

The Moment of Truth

by

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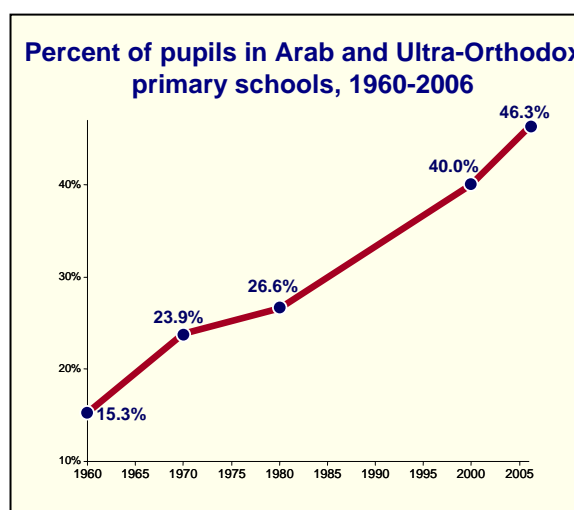
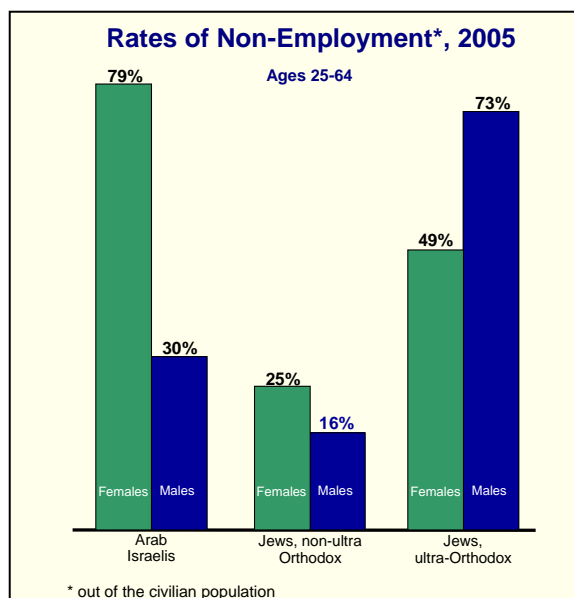
Yogi Berra's saying, "it's déjà vu all over again" best describes the gnawing sensation that is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. In the 1970s, the State of Israel began to settle Jews within the heart of Arab populations in the West Bank and Gaza while completely ignoring relative differences in birth rates between the populations. During the past few years, we have been experiencing the consequences of that leadership blindness. It is still not clear how we will extricate ourselves from that trap – and yet, here we go again. The cost of ignorance this time may be existential.

In Israel today, there reside two minorities who do not share the country's Israeli-Zionist narrative. As some try to seclude themselves from us, many in the majority have adopted the "out of sight, out of mind" approach and are oblivious to what is occurring within these populations – as though what happens there has nothing to do with us. This attitude is sometimes reflected in discrimination and sometimes in political coalition agreements with clauses that provide monetary disbursements to relieve pent-up pressures.

In the meantime, a process has been unfolding that has no parallel in the Western world. In the primary working ages of 25 to 54, 73% of the ultra-orthodox men and 79% of the Arab-Israeli women are not employed. Thus far, the adult populations of these two groups are still sufficiently small for the State of Israel to be able to finance lifestyles of non-work at these rates. But, as in the case of the West Bank and Gaza settlements, what transpires over the period of a few decades is primarily dependent upon the relative growth rates of the different populations.

It is difficult to overstate the pace at which Israeli society is changing. In 1960, 15% of the pupils in primary schools studied in either the ultra-orthodox or the Arab school systems (these are today's adults). In 1980, this rate reached 27%, and last year: it was 46%. If we won't find a way to integrate these populations into a mutual Israeli narrative, and immediately, then in another generation or two – at most – the demographic balance within Israel will change the country beyond recognition.

In that future, who will be able to finance lifestyles of non-work at the rates to which these groups are currently accustomed to? Who will be able to assemble a majority in the Knesset that would make it possible to change these conditions, even when it is clear that we



Source: Dan Ben-David, data from Israel Central Bureau of Statistics

cannot possibly continue to underwrite them? Who will provide the defensive shield? If the Israeli narrative will be that of the ultra-orthodox or the Arab-Israelis, then how many of the children from today's majority will want to continue living here?

We are fast approaching the point of no return, and it is time that all sides internalize what's at stake. Without Israelis willing to work for a living and willing to risk their lives to defend this country, Israel will cease to exist. With it, the ultra-orthodox Jews who live here will cease to exist. And with all of the unconscionable discrimination faced by Israel's Arab citizens, they don't have to look any farther than Gaza or Nablus to understand what kind of alternative existence awaits them in such a future. It is no coincidence that, in all of the polls and surveys, Arab-Israelis are totally against their villages and towns becoming part of Palestine as part of a land-swap peace agreement.

We all have a lot to lose if we don't get our collective act together, and soon. A necessary condition for changing direction is to mandate an identical education in the core subjects – with no distinction on the basis of religion or the degree of religious observance – for all of Israel's pupils. They all need to understand the importance that this country holds for their lives, the importance of working for a living, and the importance of defending their country and their way of life. An additional necessary condition is mandatory military or civilian service for all.

Where are the leaders who are ready to level with the nation and declare that we have reached the moment of truth in Israel's history? Where are the citizens who are ready to get off the couch and send these numbers to their elected representatives?