

**JEWISH ENCOUNTERS
BOOK SERIES**

ELIE WIESEL DAVID MAMET REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

MELVIN KONNER DOUGLAS CENTURY

>nextbook
PRESS

LEARN MORE

www.nextbookpress.com/JewishBooks

Ads by Google

ONLINE EDITION
JERUSALEM POST

 [Click to Print](#)

The hopeless irrelevance of the state rabbinate

Aug. 30, 2009

peretz rodman , THE JERUSALEM POST

What would happen if our minister of transportation and road safety were to suggest that drivers who prefer, say, French cars should build their own parking lots and be banned from publicly funded lots? What if our minister of national infrastructures were to propose that people who use electricity to watch certain television channels should be required to provide electric power for themselves without access to the nation's electric grid? Would anyone take such suggestions to be anything but ludicrous and insulting?

Religious Affairs Minister Ya'acov Margi has made just such a suggestion. In an [interview](#) with the *Jerusalem Post* last week, he suggested that Masorti/Conservative and Reform congregations be barred from access to public funds that subsidize the construction of buildings for religious institutions such as synagogues.

The anti-democratic nature of his proposal is obvious, even blunt. And that is entirely intentional. As political and religious leaders of haredi Orthodoxy realize that increasing numbers of Israeli Jews are seeking religious alternatives to Orthodox Judaism, they become more and more strident in their denunciation of those alternatives. Seeing the competition grow stronger, they seek to squelch it as they always have: through the political power they wield.

In this, they have consistently failed, and the public is better off after each failure. The Supreme Court has clearly and consistently ruled, over the past several decades, that the official state rabbinate's monopoly on Jewish religious life in the eyes of the state is operative in only two areas: personal status law (marriage and divorce) and kashrut. The haredi population itself does an end run around the state rabbinate's kashrut monopoly with its own *badatz* supervisory bodies. The rest of the country does the same for marriages by choosing to wed abroad or by other means, sometimes adding a Jewish wedding in Israel conducted by a non-Orthodox rabbi.

THE HOPELESS irrelevance of the official state rabbinate to the lives of virtually every Israeli Jew is so obvious as to have become a national embarrassment. The refusal of the present leadership of that rabbinate to accept even conversions conducted by most Orthodox rabbinic courts outside Israel (not to mention its obvious denial of status to non-Orthodox converts) has moved the state rabbinate outside even the Orthodox mainstream around the world.

The same forces that have insisted on back-of-the-bus seating for women on some public bus lines are those that now control the Jewish religious apparatus of the state. Is it any wonder, then, that so few of us turn to the officially-appointed and publicly-salaried rabbis of our neighborhoods, cities and regions for any sort of assistance or guidance, even in the realms in which they

supposedly have a monopoly? How many even know who those rabbis are?

Non-Orthodox Jews with a commitment to tradition, whether part of existing denominations or members of the many grassroots ad hoc communities that have sprung up around the country, do not seek a "separation of synagogue and state." (The phrase itself is painfully inelegant and inexact, in any case.)

Like most Jewish Israelis, we do not find it odd or objectionable that the State of Israel would provide support for expressions of Jewish religious life of all sorts: institutions of Torah study, synagogues, mikvaot (ritual baths), publications and others. All we expect as citizens and taxpayers is that all expressions of Jewish religious life be eligible for state support.

This is not a new problem. In the three and a half decades since I first came to live here, the ineffectiveness of the state rabbinate in building respect for the Jewish spiritual legacy has been bemoaned in countless articles, interviews, broadcasts and conversations. Only the virtual deadlock between Left and Right over Israel's urgent geopolitical questions has given the religious parties in our legislature the power to stave off action by a majority in the Knesset to disestablish the state-funded Orthodox rabbinate.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs disappeared briefly under the Likud-Shinui-Kadima governments of the decade soon ending, but that was merely an administrative sleight-of-hand and was swiftly reversed. (See www.dat.gov.il to learn what the ministry is up to.)

APPARENTLY, THIS aspect of our civic affairs, like so many others, is "on hold" indefinitely. But as with other misery-producing institutions whose existence long seemed permanent - the Soviet Union and its satellite states come to mind - their internal contradictions and obvious failures will eventually cause them to crumble.

In fact, we seem to be able to congratulate the state rabbinate itself and its cheerleaders among the Orthodox political parties for doing all they can to hasten its demise.

We all drive the cars we choose and park them in public lots. We all watch what we want on television and draw our power from the national grid. Why can't all the synagogues we pray in get public funding to the same degree as those favored by the obscurantist rabbis whom Ottoman law, absurdly still in effect here, put in charge of our marriages and divorces?

The fairness of that request is so obvious that its eventual success seems assured.

The writer is past president of the Masorti/Conservative Rabbinical Assembly of Israel and acting chairman of the Masorti Movement's public affairs committee. He lives in Jerusalem.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1251145154693&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>
[[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995- 2009 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>