Israel should investigate

Seeing women wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah collectively is no longer an unusual sight in the Jewish world outside of Israel. Even in the Orthodox world, an increasing number of "modern Orthodox" congregations are finding ways to accommodate the religious stirrings of the women in their midst. In Israel, however, the sight is rare indeed, because the religious establishment in Israel is under the control of, essentially, one approach to Jewish observance, namely, the haredi way.

That is why in 1988, a group of women came together to form Women of the Wall. Their central mission was then and remains today to achieve in Israel what is becoming more commonplace throughout the rest of the Jewish world: the right "to wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah collectively and out loud at the Western Wall." They assembled at the Wall each Rosh Chodesh to do so. On June 4, 2003, Israel's Supreme Court confirmed that the group had a legal right to pray at the Western Wall. The government was required to designate a special place for such prayer at Robinson's Arch, near the southernmost point of the Wall. The group's right however did not allow causing offence to other worshippers. This was interpreted to mean praying without wearing tefillin or a talit, as that would surely cause offence to some of the men—and, it must also be added, to some of the women as well—ostensibly in the midst of their own prayers somewhere else at the Wall. Last week, on Rosh Chodesh, Anat Hoffman, the executive director of Women of the Wall, was arrested while leading prayer services at the wall “for disturbing public order,” i.e., for wearing a talit and raising her voice high in prayer. Hoffman alleges that her treatment in custody included a naked strip search and being "dragged on the floor 15 metres."

Setting aside for the moment the issue of the women's right to collective prayer, including wearing the talit, if Hoffman's allegations are true, there can be no justification whatsoever for such outrageous and abusive treatment by the police.

One cannot complain of Women of the Wall that their purpose of changing the "religious" status quo at the Wall is overtly political and not really religious. For it is indeed the political system that vests such complete authority in the hands of a group that is utterly inimical to other, different ways of expressing Jewish ritual.

The penultimate paragraph of Israel's Declaration of Independence is an "appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz Israel in the tasks of immigration and up-building."

Having summoned the Jews of the world—presumably in all our wide diversity—to Eretz Israel, how can Israel—some 65 years later—still refuse to accommodate the legitimate, sincere, and deeply held religious diversity of the Jews to whom the country directed that appeal?

Reform Jewry's leaders in the United States have called for an investigation into the police's treatment of Hoffman. We support that call.

Economist Robert Solow, an American Jew, won the Nobel Prize in economics for developing a model showing long-term growth depends on technological progress, not just labour and capital, while Soviet born Jewish poet Joseph Brodsky won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Exhibit incites hatred against Jews, Israel

The downtown Hamilton Public Library recently featured drawings, at the library’s main entrance, that were purported to be children’s drawings illustrating how Palestinian children suffered during Israeli military operations in 2009 ("Hamilton library display sparks discord," Oct. 11). The Hamilton Jewish Federation’s public affairs committee protested the display on the grounds that it incited hatred against Israel and Jews. The library agreed to move the display to the fourth floor, but many people saw the exhibit before it was moved. The public affairs committee should have pressed for an investigation to find out who approved the exhibit’s installation in the library and if the library investigated to determine if the display was fraudulent, written to the Hamilton Spectator to state the Jewish case against this exhibit, and lobbied elected officials who oversee the library to require the exhibit to be removed.”

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Prison chaplains

Here is a link to a petition created by Cantor Michael Zoosman to the federal government to reinstate funding for minority chaplains, including Jewish chaplains, in Canadian penitentiaries (“Ottawa defends cuts to part-time chaplains,” Oct. 18). If you agree with it, please sign the petition at www.change.org. The Conservative federal government of Canada, normally friendly to minorities, including Jews, and to Israel, has decided to save a few farthings by eliminating the funding of part-time chaplains in the Canadian prison system. This would include Jewish chaplains. Public Safety Minister Vic Toews, has said that volunteers or Christian chaplains would serve the purpose. Zoosman is a young American cantor who served recently at the Conservative Congregation Beth Israel in Vancouver and as a chaplain in the prison system. He has returned to the United States to study more about being a chaplain. He is an involved, concerned and compassionate man, and a friend of mine.

Ken Frankel Montreal

LET THEM GO...

Ron Arad, Zachary Baumel, Zvi Feldman, Guy Hever, Yehuda Katz

Community’s support of PM

Kudos to columnist Jean M. Gerber for raising an issue in your newspaper that I have not seen discussed, namely much of the Jewish community’s blind allegiance to the Conservative party simply because Prime Minister Stephen Harper is pro-Israel (“Put not your trust in princes,” Oct. 11). I agree that it is wonderful to finally have a prime minister who forthrightly supports Israel and denounces Israel’s enemies. However, there are many other policies promulgated by the Tories, for example, in the areas of finance, environment, science, women’s rights, foreign aid, crime prevention, electioneering and openness to public scrutiny, where their practices are debatable, to say the least. I would like to see the Jewish electorate think seriously about all the issues when deciding which party to support, instead of acting in a knee-jerk reflexive manner based on one area only, even though it is very important.

Michael Kinrys
Toronto

Left-wingers cynical about PM

Jean M. Gerber in “Put not your trust in princes” (Oct. 11) raises issues that are of importance to Israel and in the fight against antisemitism. She criticizes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who are both on the political right. Netanyahu is criticized for meddling in the U.S. political campaign by asking for help in curbing Iran’s march to nuclear capability. Certainly, with Israel facing an existential threat, any Israeli prime minister should leave no stone unturned to ensure that another holocaust is prevented. Harper’s views on Israel, antisemitism and actions on Iran are viewed with suspect by the political left. They don’t believe that a great leader who says and does things because it is just and moral to do so may emerge from the right. Harper’s critics cynically believe his speaking out in defence of Israel and against antisemitism is political pandering to Jews. Issues such as health care, poverty, research and immigration should not preclude offering support to a leader who is at the forefront of Israel’s battle for survival.

San Minnick
Cote St. Luc, Que.

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