



A cultural struggle where hate is the enemy



by Jay Shofet

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The Kulturkampf in Israel — the real cultural struggle in our society — has been sizzling for a while now and this summer is boiling over. The lines have been clearly drawn: it's the *haredi* (fervently Orthodox) fundamentalists against everyone else. At stake is the very nature of religion and our state and all the existential questions that comprise it: who is a Jew, who is a rabbi, and what will be the fate of our civic and human freedoms and conveniences, should they run counter to the belief system of the *haredi* rabbis and politicians?

Every news cycle brings more abominations, revealing a community of Jews so callous they would rather injure policemen in violent demonstrations than allow others to be able to park cars on the Sabbath, so cynical they would defend and harbor an alleged child abuser and hide her children rather than allow secular authorities to do their job, so vengeful they would retroactively void a conversion of a young Ethiopian woman because she had the temerity to bring charges after being the victim in a hit-and-run accident by a yeshiva student who is the son of a prominent municipal rabbi.

As a liberal Jew in Israel, and a democrat, the *haredi* worldview offends me; to the extent — and it is great — that they pose an affront to our civil rights, they must be opposed. But this is not, for me, a dispassionate struggle. If what I write sounds hateful, I cannot deny it: for distorting so grotesquely the religion that is at the core of my identity; for interpreting Jewish laws and tradition with such narrow, disrespectful chauvinism; for the selective, utilitarian, and somewhat parasitic approach to Israeli society and polity; and, perhaps most of all, for working tirelessly and violently to impose this fundamentalism on the rest of us — *J'accuse!* I am livid with anger — but worse, I feel something growing and black and primal, something like loathing.

But I hate that I hate, and not only because — as any therapist will tell you — it is a base and ultimately unhelpful emotion. Smart and caring friends who also work to advance religious pluralism tell me I'm wrong, that I need to understand and try to identify with the narrative of the *haredim*, to see them in a different light, to relate to their faith and their fears.

Because hatred, after all, clouds our hearts and dulls our Jewish souls, and — worst of all — may just impede our pathways to moments of true spirituality in our workaday lives. These moments are not easy to come by, and are not to be taken for granted.

That's exactly what Judaism should be about, I thought Friday night, singly lustily as the sun set over the Tel Aviv port during Kabbalat Shabbat prayers with 600 people of the liberal Bet T'fila congregation.

The thought occurred to me again as I listened to my rabbi at a bar mitzva service in my Reform synagogue in Modi'in on Shabbat morning.

My rabbi's name, aptly, is Kinneret. She is an avid swimmer, and her personal blessing to the bar mitzva boy, also a swimmer, included this aquatic observation: "There are moments while swimming when you reach your limit of exhaustion, but you push yourself, you break through, and you feel a moment of *rihuf* — of hovering — of gliding above the water's surface." That, she said, as the youth nodded understandingly, "is what connects *bricha* — pool — to *bracha* — blessing."

Not being one to push myself in swimming, I enviously tried to relate to the physical sensation my rabbi described. And yet I instantly identified with the feeling itself, the brief moment of transcendence, the fleeting instant of grace.

Only a minority of Israelis will ever find that moment of transcendence in an Orthodox synagogue in Israel, and fewer will find it — or even seek or expect it — in the places where our personal lives touch the public sphere that is under the sway of *haredim*: our weddings, our divorces, the funerals of our loved ones.

It's not all we do, but it is the best we do in the liberal Jewish movements and communities in Israel: We provide and nurture much-needed public Jewish space for hovering. All week long we educate and we advocate, we work nationally and locally, we study our sources, and toil to repair the world. But on Shabbat, we heed my rabbi's metaphoric blessing, and we all get in the pool and we try to hover.

It might just be the antidote for hate.

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