

Hitching up both carts

Ariel Rubinstein

Published in Yedioth Achronot Jan 19th, 2006

Translated from Hebrew by Ira Moskowitz

Hechal Shlomo represents the religious Zionist establishment that supported the settlement enterprise and made religion repulsive to us. Over time, it is taking on the appearance of a *shtibl* that is full of activity, yet neglected. Tel Aviv University, where I work, represents Israeli liberalism and enlightenment. The campus speaks aesthetics and the lawns drip hormones. But it was actually at Hechal Shlomo, at the conclusion of the 10th of Tevet, where I experienced an astonishing clash of image and reality.

The gathering was initiated by a still little-known group called “Circles of Justice” (*Ma’agalei Tzedek*). It is a group of men and women from religious Zionism, full of energy and sparkling eyes, who seek to “bring social-economic issues into the religious discourse from the Jewish *halachic* perspective.” The group organizes educational activities in schools and youth movements, operates a social *beit midrash* [literally – “house of study”], and convenes public conferences on fast days. The conference on the 10th of Tevet was aimed at “breaking the silence and exposing the faces of the transparent people, hundreds of thousands of temporary workers, cleaners, guards and laborers, who are exploited and deprived.”

During the past eight years, as part of a group of faculty members at Tel Aviv University, I have been engaged in a frustrating attempt to get universities to promise to grant status, dignity and fair wages to the temp workers employed at the campuses. We have held a number of conferences at the university aimed at pressuring the unreceptive management. At best, we were able to bring together a few dozen students and this was only with the added attraction of a film. And here, on a wintry Jerusalem night, over 2,000 young men and women gathered and called upon the religious Zionist community to take action, beginning in yeshivas and in the institutions with which the community is connected.

The evening began with dozens of study sessions in corners of the building, led by rabbis, intellectuals and social activists. I joined the session led by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun entitled “Therefore, because of you...” (a reference to a verse in the book of Micah that continues: “Zion shall be plowed as a field.”). Speaking to the 200 people at the study session, the rabbi did not hesitate to offer a contemporary interpretation of Micha’s ominous prophecy: The supplications of those who asked in their pure prayers to prevent the disengagement were not answered because they themselves had remained silent when Netanyahu’s policy had “torn the flesh and cracked the bones” of tens of thousands of poor people.

The speakers at the gathering included men and women, religious and secular, rabbis, including the head of the Ateret Cohanim yeshiva, alongside leftist cultural figures. It was miraculous. MK Eitam was there and admitted that the norms practiced in the territories have penetrated into Israeli society. In other words: “The occupation corrupts.”

Many of those present had spent the summer in Gush Katif. Despite this fact, a speaker still drew some applause when he called upon the religious Zionist public to remove the sanctity of the land from the top of its list of priorities. An equivalent statement would have been met with a barrage of hysterical catcalls at a gathering of the left.

While preoccupied with settling the Land of Israel and Palestine, the religious Zionist public lost its ability to communicate with Israeli society at large. Most of the residents of Israel have heard of Joseph’s Tomb, but did not notice that the 10th of Tevet occurred last week, and they have no idea what the day signifies. We, the secular, fearful of religious domination, closed our eyes from seeing that the forces for reforming Israeli society can be found in the religious milieu more than at the university in Ramat Aviv.

The employment of workers via temp agencies is the result of greed and lack of solidarity. A remedy for the temp workers will only come with an absolute prohibition on this type of employment. But this is not only an economic and legal issue, and its solution requires a change of heart. As a secular Jew, I believe that our cart is not

empty, but that it is not sufficiently full to support the required change in values. The failure in the fight against the disengagement should convince the religious Zionist public that it cannot generate fundamental change on its own. We need to hitch both carts together in order to build a more just society. But this joint effort requires two concessions: Israeli religiosity must reject the idea of ruling another people and recognize the depths of the disgust from the occupation. Israeli secularity must become more modest in its hedonism and denounce the expressions of hatred toward the values of Jewish tradition. If only.