

Teaching the Tradition of Freedom to Israel's Ultra-Orthodox

RCP realclearpolitics.com/articles/2016/12/29/teaching_the_tradition_of_freedom_to_israels_ultra-orthodox_132669.html

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

December 29, 2016

TEL AVIV—Last week, I taught an intensive two-day seminar in Jerusalem on the tradition of modern freedom to male *haredi* (“God fearing” in Hebrew) or ultra-Orthodox, Jews. The students were particularly drawn to the challenge of reconciling the claims of individual liberty and democratic self-government with their exacting form of traditional Jewish belief and practice.

The struggle to harmonize freedom and faith is hardly unique to the ultra-Orthodox -- or to Israel. But few groups within contemporary liberal democracies experience the conflict as a greater threat than do Israel’s ultra-Orthodox. And few of today’s liberal democracies have a more urgent interest in facilitating a rapprochement between a deeply pious minority and the essential requirements of a modern nation-state than does Israel.

The students’ presence in the seminar—offered by the Tikvah Fund, a New York City-based philanthropic foundation—was anything but routine. The ultra-Orthodox in Israel are largely products of a separate, gender-divided, state-funded educational system. It revolves around the study of Talmud and other sacred Jewish texts while excluding history, literature, political thought, economics, foreign languages, science, and other secular subjects. Because several students spoke little or no English, the class was conducted in Hebrew.

Along with their strictly *yeshiva*, or religious education, the austere dress and self-contained neighborhoods of the ultra-Orthodox are designed to maintain a wall of separation from the main currents of Israeli life. But times are changing and broader Israeli society exercises its gravitational pull. The seminar participants, for example, belong to the first generation of Israeli ultra-Orthodox who generally speak Hebrew rather than the Yiddish of their Eastern European forebears, whose communities were eradicated in the Holocaust.

The ultra-Orthodox have tended to look upon the rest of Israel with suspicion while their fellow citizens often view the ultra-Orthodox with rage. The ultra-Orthodox justify their exemption from mandatory military service (Arab citizens are also exempt) and the devotion of large numbers of their adult male population to Talmudic study instead of gainful employment on the grounds they are safeguarding God’s law and keeping alive a holy tradition. Meanwhile, Israel’s secular Jews and many of the country’s non-haredi religious Jews have come to regard the ultra-Orthodox as state-subsidized freeloaders.

The situation is not sustainable over the long term. According to a report issued earlier this year by the Israel Democracy Institute and the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, the ultra-Orthodox constitute about 11 percent of the country's 8.5 million citizens. And they are growing rapidly. Whereas the birth rate in the general population averages 3.1 children per woman, the haredi community average is 6.9. More than a quarter of all Israeli first-graders are ultra-Orthodox. If current trends continue, by 2059 the ultra-Orthodox will constitute 27 percent of Israel's total population and 35 percent of its Jewish population.

It is therefore good news that “a quiet revolution” has been unfolding among the ultra-Orthodox. Majorities in the haredi sector affirm pride in Israel. Increasing numbers are volunteering for military service. More ultra-Orthodox men and women are enrolling in universities. The employment of ultra-Orthodox men in the economy's technology sector is on the rise.

The students at last week's Tikvah seminar—the youngest in their mid-twenties, the oldest in their mid-fifties—are part of this revolution. While all self-identified as ultra-Orthodox, their appearance and dress ranged from Hasidic-style long curling side locks, full beards, and knee-length black coats in the style of 18th century Polish nobility to neatly cropped hair and casual contemporary fashions. Each wore a black kippah (head covering) although one student, in the course of group introductions, announced mischievously that underneath his was a (metaphorical) colorful knitted kippah, which denotes in Israel a welcoming attitude toward modernity. Several of the participants study full time in yeshivas, some are employed in the private sector, and others work with the government to facilitate better relations with the ultra-Orthodox. A few are pursuing undergraduate degrees.

To launch the seminar we discussed a popular Israeli short story about a bus driver (once a mythic figure in Israel) who wanted to be God. The story dramatizes the harm of ideology—a simplifying framework that squeezes the complexities of politics to fit the requirements of some single, exclusive principle. Then we considered Israel's 1948 Declaration of Independence, which draws on a multiplicity of principles springing from a variety of sources—not least the Jewish tradition but also prominently the tradition of freedom.

Having established that the responsible exercise of political judgment involves the blending of competing principles and that Israel is founded on the conviction that political freedom is an inseparable dimension of the Jewish state, we turned to our main topic. We explored the foundations of political freedom in John Locke's “Second Treatise”; the constitutionalization of freedom in “The Federalist Papers”; the tensions that arise between democracy and freedom in Alexis de Tocqueville's “Democracy in America”; and liberty of thought and discussion in Mill's “On Liberty.”

The students were particularly intrigued by the limits on the exercise of individual rights that Locke grounded in God's sovereignty, the priority that the U.S. Constitution gives to the protection of religious freedom, and Tocqueville's insistence that religion makes a surpassing

contribution to political stability in America by remaining separate from politics.

Passions flared when we turned to Mill. Students readily appreciated the importance of a *public* sphere—newspapers, broadcast media, and parliament—in which the condition of their freedom of speech was the freedom of speech of all others. After all, the ultra-Orthodox too have interests to advance through the political process. At the same time, they immediately grasped the danger to their way of life posed by the vigorous promotion within the *private* sphere, embracing their families and communities, of Mill's core conviction—indeed the conviction at the core of all moral and political education worthy of the name—that “he who know only his own side of the case knows little of that.” Exposing their sons and daughters to Mill's case for the sovereign individual, they justly feared, might weaken their children's attachment to the stringent ultra-Orthodox interpretation of God's commandments.

But how can you prepare for effectively exchanging opinions in public life, I asked, without cultivating at home and in civil society curiosity, empathy, and knowledge of history, literature, and moral and political ideas? Doesn't the study of Talmud itself, I continued, provide support for freedom of thought by encouraging students to explore the other side—indeed the dizzying multiplicity of sides—to the endless puzzles that arise in the effort to live in accordance with Jewish law?

During one break a Hasid who'd hardly uttered a word during class approached me. “You're saying,” he whispered, “that living well with—and within—the tradition of freedom is a question of balance?” I nodded and smiled.

Ultimately, both the ultra-Orthodox and broader Israeli society stand to profit from rapprochement. The ultra-Orthodox can acquaint themselves with the pleasures and the pride that stem from developing skills valued by the workplace, providing for one's family, and contributing to the national defense. And Israel's secular majority, who—like America's—tenaciously seek fame and fortune, rigorously choreograph leisure, and restlessly chase after quiet time, can enliven their imagination and deepen their understanding of human diversity by acquainting themselves with those devoted to fulfilling God's law.

The desired rapprochement repudiates the dogma frequently shared by both sides that freedom and religion are inevitable antagonists. It conceives of them instead as working partners and perhaps indispensable friends.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.