

## Who Is A Jew?

by

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The question of “who is a Jew?” has been debated since Israel attained statehood. It is a fundamental question in matters of citizenship and marriage in this country. But as with many other issues, the emphasis is not always on the primary essence of the question: we deal with matters of quantity rather than quality. Even if we manage to solve the issue of quantity, and we find a way to integrate hundreds of thousands of olim who are not Jewish according to halacha – and Jews abroad will find a way to slow down the rate of assimilation in their communities – we will still be left with the issue of quality.

What will be the nature of the State of Israel in another generation or two? Democracy is a necessary but insufficient condition. There are currently three main alternatives struggling to define the nature of Judaism here. Each one of these alternatives is leading to – should no changes be forthcoming – the end of Israel as the home of the Jewish people.

Is the first alternative, that of the haredim (the ultra-orthodox), the flag that we could or should all unite around? On the one hand, it could be argued that their uncompromising traditions may be the only glue that can prevent widespread assimilation of the kind affecting diaspora communities. On the other hand, this population has produced no significant uprising against its rampant shirking of the draft in a country facing clear and present existential threats. It also has produced no large-scale, organized dissension against a leadership that prevents its grade-school students from receiving a core curriculum necessary to survive and thrive in a modern economy and society. Is this the enlightened Judaism that is continuing along the path of Maimonides, who was one of our greatest rabbis – and also a physician?

The second alternative, that of the orthodox Jews who serve in the army and work for a living, could have been the bridge between the modern world and traditional Judaism. These are observant Jews who excel in their contribution to furthering Israel’s society and economy. But where is the massive group within this population that is organizing to save it from a leadership with selective democratic principles when it comes to settling the whole of the Land of Israel, a leadership that has no compunctions against encouraging rebellion among their soldiers against orders not to their liking – even at the cost of fostering a behavioral cancer in the army that could rapidly spread to other groups in society who object to this or that policy of the elected government.

The third alternative trying to define Israel’s Jewish character is that put forth by the country’s secular Jews. On the one hand, this is the Israeli version of the modern secular world. On the other hand, what is the value added that secular Judaism has to offer the future generation so that it will prefer to remain in the Jewish country, so that it will be willing to risk its life and the life of its children in order to preserve it? What kind of a thread could bind sabras, who are strangers to synagogues, to their brothers abroad – be they orthodox, conservative or reform – who are unfamiliar with a Judaism that is unconnected to the temple?

These three alternatives, in their current forms, represent together and separately a dead end for the Jewish State. If this country will not learn to separate between religion and politics – which corrupts religion – we will find it extremely difficult to create an additional, different, alternative in which pluralism in defining the future character of Judaism could flourish.