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Subject: Tel Aviv & Back, Letter 32

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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

On Friday, Jerusalem hosted the first Gay Pride Parade in Israel's history. I first heard about it in Marcel's Barber Shop on Ben Yehudah (I risked my life because Ya'akov's on Azza has been closed for over a week). The parade occasioned a lot of locker room banter among the all-male clientele, none of which I could understand. On Shabbes morning in shul I overheard David Lazar tell Art Green that the Haredim stayed away, so as not to expose their people to such abomination, and there were no incidents. I feel sorry for the Haredim, for Shabbes was Day Two of the Sharav, and to walk around in such heat in a black gaberdine and layers of clothing designed by the Polish nobility is a form of martyrdom. I also pity them because they don't have nearly as much fun in shul as I do, and because they speak such an awful Yiddish. I eavesdrop every now and then on their cell phone conversations. What a Creole! A mishmash of Basic Polish-Hungarian Yiddish, Brooklyn English, and Israeli Hebrew. The vocabulary and sentence structure are so primitive! How, I am at a loss to imagine, can any nuanced emotions ever get expressed, either between parents and children or between husbands and wives? How do they even study Talmud? According to a recent Hebrew University dissertation, they pronounce "Intifada" "Antipada." Why? Because without radio or television they have to guess from the way the word is spelled in their kosher publications. How ironic. The aliyah from America produced: (1) Haredim of every conceivable stripe and (2) religious pluralism.

The unholy alliance between synagogue and state has produced some strange practices. Back in April, at the Pesach seder, we met a man named Paul, with rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University. He earns his living by ghost officiating at non-Orthodox weddings. Because Reform and Conservative marriages are not recognized, some enterprising couples hire Rabbi Paul to sign the necessary documents. In his own eyes, Paul is a kind of Johnny Appleseed, and his benign presence is certainly better than the ever more popular alternative--flying to Cypress for the wedding and returning to Israel for the party. As for the Rabbinate, I guess its primary concern is guarding its power base, which is what the other political parties are busy doing as well.

Because this was my last Shabbes Mevorchim in Israel, I showed up at the Leader Minyan at 8:10 and turned down invitations for lunch in order to stay until the very end. (Talk about martyrdom!) I know most of the melodies by now, and although I

did not join the male dancers at El Adon (they were singing a melody that doesn't resonate for me), I was counted amongst them before the Torah Service. And this time I remembered to announce the Molad both in Yiddish and Hebrew. Five hours is a long time to be in shul, especially in the midst of a Sharav, so I had occasion to do a lot of thinking. One voice was saying: This whole phenomenon of neo-hasidic, almost-egalitarian prayer is nothing but an American import, much less significant, say, than Seinfeld (who is expected here any day now), and the presence of people who bring regards from Minyan Ma'at underscores how small the pool of potential daveners is. Another voice said: Small, but invaluable. Dov Elboim, a renegade from the Haredi world, would give up his TV program in exchange for a minyan like this. That's why he interviews so many people who are trying to break new religious ground, and why so many of them are American-born. And a third voice said: Consider how fortunate you are! Were it not for Havurat Shalom and the Sixties, you, a secular Jew from Montreal, would never have discovered the language of prayer. Listen, Art Green is here. Why don't you go over to thank him?

So during kiddush, even before Moshe Kline started pouring the ice cold vodka, I did.

Jerusalem, June 9, 2002

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