

## Bialystok – Geula

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At first there is frenetic and anxious activity, interrupted by the *mikvehs*' sirens that silence the tumult. Afterwards, the men and their sons walk to the synagogue, clean and polished. The women emerge after the men, leisurely strolling up and down the main street in Jerusalem's Geula neighborhood, between Shabbat Square and the Schneller army base. The baby carriages are loaded with infants, and children in white shirts mischievously frolic around their mothers. Suddenly, a wave of *L'cha Dodi* erupts from the small synagogues tucked behind every street corner. And after the evening service, the men exit the synagogues and return to their homes, and forks and knives clatter and through the open windows Sabbath songs can be heard, full of yearning, until the silence returns.

The streets are filthy, with unsightly building additions patched onto the homes. The walls are lined with graffiti and placards accusing one another, and all accusing the state, of unspeakable acts. The letters are blacker than black, and the words are brutal. But the people are cheerful and handsome.

I return home and read an article my grandfather published in a Hebrew collection printed in Warsaw ninety years ago by the "Association of Young *Haredim* [ultra-Orthodox Jews]." In the article, my grandfather lovingly describes an elderly man who stands at a street corner in Bialystok and pleasantly and persistently exhorts the Jews to close their shops before the onset of the Sabbath. Following his exhortations, "a holy silence" takes over the street. "The same silence as precedes a king's appearance in the city." Bialystok is gone, and the silence survived in the streets of Jerusalem.

I am not a religious person and I have no intention of becoming one. I am angry at the *haredim* because of their support for ultra-nationalism, their expressions of racism and their discrimination against women. I deplore their feeble participation in the productive economy, despite the fact that they enjoy its fruits. I am disgusted by the commerce in blessings from holy men, by the nocturnal lovemaking at their gravesites, and by the cults that shout "Messiah, Messiah." These acts, in my eyes, are pure idol worship. Nonetheless, I look at the streams of people in Geula as one whose roots are there.

I did not know my grandfather. From the few letters that survived, I find that his ultra-Orthodoxy did not prevent him from sending enthusiastic blessings to his two sons who became non-religious and moved to Jerusalem as wholehearted Zionists. I learned from another source that my grandfather sent his daughter to study mathematics in Moscow so that she could lead the secular studies at the small ultra-Orthodox school he directed. On Sabbath eve in Geula, I hear the Sabbath silence my grandfather describes. I imagine him and I don't find him.

Three generations from now, will the expression “Jewish people” still have real meaning that is not merely folkloristic and genetic? If so, it is clear that it won’t be thanks to the assimilating Jews or the messiah-crazed, whose hopes will be disappointed sooner or later. Nor will it be thanks to the immigrants who have arrived here without any connection to Judaism. I can imagine only two types of Jews who are capable of sustaining the Jewish people: One is the deeply-rooted, Zionist Jew who believes in an exemplary society, as he envisions this, and the other is the ultra-Orthodox Jew who is faithful to the values of his forefathers, as he envisions this. All the rest are transitory.

On the street in Jerusalem, I lament the ultra-Orthodox person who cannot see that he actually has something in common with large swaths of the Zionist secular public. I yearn for a vibrant society immersed in arguments and disputes. From my point of view, let us throw stones, burn flags, hang insulting placards and at the end of the week gather together, each in his own way, for the silence of the Sabbath.

In the meantime, the summer has arrived and we will all become engrossed in trivial matters. The magicians will round the square, political wheeler-dealers will winkingly concoct an historic compromise, and attorneys will determine whether the compromise will withstand a High Court challenge, as if the law is above everything. After the summer come the Days of Awe. The tragedy is ours, and the tragedy is theirs too.

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