Is Israel good for the Jews?

In the Diaspora, the Jewish milieu is gentler. It’s each to their own, and all together.

Is this sense of tradition and community lost to Israelis who grow up secular in their own land? (Reuters)

By PAMELA PLELD

P analysis is a rhetorical device whereby you say something after promising not to. I won’t tell you about my aching back,” you announce, and then list your symptoms for an hour.

I could not write a column a week starting thus: “I can’t even begin to describe how crazy things can get when life cracks you on the head.” Then I would spell out various encounters, like a recent dinner with a friend in a cozy restaurant, when she, in short order, declared that I should not mourn now that a year has passed since Martin died, should get married again, soon, and should not waste time grieving, as life is short (in case I hadn’t noticed). Then, in a sharp transition, she described her wedding anniversary of the country’s lowest generation and exclaimed that if her husband died, she would have to die, too, he looks after her so well.

Believe me, I couldn’t make this stuff up.

But as Purim segues into Passover and yet another round of hugim begins, I don’t feel like dwelling on nonsense. I want to be spiritual and uplifting and elevate the discourse. And as it happens, I’ve been editing elevated discourse all month; I’m currently proofing Three Ladies, Three Lattes, a book I wrote collaboratively with two friends. One is haredi, the other hasid (an amalgamation of “haredi” and “dati leumi”). The latter community goes to the army and works, their men wear jeans, and their women’s gabs is “harder, lighter.” The issues we tackled together – how we dress, how we raise our kids, why we live here, the reasons we go/do not go to the army, and our relationship with God – are subjects that are tearing our country apart.

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MARTIN O’CONNOR quoted a Jewish ethic that extols dying rather than humiliating anyone else. This message conceivably originated with the biblical Tamar, who chose death rather than shaming her shameless father-in-law who had impregnated her in a casual encounter. Tamar’s sanctity culminated in her marriage to the father of her child; who knows if her piety was undercut by pragmatism. Be that as it may, I hear my husband’s voice proclaiming that it is wrong to dish the dirt, and I do my best to refrain from offering insights. I often wonder whether it constitutes humiliation. Should I have chosen death before uttering the words?

The question comes in context. Recently religion has been bouncing around in my mind. My tennis teacher declared last lesson that the best thing that could happen to the country would be for all the haredim to leave a cousin is celebrating her son’s bar mitzvah with a family trip abroad; a Torah-reading is anathema to her, as it is to all of the haredim. A close friend, who spent four years in a crack army unit and then 40 years in the service of the country, proclaimed that he feels no affinity with Jews in the Diaspora and would be happy if his son intermarried and settled in Europe. Visiting a synagogue while on holiday abroad is totally off his radar screen – why would he, he says, he can’t stand religious Jews.

Our book tackles these issues, and they’re compelling for me. We grew up in the Diaspora, both Martin and I, in a gentler Jewish milieu. You could drive to shul on Shabbat, pop your kippa on your head, down away with the best of them and then, fortified with some fish cakes and chopped herring from the kashkash, head over to the Jewish golf course for 18 holes. Judaism was belonging, it was community, it was home. In Israel, you are religious – or you aren’t. You have to identify: You cover your head, or you don’t. If you cover, there’s more categorization: Are you a wig woman, a hatter, or a twister of scarves? If you watch TV on Fridays after the wedding sunset hour, then you have no place going to pray. If you don’t haul yourself out of bed to join a morning minyan, you are a man who should eat pork chops fried in butter.

OUTSIDE OF Israel, the edges are gentler; you meld more between the lines. You can go barbecued by day, but hat up for Friday night services. You can keep kosher at home, but eat anything out. It just works like that. Each to their own, and all together.

In Israel, the question of Shabbat is existential. It’s not each individual who chooses whether to catch buses to the beach on the Day of Rest; the government decides if public transportation will run. And God seems to have been hijacked, somehow, by bearded boys in black who often don’t seem to live by the code of conduct we were brought up to believe in.

There’s more, of course. The Hilltop Youth, or the zealotized hooligans who perform “price tag” attacks, all seem to sport prayer-fringes flapping in the wind. So many criminals appear in court under heavy coverings; there’s talk of corruption in places which should never be corrupt.

At the risk of sounding simplistic or deranged, I will share a thought that has been swirling around my brain recently: Has Israel actually been good for the Jews? Martin, who grew up in London, was (to my) a brilliant Jew – he added joyous ritual to our lives, Blessing the kids on Friday night and singing the prayer to me, his woman of worth. He could read Parshat Hashavua and discuss it with us, he knew the traditions and the laws, and the tikkunim of Judaism were fun for us, and festive. I knew it all too, the prayers and the practicalities. I also went to a Jewish school abroad. Yet we weren’t “religious” as such. Is this sense of tradition and community lost to Israelis who grow up secular in their own land?

Has the price of having our own country, where our religion can flourish and be free, led to exaggerated emphasis on stringencies that seem ever more strict (who heard about censoring women’s faces or voices 10 years ago, or about separate seating on buses in 1948)? Has the burgeoning power of the ultra-ultras led to an intensity of hatred of our own traditions by less pious Jews, seldom felt before? Has the brute force of the abstinence to control conversions, marriages and divorce sent scores of our secular into the arms of civil ceremonies, vowing never to set foot inside a shul? It’s such a sobering thought: Has Israel been bad for Judaism?

Yet, we keep saying in our book, there must be a way to smooth over difference, to reach out arms to each other (whether they be from the shoulder down, or covered to the waist). We have to find the way. The alternative is too outrageous to contemplate.

We’re working on it. Shabbat shalom to all, however we spend the day.

The writer lectures at Beit Berl and IDC. Her latest book, Three Ladies, Three Lattes, is about to be published.

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