



Who is a Jew?

Over the course of many millennia, the question of 'Who is a Jew?' has been asked in many historical contexts across many geographies around the globe. While this is a very old question asked many times across centuries, today's world culture of the 21st century and some most troubling recent current events specifically in Israel presents a timely moment for me to re-engage this question in my column this month.

I recently shared with the congregation from the pulpit a statement from the Israeli Defense Forces chief rabbi. I present it here again for our readers. The headline is: "Israeli Army Rabbi does not recognize Masorti." For those who may not know, the Masorti Movement in Israel is the equivalent of our Conservative Movement in America. Here is the text of the article in the Jewish Times as reported in Ha'Aretz: "An Israeli army rabbi has refused to recognize Conservative Jewish soldiers as religious Jews. The rabbi of the Nahal infantry brigade has forbidden the troops belonging to the Conservative, or Masorti, movement from growing beards for religious reasons, Ha'aretz reported, citing Army Radio. As of April, a new order permits soldiers to grow beards only for religious or medical reasons. The Conservative soldiers were told they were not given the permit for religious reasons because the rabbi did not recognize their stream of Judaism, Ha'aretz quoted Army Radio as reporting."

This, of course, is only the tip of the iceberg. Some weeks ago, a colleague at the Women Cantors Network forward me the following article entitled, "Religious IDF troops walk out of event featuring woman singer" by Amos Harel in Ha'Aretz: "About 100 religious soldiers left a Paratroop Brigade assembly earlier this month to avoid being present at the performance of a female singer, the army weekly Bamahane reported last week. Their departure stemmed from their belief that *halakha*, or Jewish religious law, prohibits them from hearing a woman sing. Their position has the support of the army rabbinate. The case is only the latest of several such incidents of which *Haaretz* has learned. The first was reported about two years ago. This month's incident occurred two weeks ago in Haifa, when the Paratroop Brigade was marking its service in the recent Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. The event featured a short performance by male and female singers, both members of the brigade, who performed the brigade anthem. At that point, soldiers from the hesder program, which combines yeshiva study with army service, left the performance, after notifying their commanders. Several officers wearing skullcaps did the same. No disciplinary action has been taken against those who left. Sources in the army rabbinate said that *halakha* supports the soldiers' decision to leave. The rabbinate has urged commanders to show sensitivity in such situations and either to excuse religious soldiers in advance from attending any portion of a ceremony that poses a problem or to simply not feature female singers at such programs. But the army's chief education officer, Brig. Gen. Eli Shermeister, called the incident a "worrying phenomenon" that "should not be accorded continued legitimacy." Events like this are designed to foster group cohesion, he explained, so allowing some participants to leave would defeat the purpose. Army sources reported that another brigade recently canceled the appearance of a female singer at a program for commanders after two religious battalion commanders said they would not be able to participate in such an event. In another incident a year ago, there was a mass exodus of religious soldiers from a performance by women. The sources said the problem has also surfaced at Soldiers' Welfare Association vacation facilities for army units."

We all know that the identity of Jews at some of our very worst moments in our collective history were evaluations made by non-Jews filled with hatred who persecuted, punished and murdered Jews for their 'otherness.' Whether murdered by the Babylonians or Romans in Jerusalem during the destructions of the temples in 576 BCE and 70 CE, burned at the stake in York, England in the 13th century, murdered in Mainz during the crusades, tortured after being accused of causing the Black Plague in medieval Europe, killed during the Inquisition in Spain in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, murdered in pogroms throughout Eastern Europe and Russia in the 17th through 19th centuries, and slaughtered by the Nazis in a magnitude of more than 6 million human beings in the 20th century, in all these cases, these were horrors perpetrated upon us by non-Jews.

I remember a Holocaust film made over a decade ago about a young boy who survived the Shoa. He managed to fit in with other Hitler youth because he was blond and had successfully camouflaged his circumcision. It is true that the *brit milah* for males has been a physical identifying factor over the centuries, but with the requirement for all Jews to wear and/or carry specific kinds of identification symbols – from special shaped pointed hats in the Renaissance to passports with 'Jew' as nationality rather than 'German' or 'Russian' in the 19th century to armbands with Magen Davids in the ghettos of Poland – made Jewish identity a physical marker for women, as well.

The insistence by the Israeli army that soldiers' faces may not go unshaven if they are members of Masorti creates a discriminatory practice that focuses on Jew vs. Jew. Here the perpetrator of the bias is not a non-Jew, but a Jew. And that Jew is directing his bias and not permitting his fellow soldier in arms to practice Judaism in the manner he chooses as they fight together to defend their own country. Jews sadly in the late 19th century were conscripted into the Russian army for a 25 year period. They fought for Russia, but were treated as 'other,' less than their fellow Russian citizens. We all know the expression 'holier than thou,' but does not this expression take on a particularly ironic meaning when applied to the reports of refusal by an army rabbi to permit freedom of worship and observance to a fellow Jew? And with respect to the treatment of women soldiers, in an army that has a tradition from its inception some 60 years ago to include women as soldiers fighting side-by-side with men, is not something terribly wrong when, with the approval of military leadership, some men are permitted to visibly show their disdain for women singing in a brigade team-building event by walking out? These very same women could in the next instant be saving the lives of the very men who walked out on them, fellow Jews. The emergence of this Jew vs. Jew climate in the Israeli army is a most troubling trend and we must make our voices heard against such vile discriminatory practices pitting Jew against Jew when 'we are all our brothers (and sisters)' keepers' and '*Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba zey*' 'All of Israel is bound up with one another.'

This month, the month of Iyar, we celebrate *Yom Hazikaron*, *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, and *Yom Yerushalayim* respectively the Day of Remembrance for Israel's fallen soldiers, the Day of Independence for the establishment of the State of Israel, and the Day of Jerusalem celebrating the city's reunification. May all our brothers and sisters in the Israeli army and beyond, in all walks of Israeli life, learn to live with *kavanah*, respect for one another, irrespective of political, religious, gender, ethnic and socio-economic differences. Let us pray for an Israeli society that in all its guises is a society of inclusion, not exclusion and let us be mindful that '*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Ba Zeh*.'

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