

Questions without answers



Israelis protest against the government's controversial judicial reform bill, in front of the residence of Justice Minister Yariv Levin, in Modiin, on March 9, 2022.

by Phyllis Chesler

We have just seen an insurrection that shut Israel down being hailed as a “peaceful” pro-democracy movement. A movement that is proud of having used BDS/antifa tactics against their own state in order to further “de-Judaize” the country.

Israel is the one and only Jewish state, but what does that mean? What is “Jewish” about Israel? Is it protecting gay rights, trans rights, Arab rights, women's rights, refugee rights, the rights of a Supreme Court over and above the rights of a democratically elected government? Is this what is meant by democracy?

I suppose one could argue that such values can be found in the

Torah, Talmud and commentaries if one interprets them in a creative, politically correct, 21st century way. There are always “strangers at our gates” whom we are commanded to rescue, women and children in danger whom we are commanded to protect.

Is leading a secular, assimilated lifestyle, free from rabbinic encroachments (we’ve been here before, over and over again), particularly “Jewish?” Or does “Jewishness” consist of obeying rabbinic authority or at least studying, even respecting, Jewish law and Jewish history?

I do not have the answer to these questions. I can only answer them for myself.

Personally, I believe in the separation of religion and state, something that does not currently exist in Israel. Personally, I would not like to be forced to dress in a rabbinically approved way. Personally, I do not want to be told where I can pray in the Holy Land. Personally, I would not like to be forced to leave Israel in order to obtain a civil marriage or a civil divorce. Personally, I would not like my streets to be closed to traffic on Shabbat.

And yet, and yet: What then, is our collective relationship to tradition? To authority? To the wisdom of the ages? To Jewish knowledge? And who gets to decide?

Do Israel’s religious Jews really want to control non-religious Jews? Some may, but most probably just want to be left alone. Do anti-religious Israeli Jews want to control religious Jews? I think that they too mainly wish to be left alone. Anyone who can immediately accomplish such an enlightened détente deserves far more than a Nobel Prize.

Do I, as an individual, have the right to make a decision for all of us? Do the rabbis collectively have such a right? Clearly, our beloved country, our only potential refuge in a Jew-hating world, is now at such a crossroads.

Many are convinced that those who elected the current government think it is both their duty and their right to make such decisions for one and all. And those who led and joined the demonstrations/insurrection believe that, based on their views of civil rights and liberties—supported by the Israeli Supreme Court—they are entitled, even obligated, to turn Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria into outposts of 21st century America and Europe.

Do they prefer Tel Aviv's easy, boutique way of life to what they view as the far more constricted, "primitive" lives of the Haredim, Hasidim, Mizrachi Jews and the "settlers," all of whom elected the current government? Are they fearful that without the Israeli Supreme Court holding all the cards, both the rabbinate and the nationalists will start to control their lives even more?

So many learned, intelligent, passionate patriots have marched. They insist that this is who they are. Perhaps so. But they somehow fail to see how much comfort their tactics, their accusations, may have given to our enemies and to Jew-haters around the world.

They are proud of having used mob action to obtain their ends, which were not merely to pause deliberations on the judicial issue but rather to weaken or destroy Netanyahu and the politicians with whom he was forced to make an alliance. Trump Derangement Syndrome pales in comparison to Bibi Derangement Syndrome.

We are truly One (Western) World. It seems to me that the demonstrators want to live in the Arab, anti-Zionist, Islamist Middle East as if they were living in Berkeley or on the Upper West Side of New York. Do they not share my fears about Iran, Hamas and other existential dangers to which Jews now find ourselves subjected? What if, God forbid, Hamas or Hezbollah had attacked when the country was effectively locked down?

I watched so many videos of the demonstrations. One video really moved me. When the demonstrators came to Bnai Brak, they found a welcome committee that offered them cholent while singing "Shalom Aleichem."

One demonstrator, draped in an Israeli flag and on a motorbike, slowly removed his helmet, began singing along and finally began weeping. Was he moved by this show of brotherly love? Was he reminded of childhoods at the Sabbath table? Did he understand that the demonstrators were being greeted by their presumed "enemies" as if they all constituted the Sabbath Bride?

I have no answer to these questions either.

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