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## Separate but not Equal

by

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It is generally accepted that the modern civil rights movement was born on December 1, 1955. On that Thursday, Rosa Parks – a black woman from Alabama – refused to yield her seat to a white passenger and move to one of the back row seats designated for blacks on the public bus. She was arrested and fined for disobeying the City of Montgomery ordinance.

To her aid came a young local pastor by the name of Martin Luther King, who called for a boycott of the bus company. The boycott lasted 382 days and catapulted the two into the national spotlight and into the history books. In the end, the Supreme Court struck down the discriminating city ordinance and outlawed segregation in public transportation.

On that historic day, on the other side of the globe, Egged, the largest bus company in Israel – that was founded by socialist workers even before the founding of the State – transported every passenger on any seat he or she chose to sit on. Today, exactly half a century after formal discrimination was banned on public buses in Alabama, our Egged has introduced new bus lines called “kosher lines for the ultra-orthodox.” The rules of travel on these lines, as detailed in this paper a few days ago, stipulate that women can only sit in the rear of the bus. Men are the sole individuals permitted to sit in the front of the bus. It is truly ironic how our nations passed one another on their way into the 21st century.

This brings us to the very thin line distinguishing between religion and basic civil rights. Where does one draw the line? If the religion allows a man to have several wives concurrently, should society accept this? This is an issue that links two population groups that prefer life in the desert: Mormons living in Utah and Bedouins living in the Negev. The religions of both groups allow polygamy – but in Utah this has been designated a felony since 1935. Here, when was the last time a Bedouin was arrested for polygamy? The Social Security Institute that we are all required to fund only aids and abets this situation by steadily increasing the flow of money to these families.

In the Israel of 2006, there are population sectors that are required to endanger the lives of their children in defense of this country, and there are population sectors that are exempt from any such obligation. This is a country that does not require all of its children to learn a common core curriculum from pre-school through the end of high school. A country that permits – and funds – the existence of separate education systems (national, national-religious, ultra-orthodox and Arab), some of which teach anything they like. Later, we are surprised by the enormous gaps in income and in beliefs.

The education issue is cardinal not just because it is about endowing individuals with the basic tools for contending in an open and competitive labor market. It is also critical for informing each person about the basic rules of behavior by which all citizens and institutions must function in a free and democratic society.

We are talking about granting the right and enforcing the obligation to know what is allowed and what is forbidden. When a father, for example the Yeshiva student Yisrael Vallis, is suspected of abusing and murdering his baby, it is inconceivable that citizens in a modern society riot in the streets against his being taken into custody. When there is suspicion that parents prevent their children from receiving adequate medical care, as was the case a couple of months ago with an infant from Ashdod, it is unimaginable that a mob of citizens take the law into its own hands – as did ultra-orthodox men in Ashdod – kidnap the body and secretly bury it in order to prevent any further investigation.

This is not to say that a modern society shouldn't carefully consider the feelings and beliefs of all its citizens. In a society like ours, there is clearly room for heightened sensitivity. But this does not necessitate an abandonment of the resolve to clarify and protect individuals' basic civil rights. Each and every individual, with no exception.

Since the exploitation of religion for the purpose of legitimizing discrimination is unacceptable in any modern society, then the seating issue in the “kosher lines for the ultra-orthodox” is not difficult to resolve. If it is so important, from a religious perspective, that men and women be seated separately, then in light of 20th century history and the amalgamation of discrimination and busing, it is no less important from a public perspective that it be the men who sit in the back and the women who sit in the front.