

A Secular Journey into Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Territory: Why can't we get along?

Amnon Zohar April 23, 2012

To me, one who was born and lived in Israel for many years, an unaffiliated secular "Sabra", I always thought of Ultra-Orthodox Jews as people who are meek, pale, weak, repressed and living in the past. People who refuse to embrace modernity and are stuck somewhere in the Eastern European "Shtetl" (town) of 300 years ago. That was my image of the exilic Ultra-Orthodox Jew. Was it the long black garments, the weird fur hat ("Shtreiml"), the long beards and even longer side burns ("Peyes"), the hanging fringes ("Tzitzit), the women wearing long austere dresses, head covers and wigs and constantly pregnant. Where they really my people, part of my culture? After all I too am a Jew. When I returned to Israel on a Sabbatical to study at Tel-Aviv University after 41 years of living in Canada, I could immediately detect that what was a mild resentment of Ultra-Orthodox Jews by the secular majority has escalated to practically a cultural war with both sides radicalizing their positions.

I have to admit that I felt no empathy towards the Ultra-Orthodox some of whom are declared anti-Zionists who refuse to accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel. This was a perfect example of unadulterated Cultural Relativism. Just as suggested by its definition, I failed to "assume that cultures and societies may have their own distinctive systems of morality and social practices, which are "right" for those cultures in terms of their own contexts and their own functional interrelations. It is therefore a mistake to pass critical judgments of better or worse on a comparative basis between them since each is acceptable in its own place."¹ Better yet it was a classic case of "Ethnocentrism which refers to the uncritical belief in the superiority of our own culture in comparison to others; the judgments made are thus "ethnocentric."²

The truth to be told I never met an Ultra-Orthodox Jew in Israel or abroad (except watching them on Television), I never understood the nuanced differences between the different sects and I did not know much about their customs and rituals other than their strict adherence to the Torah and Halacha.

It is for these very reasons that I was so thrilled to find out about an organized tour to the two most Ultra-Orthodox towns and neighborhoods in Israel, Bnei-Brak and Jerusalem's Me'a Shearim to observe and engage in their celebration of the festival of Purim. Why Purim? Of all days of the year, this is probably the most meaningful in order to compare and contrast Secular and Haredim way of life. Purim is a leveler. First, it is not a religious holiday but rather a festival. Secondly it is celebrated equally by Secular and Haredim (albeit as we will see in somewhat different ways) and both use Purim to "loosen up", have fun, get silly and do everything (decent) that comes to mind, mostly the opposite, the mischievous and sometimes the

¹Introduction to Anthropology - Glossary

²*Between Two Worlds* Ethnographic essays on American Jewry Edited by Jack Kugelmass

bizarre. Most importantly, there is a saying in Purim: “NicasYaain, Yatza Sod” (loosely translated it means: when you drink lots of wine or get drunk hidden secrets are revealed). So, what can be a better way to engage with Haredim than on Purim.

For the uninitiated, Jeffrey Rubenstein describes Purim as “the strangest Jewish festival” and goes on to relate the folk customs, revelry and mischief that have developed somewhat independently of the central story. Rubenstein goes on to explain that Purim should be understood as a time of ‘*liminality*’ – famously described by the Anthropologist Victor Turner as “betwixt and between” – a transitional period, neither being one thing or the other, living in the grey. Turner explains that liminal states generate a social environment known as ‘*communitas*’, in which existing social order and status are reversed, hierarchies disrupted and relationships transcend their everyday boundaries³.

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As a child in Israel the festival of Purim has always been my favorite. Every year, from nursery through kindergarten and grade school we studied Megilath Esther that tells the story of Purim and of course we went out with our parents dressed in our Purim costumes to join in the street celebration and sometimes the Purim parade known as the “Adloyada”. This, however, celebrating Purim the Ultra-Orthodox way, I was told was the “real deal” and we were on our way. We left Tel-Aviv at 8 O’clock in the morning on a tour of “Purim in Bnei-Brak” organized by the “Cathedra” school that is affiliated with the Israeli Museum. The Cathedra brands itself as “a meeting place for Intellectuals from every discipline who are craving to learn more and more...” This may be one reason why the bus was full to capacity with passengers who seem to have a lot in common: White, Ashkenazi, secular, retirement age, seemingly affluent and well-travelled in Israel and abroad who either are, or think or would like others to think that they are intellectuals. We made excellent time to Bnei-Brak which is quite unusual in the traffic clogged Tel-Aviv especially during the morning rush hour.



On arrival in Bnei-Brak we were met by Dorit, our tour guide for the day. Dorit was born in Bnei-Brak, in fact her grandfather was one of the founders of Bnei-Brak then intended as a

³ Russell Collins. *The InBetweeners – Exploring the Margins of Purim* 27/03/2012 <http://brand-ish.co/cartoonkippah/the-inbetweeners-exploring-the-margins-of-purim/>

did not hear...

“Zionist agricultural town in the spirit of the Torah”. Dorit is secular as is her family for generations. One of the few seculars living in Bnei-Brak . Today, according to Dorit, the town is populated as to 97% by Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox), about 2.5% by National Religious and only .5% of secular or traditional Jews. We are all gathered in the Town Hall Square and listen to Dorit describing the history of the founding and the evolution of the town of Bnei-Brak and its demographics. Bnei-Brak is the 5th holiest city in Israel after Jerusalem, Hebron (not really in Israel), Safad and Tiberius and a large Torah study center. We learn that Bnei-Brak is likely the most densely populated town in Israel. In fact the “Parkette” that surrounds the town hall square is the only park or garden in the entire town. The reason we are told is not only the natural growth of the population but also the prohibition of building high rises of more than four stories high. The reason for that is of course the fact that the Haredim are not allowed to use “Shabat elevators” as do some of the more moderate religious in cities like Tel-Aviv.



Our first stop is a visit to the Hertz family across the street from the town hall. They live on the 4th floor and invited us to visit their home and share in the reading of the Megilah. The Hertz' apartment is of average size still holds all of us (25 or so) and her family members. She explains that the walls in her family room are bare as she is in the midst of redecorating the home with her newest art form (glass work) to which she recently switched from textile art. She shows us some of her newest works already hanging in the kitchen and the hall with the rest to come in the family room. She clarifies that hanging pictures and artworks on the walls is perfectly

acceptable in Haredim's homes. The house features many Judaica items (candle sticks, silver plates, holly books etc.,) it is clean and peaceful.



By 11:45- We go out to the streets of Bnei-Brak. By that time we are told the traditional father and son learning of the Torah ritual is over and families go out to celebrate Purim on the street. We see groups of youngsters in similar costumes dancing in circles or singing from roof tops of cars and windows. These we are told are Yeshiva student each group representing a different Yeshiva.

*photos are
very helpful.*



On our way to the center of the town we stopped by the Ponevez Yeshiva (<http://www.ponevez.co.il/>) one of the largest in Israel. We were told that the Rabi of the Polish town of Ponevez was asked by his wife to go to Israel before the Holocaust and wait for her and their 10 children to arrive after he settles in. In June of 1941 the Nazis murdered all the Jews of Ponevez and in 1943 Rabi Kerlitz founded the Ponevez Yeshiva in Bnei-Brak. He subsequently gave shelter to the “Children of Teheran” that were rescued from the Nazis by hiding them in monasteries. Unlike most Haredim Rabis who are anti-Zionists, Rabi Kerlitz in his last will and testament decreed that the flag of Israel will be raised on top of the Ponevez’ Yeshiva on every Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israel’s independence Day).



We proceed from there to walk the streets of Bnei-Brak to the sound of singing, shouting, dancing, loud speakers carrying the traditional music across town and watch families who are out on the streets with all the children dressed up in Purim costumes. I continue to snap photographs everywhere I can. Of course I ask permission of the parents and the children before I photograph them. Some agree willingly and even enthusiastically but others refuse. On any normal day the Haredim are not allowed to be photographed but Purim (for most) is an exception. The costumes look like they are homemade of original fabric. Many girls in brides dresses, many boys as soldiers, cops and kings. Some very original (a book warm, a baby in a crib).

V. J. Shevartov



The joy is evident on the faces of the children and the adults. Most of them are in a rush carrying MishloachManot on their way to deliver to friends and family.



A few, mainly youngsters, semi drunk and some full-fledged drunks stumble across the street. Drinking to oblivion is a Purim ritual and even kids and definitely under drinking age youths are allowed to drink on Purim. Same goes for smoking. It would appear that on Purim almost anything goes but all in good spirits and good intentions. By now it's 3:00 PM and we are invited for a mini- Mishte at Dorit's home. Wine and Kugel (a Jewish Ashkenazi traditional dish) is served and sure enough a group of Yeshiva students, barge in, form a circle, and dance and sing their hearts out. We thank Dorit and head home to Tel-Aviv.



From this relatively “dry” description it may be hard to understand why this day was so enthralling, illuminating insightful and down- right joyous. In my analysis that would follow I promise to take you in on a wonderful tour of fascinating people, places, customs and rituals and a few interesting if not controversial personal observations.

The next day is Shooshan Purim (the day after Purim). In Jerusalem being a “walled city” and according to Jewish tradition Purimis celebrated on Shooshan Purim. We board a mini-bus in Tel-Aviv with a different tour and head out to the most ultra-orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem (and Israel for that matter) Me’aShearim (translated: “a hundred gates”).The women in our group were warned ahead of time that they must wear skirts or dresses well below the knee (absolutely no pants or short skirts) and have with them head covers (only to be used when visiting synagogues). Our guide, Dancho albeit secular developed some good relationships with some of the Haredim’sRabis and we were fortunate to be allowed to enter the synagogue in Me’aShearim to listen to the reading of the Megilah.



Of course the women were separated from the men as is required in Orthodox Judaism. The reading was interrupted by the noise of special noise makers (Ra’ashanim) that the children use every time the name of Ha’Man (The evil man who wanted the Jews killed in Persia) was

mentioned. This is another one of the Purim rituals. Following the reading the men broke into a wild dance to the music of a band that was perched on the balcony of the synagogue. If Bnei-Brak was joyful, Me'aShearim was rocking. There was nothing commercial about the Purim celebration as I have gotten used to in the secular sector. Costumes were homemade, elaborate and creative. No paper hats or garments, no American culture heroes like you see in Tel-Aviv: Batman, Superman, Spiderman and other pop culture figures. We then saw some of the things we were told but found hard to believe: little kids smoking cigarettes (and cigars), young Yeshiva student totally drunk and some puking their guts out, but all in good spirits. After a long walk in many of the ultra-orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem we had a unique opportunity to meet with one of the Rabis of the BraslevHaredim. He accepted us (in mixed company) at the women's section of the Braslev synagogue (the main hall sits 10,000!) and talked to us briefly about their way of life regarding such matters as marriage, education and attitudes towards Israel. I will tell you much more about this encounter later on.

nicely put
✓



We finished our “field trip” with a Mishte at the home of a family belonging to one of the most radical if not extreme ultra-Orthodox strands known as BeithAharon. We climbed up to their modest apartment and the first thing that caught my eye was a Palestinian Authority flag hanging from the ceiling. I was uncomfortable at the sight as did others of our group. It was soon removed and was explained as a Purim prank by one of the children, argument being that in Purim everything is upside down. This is a family of 16 (!) children, most of them and their spouses and children were present. We learned that 3 of the daughters gave birth to children at different times next to their mother who also gave birth to their siblings at the same time. We drank wine (again) and were offered traditional (kugel-again) Purim food. The place was humming but with a sense of joy and celebration. The entire family was friendly and accommodating. We boarded the mini-bus on our way back to Tel-Aviv. Needless to say there

wow!

many impressions exchanged on the bus. I have never been in the company of Haredim and frankly knew little about their way of life. This year's Purim was a true revelation.

When we boarded the bus to Bnei-Brak on Purim day and the next day (Shooshan Purim) to Jerusalem we were tourists. We knew that we were going to a place we have not been to before, to see people who are much different than us, on a day that we both consider joyful and mischievous, that we ourselves celebrate albeit in hindsight not as well. We had no set expectation other than, "we're here – entertain us". When we came home after two days practically exhausted we realized that we were actually enthusiastic participants in an unusual experience in an immersive, impressive and engaging manner. Whenever ~~we travel~~ anywhere in the world we invariably come back thinking about the 3 things that left a lasting impression on us and this experience was no exception. We were impressed by some **people** we met, by some **customs and rituals** we took part in and by the **cultural interaction** if not collision between secular and ultra-orthodox Jews. *V. good*

my wife...

(others)

People:

Hinda Hertz the mother of the household we were invited into in Bnei-Brak. She is 57 years old, mother of 7 children (5 are married and 2 are still at home) and 17 grandchildren. Mrs. Hertz is an artist and a teacher who teaches art, to Haredim women who study to become art teachers. She talked to us about herself her family and her core values and beliefs. She is extremely eloquent and respectful of her guests. When asked to speak through a microphone, she admits that she is not comfortable with electronic gadgets of any sort including the microphone and prefers to use her voice. There is no Television, Radio or Internet in the house but there are computers. Mrs. Hertz describes her function in the household and sums it up by saying while I am the home maker I am also the home essence (sounds better in Hebrew). She explains why Purim is such an important festival and compares it in significance to Yom Kipur. She argues that true joy and Simcha elevates the spirit of togetherness, love for each other and peace even more so than Tfila (Prayer) on Yom Kipur. She speaks about her father who already has 5 great, great grandchildren and her grandfather who was a Rabi in Poland and opted to come to the land of Israel well before the Holocaust. His entire family in Poland was annihilated by the Nazis, but he started a new family in Israel that grew to more than 1500(!). It is his revenge of the Nazis, she says. We came in with a preconceived notion that women are "second class citizen" in their own home and left convinced that they are the center of the home. The mutual respect and admiration between the wife and the husband and amongst the children was indeed revealing.

In Mea' She'arimis the mother of 16 (!) children. One of the women in our group asked the mother the obvious question: How do you manage to raise 16 children practically by yourself? The woman replied calmly and said "It takes only 5 minutes a day to tell each one of your children how special they are and how much you love them". This is a phrase I shall never forget.

me neither!

The Braslev Rabi accepted us (in mixed company) at the women's section of the Braslev synagogue (the main hall sits 10,000!) and talked to us briefly about their way of life regarding such matters as marriage, education and attitudes towards Israel he explained that Orthodox believe that matchmaking organized by the parents is a better recipe for a good marriage rather than "young love". Love grows with time, he says, and is built together in partnership overtime. He mentioned that girls are being educated in compliance with the state mandatory curriculum albeit with emphasis on religious studies. They graduate with a matriculation certificate and join the workforce or continue studies in universities or teaching seminaries. The boys, he admits, are not being educated according to the state core curriculum but mainly in Torah, Gmarah and Talmud. He argues, as do most orthodox, that such studies sharpen their mind and develops their intellect as much or more than the core curriculum and upon graduation from Yeshiva they are well prepared to "catch up" on the "secular" subjects if they need or choose to do so. As to the state of Israel, they believe that it is God's work to build Eretz Israel and not that of the state which only slows it down. At the same time he declares that all Orthodox must reject any form of collaboration with Israel's enemies who are bent on its destruction. I did not necessarily agree with everything he said or believed in but for the first time perhaps I listened I understood and I respected his views which is more than I can say about my attitudes prior to our meeting.

Speaking of people, upon leaving the Yeshiva we continued to watch the street celebrations. We were enamored by the little people, the children, the beautiful children in their original costumes and the joy on their faces.





Customs and Rituals:

Purim is characterized by the 4 “M”s the four Purim Mitzvahs (customs or traditions) Megilah (reading the scroll of Esther) MishloachManot (gifts of food or drink that are sent to friends, relatives, neighbors etc., on Purim day)MatanTzdaka (Give charity to at least two, but preferably more, needy individuals on Purim Day) and Mishte (special festive meal on Purim Day, when family and friends gather together to rejoice in the Purim spirit). There is a strong emphasis on giving to charities on Purim. ⁴Haredim neighborhoods are not well off in fact many of them are very poor. On Purim, Yeshiva students are invited (and sometime barge into) homes to sing and dance and bring the Purim spirit of joy in return for donations to the Yeshiva and more importantly the Groom Foundation. Every Yeshiva student who gets married receives a few thousand dollars, we are told, from the Groom Foundation to start a family, pay for the wedding, or for a down payment on a home. Children expect to receive money on Purim and approach you directly and unashamedly which secular tourists seem to resent as in their mind this is a humiliating form of bagging, not so for the children, it is a natural custom and I am

⁴For more on Purim Customs and rituals see: Abraham P. Bloch *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*

willing to bet that it is not being spent on candy. The rituals are mostly *Rites of Reversal*⁵ prohibitions normally enforced are lifted. In fact they become rules for “breaking rules”: Underage drinking to oblivion, children smoking, noise makers interrupting the reading of the Megilah every time Haman’s name is mentioned, serious scholars and Rabis dress and behave like clowns, picture taking is allowed and sometime welcomed on this the only day. On Purim (almost) everything goes. Yet we have not seen even one incident of rowdy let alone aggressive or violent behavior. Secular tourists like us are totally ignored, even though on this Purim day there are many more of them than on any regular day. In fact a bunch of children who do not get to see secular Jews too often stopped to ask our group – “What country are you from? America?”



Cultural Interaction:

As mentioned our group demographics represents the total opposite of our “hosts”: White, Ashkenazi, secular, retirement age, seemingly affluent, well-travelled and real or “pseudo” intellectuals. Like most Israelis of this somewhat elite group they believe that they already know everything, their opinions are set their attitudes firm and listening is not a known strength. This naturally led to a few “clashes of civilization”. For instance, the women in our

group were warned ahead of time that they must wear skirts or dresses well below the knee (absolutely no pants or short skirts) and have with them head covers (only to be used when visiting synagogues). Well, some did and some did not. Worth yet some stepped into the synagogue without a head cover. The excuses were lame and respect for the hosts at a premium. I did not have to check their academic credentials to conclude that disrespectful behavior if not arrogance on the part of some of our group members was not a requirement for attaining academic status (real or imaginary).

do you
keep
them
warm?



This is a time in Israel of great division and animosity between Secular and Haredim regarding issues of discrimination against women, service in the IDF and contribution (or rather non-contributions) to the Israeli economy by the Haredim and them imposing through their political clout more and more restrictions on the secular majority. On Purim I saw nothing but great hospitality, tolerance and goodwill on the part of the Haredim, but amongst our group I heard a lot of comments expressing resentment, anger and disdain towards the Haredim. When we met the Braslev Rabi at his synagogue and where he “allowed” us to be in mixed company, and while he was calm, cool and collected in presenting his views and beliefs, some of the members of our (secular) group challenged him in the most disrespectful manner with their anti-Orthodox arguments if not accusations to the point of discomfort and awkwardness. Needless to say there

were many arguments exchanged on the bus mostly related to the behavior of some of us in the group.

this is another interesting topic to develop in the future



I have never been in the company of Haredim and frankly knew little about their way of life. These tours left a lasting impression on us. It would seem that the Haredim know more about us than we know about them, that they are probably more comfortable in their skin and secure in their beliefs than are we and finally that culture, dignity and respect and civic behavior is not a secular monopoly. This journey also broke some of my misconceptions regarding Haredim's life amongst them the status of women in the home if not the public square, the peaceful harmony in Haredim's homes with many more inhabitants, than the secular and finally their discourse, hospitality and demeanor project more dignity and civility than that of many people in our secular group. As advertised in the tag line of the tour company I was one of the people "from every discipline who are craving to learn more and more..." Indeed I did. This years' Purim was a true revelation.

Excellent job!
Enjoyed reading
your paper.
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