

Professor Dan, Shalom:

One of the kings of ancient Persia, so the legend goes, gathered seven of his wisest men, all of whom were blind, in his courtyard. He informed them that in front of them was standing a creature known in our language as an elephant. He asked each of them to approach the animal and, by feeling it, to describe what an elephant was. Naturally, since each touched a different part of the elephant - the trunk, the tail, the tusk, the leg, and so on - each gave a totally different answer as to what an elephant is.

The truth? - Not, as we say, somewhere in the middle, but rather the composition of all the answers together.

Years ago, when our family lived in Elazar, our first point of arrival in Israel, someone from the "big city" told us that we did not know how real Israeli's live, since we were living in a small, relatively isolated, co-operative settlement. Since we were new olim, we believed him.

It took years of living in our Holy Land in various types of communities and among Jews from many different national and other backgrounds to understand that there is no such person as the "Real Israeli" and no such place as the "Real Israel." Nor can it be said, by extension, no such entity as the Real Jew.

The Jewish people is truly a Mosaic - in all senses of the word. We are, as Rav Yisroel Hess reminds us, each of us individual pieces of the jigsaw puzzle.

called the Jewish People. We each have a different shape, a different colour, a different opinion and a different position in the overall picture - a picture that was created with the creation of the world.

And why ARE we different one from another? First of all, because God created us that way and God does not make mistakes. Secondly, because each of us, in addition to being formed by different backgrounds and different sets of life experiences, also have 'different rôles to perform in this world'. There is no redundancy in creation. God does not create two people with exactly the same job to do.

The obvious conclusion from all this is that Different is Good, that variety is positive and healthy. If that is so, then why don't we like each other? And, to the point you are asking, Professor Dan, why do so-called non-religious Jews seem to be running away from their heritage? And let there be no mistake about it - while in the Dispersion Jews seem to be "passively" disappearing, God forbid, here in Israel many Jews are running away - both literally and/or culturally.

As partial explanation, this writer would like to suggest that behind this is a lack of awareness that none of us is complete as Jews. We all of us - religious, non-religious, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, left, right, etc. - NEED one another in order to complete the picture. Among other places in Jewish practice that this finds expression is in the obligatory contribution

of a half-shekel during the month of Adar for the sacrifices which will be offered in the New Year starting in Nisan on behalf of the entire Community. (This half-shekel is also used to carry out a national census).

Our Sages tell us that one of the ideas behind this mitzvah is that no Jew is ever complete by himself. He cannot represent himself with a whole shekel. He needs other Jews to complete him. It seems to me that it is this lack of understanding of how essential we are to one another that is behind the drive to polarisation in opinions, materialism, privatisation, etc. Each and every one of these phenomena might be considered good and healthy, since they each represent some aspect of the whole Jewish picture, would that we were privileged with a leadership which would remind us that they are only parts of the whole - a leadership that would also help us work together to help create the whole.

There are many analogies one could make to help clarify these ideas. I prefer one from the chemical world, since:

- (a) that is my profession, and
- (b) God has blessed us with a bounty of raw material for the following analogy.

Sodium is a very active metal - reacting with air and moisture so rapidly that you would suffer serious burns if you put a piece in your hand or pocket.

3"02

5"jla 7"lc2 1"cr 7lk
May 21, '97

To: Mr. Jeff Barak
Editor
The Jerusalem Post
FAX: 02-538-9527

From: Mordechai Goldman
Mish'ot Koreh 2
Be'er-Sheva
Tel. 07-6432843 (FAX: 07-6500487
e-mail: macky@bromine.ibmmail.com)

Dear Mr. Barak-

The attached letter is a modest attempt to give a partial response to Prof. Joseph Davis' article in last Friday's (May 16) edition, "Why this fierce self-mutilation?"

I would appreciate it if you would pass it on to him, together with my address and phone number if he is interested in further communication. At the very least, I hope that my comments will help us all in our search together for ways to getting the Jewish people back on track.

Thank you.

Pls acknowledge receipt of this. (6 pages, incl. this one).
m3f/b '37W

Why this fierce self-mutilation?

There is something that I do not understand, something that has, indeed, perplexed me for a long time.

One of the important results of the establishment of the State of Israel was the intense spread, over the last two generations, of the academic study of Judaism throughout the world.

Hundreds of universities, especially in North America and Europe, now teach Hebrew and Jewish studies, and the subject is universally recognized as an integral component of intellectual life.

The history of the Jewish people, Jewish philosophy and mysticism, Hebrew language and literature are perceived as complex disciplines arousing interest among Jews and non-Jews. Like every other national and religious culture, Judaism is understood as including various and conflicting trends and emphases, together forming a dynamic, vibrant, and developing contribution to human culture.

Western culture today is comprised of numerous such cultural complexes, each of which retains its particular characteristics. From Ireland to Mexico, from Sicily to Alabama, all present their essential uniqueness, at the same time forming the building blocks of the global cultural and intellectual civilization.

In the first decades after its establishment, the attitude of Israel's secular majority conformed to this universal approach. Judaism was understood as being not only a religious tradition but a national culture too, one which could be integrated with Western civilization. The fusion of the two was regarded as the basis of the emerging culture of the State of

JOSEPH DAN

Israel.

This situation has changed dramatically over the last two decades. Today, the only place in the world where the variety and complexity, the dynamism and relevance of the Jewish heritage is denied is among the secular community in Israel.

When I started my studies 45 years ago, most of my teachers

wholeheartedly accept the most important component of the haredi worldview – the one in which they are absolutely wrong – the claim that only the haredim are the sole representatives of Judaism as a whole, past, present, and future, and that only they express “true Judaism.”

We vehemently reject haredi claims in every aspect of life,

Secular Israelis have torn up their ticket to contemporary global culture

and fellow students, like me, led a secular life. None of us found any inherent contradiction between our dedication to Jewish studies and our adherence to Western values, norms, and methodologies.

In recent years, however, a powerful process of radicalization brought about the emergence of a schism between the haredim and the intensely secular majority. This, in turn, caused a swift weakening of the middle.

Judaism came to be regarded more and more as antagonistic to contemporary culture, as if only its rejection could enable one to accept Western norms.

The secular intellectual community developed a deep enmity toward anything it conceived as representing haredi Judaism. This came to include even the Bible, Jewish history, and the history of the Land of Israel, and classical Hebrew literature.

The paradox is that while secular Israelis fiercely reject haredi cultural, social, and religious norms, we

thought, and politics; but we see them as the only legitimate Jews.

It is hardly surprising that the haredim view themselves as the “true Judaism”; yet incomprehensible that secular Jews in Israel accept that claim, including Isaiah and Bialik, Maimonides and Agnon, the Zohar and Mendelsohn in the haredi complex, and hating it all.

THROUGHOUT the history of the state, secular Israelis never gave legitimacy to any attempt to create a moderate concept of Judaism which could be integrated with contemporary culture.

We seem to insist that only the haredim are legitimate Jews, thus contributing to the weakening and erosion of every meaningful middle road uniting Judaism with Zionism and with openness to Western culture.

Why do we do it? This attitude has no parallel either in Diaspora Judaism, which is open to a pluralistic concept of Judaism, nor in the non-Jewish intellectual world,

which recognizes the variety and complexity of Judaism as it does of every other culture.

As a result of this paradox, fewer and fewer secular Israeli students and scholars are dedicating themselves to Jewish studies, while abroad the numbers are increasing, with Jewish studies appealing to a diverse group of people, both Jews and non-Jews. More and more scholarly books are published abroad, while their number in Israel is decreasing.

Contemporary civilization does not welcome people who hate themselves and cut themselves off from their authentic cultural heritage. He who approaches Western culture empty-handed will receive only the external aspects of this culture.

We oppose the haredim in every possible way, yet we are surrendering our identity to them, as well as our ticket to contemporary global culture.

Why? I have no answer. If anyone has, I shall recommend wholeheartedly that he be nominated for a future Israel Prize.

Meanwhile, I can only express the hope that we shall overcome this self-imposed self-mutilation, and recognize that the diversity of Jewish culture can both sustain Israeli spiritual life and serve as a bridge to our integration in the best achievements of Western culture.

At this point, however, things seem to be going in quite the opposite direction.

The writer, Gershom Scholem professor of Kabbala at the Hebrew University, received this year's Israel Prize for his studies in the history of Jewish mysticism, thought, ethics, and literature.