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Israel endangered by secular failure to confront ultra-Orthodox

By Meirav Arlosoroff, TheMarker Correspondent

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The ultra-Orthodox protests against the operation of the Safra parking lot in Jerusalem on Shabat remind one of things forgotten. We've all been there before, in the '70s and '80s, and we all know how it ends. Very well, as far as the Haredi community is concerned.

Even though the Safra parking lot is in the city's east and serves visitors to the Old City; although there is no need to cross religious neighborhoods to get there; even though the Haredi community has no right to complain about it - it makes no difference. The battle was won by the Haredi community from the onset, because nobody's standing against them. The other side capitulated in advance. Jerusalem has been captured by the Haredim. They have absolute control.

Coincidentally, Jerusalem has a secular mayor, but he leans on a Haredi coalition. In any case, his tenure is temporary. A good secular mayor who seeks development and growth for the city is doomed to fail; he will have no more voters for a second term. The city's secular residents have been fleeing the city since the 1970s and moving to Tel Aviv.

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The secular residents grew tired of the battles with the Haredim over good municipal governance and fled. The question is what will these secular citizens do once they discover that Tel Aviv is also under threat from a growing Haredi minority. Where will they go next?

Israelis who believe in the future of Israel as a modern, developing and democratic state, whether they be secular, national religious or Arab, may well become the minority in the future. In fact, it's a sure thing, as sure as the prediction of the 1970s that if secular Israelis didn't fight for Jerusalem's identity, it would be left to the Haredim. Thirty years later, the prediction has come true.

The future for Tel Aviv is no more promising. Why should Tel Aviv's situation be any different from that of Jerusalem in 30 years if secular residents and proponents of a democratic Israel won't lift a finger to protect Israel's identity?

A case in point is the Haredi bill that would drive another nail into the coffin of secular education in Israel - and that of Israel's future along with it. The bill brings the ultra-Orthodox one step closer to capturing Israel's budget, in order to finance, foster and promote non-Zionist and non-democratic education that does nothing to encourage integration into the modern workforce.

Already, one in five children beginning first grade attends Haredi schools, and the total number of Haredi students is on the rise, while the number of students in the public school system, and particularly religious public schools, declines. Adding in Arab schoolchildren, one could say that nearly a half of all Israeli pupils today are students

whose identification with the state and its Zionist, democratic, modern values are in question. The Israeli pro-democracy public sees, and is silent.

Of course, there is no connection between tolerance, openness and democracy and the ostrich-head-in-the-sand policy that the state is maintaining on the issue of Haredi education. It is the ultra-Orthodox community's right to conduct their chosen lifestyle, but it is also Israel's right, as a democratic nation that seeks to develop and grow, to protect itself. In fact, it is not a right, but an obligation to do so.

By this way of thinking, no democratic state should allow private schooling to exist if these schools are not fully under state regulation and do not educate for democracy and integration into the workforce. The duty to include a basic curriculum most certainly applies to private schools that receive no state financing at all.

Certainly no democracy finances private, unregulated schools that do not educate for democracy and good citizenship. They know it would be suicidal to the state. It's a strategy based on destruction economics and democracy. Obviously, no state would do such a thing, except for one. The State of Israel.

Any way you look at it, Israel's policy on Haredi education is suicidal. If existential necessity requires decisions in a certain direction, the government regularly takes the opposite course. The fact is, the Ministerial Legislative Committee approved a bill that will increase budgeting to Haredi education, instead of taking the opposite tack, making sure that not a single shekel reaches Haredi schools that fail to incorporate core curriculum. This would ensure the future of the state.

But no such decision is being made. The government, short-sighted and concerned only with its own survival, sacrifices Israel's future on the alter of coalition stability. Proponents of democracy here - secular, national religious and Arab - see the future of the state growing dim and do nothing to prevent it.

It is exactly like the 1970s, when the fighters preferred to flee instead of joining battle. Again rational Israel currently prefers to flee from its own future. Today's apathy and shoulder shrugging, while there is still a rational majority capable of instigating a change, will translate into a sure loss within a few decades. If the current trend continues, its only a question of time before Masada falls as well, just as Jerusalem did.