



BS"D

Our Views

2nd of Cheshvan 5767 (Oct 24, 2006)

Religion by Choice

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In the year 2000, the Avi Chai Foundation in conjunction with the Gutman Institute publicized their in-depth research project that examined Jewish Israelis' approach toward faith and tradition. The report concluded that "There is a general consensus among Jewish Israelis that expresses commitment to Jewish identity, Jewish culture and the continuity of Jewish life..."

The report states that:

Only 21% of the Jewish population in Israel is not observant at all. The rest of the population is divided between those who fully adhere to Jewish tradition, those who somewhat adhere to Jewish tradition, and those who only slightly adhere to Jewish tradition.

- 98% affix a *mezuzah* to their front door.
- 85% participate in the Passover Seder.
- 71% light Chanukah candles.
- 68% do not eat *chametz* (leavening) on Passover.
- 58% do not eat unkosher food.
- 55% eat a special Shabbat meal.
- 51% always light Shabbat or holiday candles with the traditional blessing.
- 48% say the *Kiddush* at the Shabbat meal.
- 44% keep their meat and dairy utensils separate.

The figures from the 2000 report showed an increase in Jewish identity and traditional observance since the previous survey that had been conducted ten years previously. A new report, publicized by Dr. Asher Cohen of Bar Ilan University has shown another increase. It is important to note that this increase is taking place despite the mass *aliyah* from the former Soviet Union -- the absolute majority of which is non-observant. In the past years, approximately fifty percent of the immigrants are not even Jews according to Jewish law.

As tradition is the clear choice of the majority of Israel's population, one would think that the national agenda and the public domain would reflect the public's preference. But that is not the case. The once proverbial status quo has continued to disintegrate, just as the public's connection to its Jewish identity has increased. More shopping malls and stores are open on Shabbat, more unkosher food is being sold, more *chametz* is being sold on Passover and the public is subjected to more sexual harassment with advertisements that for some reason are called..."bold."

When I first started out in the Likud, I met with a veteran Likud activist -- a man with a wide breadth of intellectual pursuits -- for a lengthy conversation. I explained my views on the Jewish identity of the State. The conversation went on and on, and suddenly the man said to me:

"I can certainly agree with everything that you say, but please explain one thing."

"I can try," I smiled.

"Why shouldn't El-Al (Israel's national airline) fly on Shabbat?"

I thought for a moment and answered:

"Let it fly."

The man was surprised.

"You don't care if El Al flies on Shabbat?"

"No. El Al doesn't fly over my home in Karnei Shomron and it doesn't disturb me. Not on Shabbat and not during the rest of the week."

"So you agree that El Al can fly on Shabbat?"

"As far as I'm concerned, it can fly. But I'm not sure that you would want that to happen."

Now he was really confused.

"Why should I care more than you?"

"Do you have children?" I asked.

"Thank G-d," he answered with a smile.

"I also have a number of little ones," I concurred. "Do you want them to be connected to their Jewish identity?"

"Of course," he answered.

"I also want my children to remain connected to Judaism.

But you must agree that my children have a better chance of retaining their Jewish identity than your children. After all, a child who learns what prayer to say when he opens his eyes in the morning and what prayer to say before he goes to sleep at night as well as how to behave in a Jewish way all through the day has a much better chance of retaining his Jewish identity."

"Obviously, you are right," he answered.

"In that case," I continued, "you are the one with the greater interest that the State should supply the atmosphere of Jewish identity. Both of us want our children to retain their Jewish identity. But your children will need a generally Jewish environment in order to retain their identity much more than my children."

"O.k., I understand," he said, "but what does that have to do with El Al?"

"The Shabbat is one of the foundations of Judaism," I answered. There is no Judaism without Shabbat. Shabbat is very important to me and that is why I prefer to have the people with the greatest interest in its preservation decide. I don't want to decide if El Al should fly on Shabbat. I want *you* to decide.

"Me?"

"That's right. You! I don't want religious parties or religious legislation. The more religious parties and religious legislation that we have in this country, the less Jewish identity we have. The majority of the public wants to preserve our Jewish identity. Why turn it into coercion and push the large traditional sector into the waiting arms of the small anti-religious minority? I want to break out of that cycle. I want *you* to take responsibility for your Jewish identity. We are both on the same side. I don't want the job of coercing you into anything. I completely rely on you. You can decide if El Al should fly on Shabbat."

"I am here since the establishment of the State, I always argue about this during reserve duty, and I never heard anybody present this issue the way that you did," the man said.

"That means that we have our work cut out for us."

"We sure do."

So what can I do?

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