice to know that it's there if you need a place to live, free of the scourge of antisemitism.

For many families, however, it can cause deep rifts and divisions, some of which never heal.

I THEN touched on the Royal Family, and the disgrace that is Prince Andrew, Duke of York, who was alleged to have participated in sexual activities with 17-year-old Virginia Giuffre, something he has always denied. In that article, I questioned whether HM Queen Elizabeth II should have spoken out in support of abused women in light of her son's behavior rather than paying huge sums of money to get him out of trouble. The answer I received was a resounding: "No! She's the Queen, she doesn't do that sort of thing."

It's hard to believe that later this same year, I was writing about the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II. The end of an era and something which left its mark on us all, in one way or another.

February 2022 was the month in which Russia invaded Ukraine, heralding countless articles chronicling the Russian advance and the suffering of the Ukrainian people. We watched as scores of families left their homes, seeking safety in foreign lands.

For me, one of the most intriguing things was how expat Russians, living in Israel felt about the war. Their children would doubtless be serving in the army alongside their Ukrainian brothers and sisters in arms.

As part of my research for this article, I interviewed a Russian woman who had made aliyah with her family a number of years ago. Deeply ashamed of her country and what Putin was doing to their Ukrainian neighbors, she was happy to talk to me, but asked me not to reveal her identity; a testament to the hold that Putin has over his subjects, even those who have broken away.

Having *The Jerusalem Post* as a platform on which to publish my work has been wonderful, not least because of its reach. It has enabled me to highlight some very important and worthy organizations, such as ESRA, Israel's largest English-speaking community network. The help and support which ESRA provides in all areas, including mental health is exceptional.

A candid exchange with Orna, who suffers from bipolar disorder and her friend and ESRA volunteer,

Rika Meyerowitz, made for a very interesting and moving article, showing how anyone can be affected by mental health problems and how getting the right help can be a life-saver, literally.

I've also had the pleasure of working with and volunteering at Bet Elazraki Children's Home in Netanya this past year. This amazing place, which is home to many children who have had a difficult start in life, has formed the basis for a couple of my articles, and I hope to share more about its achievements and programs with you all next year.

IN SPRING of this year, we suffered a spate of terror attacks in which 11 innocent people were killed; murdered as they went about their daily business. It was truly shocking. Sadly, the threat of terror is something we all have to live with. The most recent terror attacks took place in Jerusalem just last month, when devices were planted at two separate sites at the entrance to the capital, killing two Israelis – a 16-year-old and a 50-year-old father and wounding 20 others.

Although the cycle of violence continues, it's important not to become complacent and to highlight the suffering – and remember the victims – whenever possible, as I did in a column earlier this year.

One of my articles was inspired by a visit to my hometown, Manchester. Whereas when I lived there, I'd barely venture outside of my comfort zone, now when I go back, I like to explore and make the most of my time there.

After a particularly lovely afternoon walking in the English countryside with my daughter, our friend and his dog, I felt moved to write about it. Seeing the old place through fresh eyes is something that I've enjoyed immensely these past few years. It's like a breath of fresh air.

Jews, or more pertinently, Israelis, and their love of tattoos has always fascinated me. So much so that I tackled this obscure subject in May. I was keen to debunk some of the myths which surround Jews and tattoos. For example, many still mistakenly believe that Jews cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery with tattoos. This, of course, is nonsense, although it was news to some, who even thought that any tattoos are actually sliced off



SARAH SEYMOUR, a private midwife who offers a home birth service, poses with a mother and the newborn child. The photo is from an article by the columnist published in February. (Sarah Seymour)

before burial.

Later in the year, I tackled the serious issue of road safety. Like many, I'm appalled by the number of lives lost on Israel's roads each year and feel that not enough is being done about it. Unsurprisingly, many others were of a similar mind. One thing we all agreed upon was that the causes of the problems on our roads are complex and the answers to them, equally so.

Babies dying in hot cars was another emotive subject which I examined. Again, many questions about how and why such a thing could happen were posed, and answers to the problem were

proffered. Let's all hope that with the advances in technology, such tragedies will soon be a thing of the past.

It wasn't all serious stuff, however.

A slightly off-the-wall article came on the back of an invitation by our local rabbi, who also happens to be an old friend, to go to his shul in trousers, which I did. Well, you could have blown me down with a feather, the responses this article attracted.

People were mortified by the very suggestion of turning up to shul in trousers. Disrespectful and shameful, were just two of the words used

to describe my behavior – and my attire. After that, I decided not to push my luck and I haven't been back since that fateful Shabbat.

The above is a selection of some of the topics which have moved me to "put pen to paper" over the last year. Next year, I hope to be able to share more interesting topics with you, dear readers.

For now, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for taking the time to read what I churn out and to wish you all, a very happy and healthy new year.

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