

THE BIG GAP

Johanna Lier / With Photos by Nurit Sharett

Perhaps the most significant difference we have to deal with today might not be about religion and nationality but about identification with new communities. In the second part of the 19th century Jewish refugees took the long journey to Switzerland from present - day Ukraine and upon arrival had to assimilate totally in order to survive. This extreme transition was double edged - a migration from their religion and also from their country. This article is reflective of my own similar ancestral background. As a writer who was researching a book on the subject, I wanted to investigate a possible mirror situation. What happens in Israel when one has an orthodox life, and how does it really feel to leave this lifestyle behind you, either on a voluntary level or because of difficult circumstances. This journey took me to the Haredi community in Bnei Brak near Tel Aviv, and to Givat Shaul in Jerusalem to explore these differences. About 550 000 Orthodox Jews live in Israel today, many of whom live in Jerusalem or in smaller villages in both south and north Israel. Bnei Brak, the northern most city from Tel Aviv and home to some 151 000 residents, counts as one of the largest Orthodox communities in the world. Rabbi Yitzchak Gerstenkorn and a group of Polish immigrants founded this village in 1924.

In this article the gap within the Jewish population between the Orthodox, or Haredim, as they are called, and the secular, or Chofschim, is taken as an allegory for the conflict between the problems of both traditionalism and modernity that shapes

world politics today. (Strenger 2006). Points of conflict include, among other things, the legal regulation of everyday life, the question of whether traffic should be stopped on Shabbat, if restaurants should be required to offer kosher foods, as

well as questions of gender and, not least, of demographic imbalance. The situation is exacerbated by the dramatic reductions in the quality of life for the people of Israel over the last twenty years, thanks to an economy driven by neoliberal policies. Together with Palestinians, Orthodox Jews make up three-quarters of Israel's poor. There is even talk in the country of "Haredi slums."

The Orthodox community, however, should not be confused with the Zionists, or so-called settlers, who with the large support from the current government, continue to expand their illegal settlements in the Westbank and who see it as their duty, based on their interpretation of certain passages in the Torah, to re-conquer the "Holy Land." This is a more right wing, nationalist position from which Orthodox Jews are far removed. For Orthodox Jews, the territorial, geographical possession of the Holy Land would be equivalent to human arrogance, a betrayal of the Messianic ideal (1) (Alain 2002).

"So you want to go to Bnei Brak?" the taxi driver repeats, for a moment remaining motionless. Outside the taxi, the steady rush of traffic - honking, hurried, aggressive. "Do you actually know what goes on there?". I respond, "Yes, I know." He turns around and surveys me intensely, "At this hour? It's six o'clock. It's dark." I point to the clock in the dashboard, signaling him to drive, "I'm running late." He throws the car into drive, shaking his head, "Okay. I'll take you to Bnei Brak." He accelerates to merge into the heavy evening traffic clogging the Shderot Yerushalaim, every now and again attempting to make eye contact with me in the rear view mirror, "You want to immigrate?"

"No," I answer, "I'm visiting a friend." He whips around to look me in the eye, "You have friends there?" "Yes," I say, aghast, directing his attention back to the street with a gesture of my hand.

We are near the outskirts of Tel Aviv. On the sidewalk an older man, Kaftan and long side locks. He walks quickly with a sunken head. The taxi driver points at the man excitedly, "You have friends like that?" "Yes," I say. He continues, "And that's not a problem?". "Do you have a problem?" I retort. "No," he says, "To tell the truth, I like these people. You know, I like science fiction movies. Going to Bnei Brak is like a trip to another planet. These people are creatures from another world." "What about politics?", I ask. "Politics?" he repeats inquisitively. "Yeah, their privileges." I clarify, "The Orthodox get welfare, lots of them don't pay their taxes, they don't have to serve in the army..." "You know," he says, "that doesn't bother me. It's all the same to me. Everyone should live like they want to. There are so many minorities in Israel! Every group should live the way they want, and they should all have the same rights. That's the only way Israel's going to survive. If we can't do that - then forget it!" We drive past store after store after store, but rarely see an advertisement. Just the name of the store and that's it. Colorful spots - vegetables and fruits. Mountains of long, round white and light brown varieties of bread - bakeries. Children run along the sidewalks of Rabbi Akiva Street, screaming and playing. The men travel in groups, hurried - some carry the Torah, praying under their breath, some adorned in enormous hats. The taxi driver searches for the street where my friend Chawa Silberman lives, a complicated endeavor that prolongs our journey.

I stare out the car window and remember the words of Paulina Ryklin, a secular acquaintance from Tel Aviv, a 40-year-old independent film producer, who caustically remarked that for every secular family that produces two generations with an average of two children per family, there is a religious family that produces three generations with an average of eight. I remember, Paulina's fury was directed at Palestinians as well, many of whom live traditional lives. She ranted "They will outnumber all other groups when they leave the refugee camps!". In the streets young girls, look tired and strain to push strollers, some holding as many as three children. Their gazes seem to consciously exclude all but what relates to the task at hand. Women schlepp copious, overflowing shopping bags, walking upright and with purpose toward their destinations.

"She would never ever shave her head and wear a wig or headscarf", Paulina declared indignantly. In a majority rule democracy, she contended, the traditional populations would have also the say: "it was irrelevant if they came from Orthodox Jewish or Christian or Muslim Palestinian communities". I remember the physical reaction of my muscles as they tensed in the face of Paulina's anger. Her hatred of Orthodox Jews is a haunting reminder of European Anti-Semitism - and for us the Palestinian situation is a reminder of brutal, post-colonial policy.

Is this the conflict between tradition and modernity that is tearing Israel apart more than the struggle between ethnic and religious communities? I let these questions swim through my mind and try to release my tension by looking at what is passing before my eyes as the taxi flits in and

out of the city streets. The dominant colors - black, gray, brown, and lots of dark blue, despite the occasional turquoise or purple - create a rather subdued, even gloomy atmosphere. It is as if external appearances, surfaces didn't matter; no need to put on airs or impress with fashionable looks. By contrast, my red blouse seems like a beacon, and I'm glad to still be in the taxi. The wind blows through the street lamps and yellow light flickers. We circle the city for an hour while with a cell phone pressed to his ear, and I hear Chawa Silberman's insistent voice trying to give directions. Instead my frustrated driver simultaneously throws open the taxi door and bellows after a passerby for help.

Finally, we reach a better part of town, and the driver appears to grow less nervous. Customer *in good hands*, this must be the place. He stops, turns suddenly around and says, "I wish you a lot of love, yes, I wish you a lot of love, be careful!" I pay and get out of the cab. "Call me when you want to go back. Give me a call!" shouts the driver out of the nearly closed window, as he races away to the roar of the accelerating motor. Tall palm trees sway slightly in the wind. No street signs. No house numbers. Virtually no light. Windows covered by venetian blinds. "Hello?" a soft voice says and, in the halo of a weakly shimmering street light, appears the tall, thin, slightly hunched over figure of Chawa Silberman.

The next day I travel to Bnei Brak a second time. In the daylight, the area seems friendly. Bright Jerusalem stone, lots of green, and the leisurely pace of people in the streets give the impression of petty bourgeois calm and order. Only a few squalid rear courtyards reveal the area's rampant poverty. I sit



Fig. 1: Little boys wait eagerly on Rabbi Akiva Street - rush hour traffic in Bnei Brak. Photo Nurit Sharett 2010



Fig. 2: Young women rush home, pushing their prams. Photo Nurit Sharett 2010 (Kinderwagen)



Fig. 3: Young women crossing a square in Bnei Brak. Instead of headscarves they are now wearing wigs. Photo Nurit Sharett 2010



Fig. 4: On Shabbat: A Young haredi-man goes to the synagogue while a secular girl rides a bike to a coffee shop. Rothschild in Tel Aviv. Photo Nurit Sharett, 2010

in the foyer of the city administration building, waiting for Chawa Silberman and watching the people. Women in all variations of traditional clothing enter the hall, ascend the stairs, come back down after a little while and leave the building. They intrigue me. I observe them carefully, longing to know more about the community my grandmother's family elected to leave behind,

to know more about the world embodied by these women, who one hundred years later, in a completely different world, pursue essentially that same lifestyle once rejected by my grandmother. (2) I examine their bare ankles or covered legs; some wear wigs, others caps, still others nothing on their heads at all; some wear short-sleeved t-shirts, others blouses buttoned to the neck. The

standardized traditional woman doesn't exist. Each has her own way of adhering to the rules in certain things and not in others. I decided then to adapt in some respects to my new surroundings: most important is the skirt, then the covered shoulders and the pulled back hair - the rest is not something I am prepared to compromise on. I roll up the sleeves of my blouse, I do not wear stockings or cover my head and I even smoke the occasional cigarette in public, which contrary to the predictions of my friends, did not provoke an aggressive response from Orthodox men. No, they check me out, unequivocally flirting with their eyes, only to look away at the very moment our paths intersect.

Suddenly, I am jolted from my thoughts by the entrance of a secular couple. She is tall, voluptuous and scantily dressed, he is dressed casually in shirt and shorts. They traverse the foyer, engaged in lively, intimate conversation. I follow them with my eyes and am briefly consumed by a flash of longing. I imagine at this moment that I am a Haredi teenager and that such sights would awaken in me the urgent desire to get out, to leave and lead a different life. But why? It's not the clothes or the couple's lightheartedness but rather the conversation: the intimacy between a man and a woman, displayed, lived out in public space, an intimacy not necessarily sexual but demonstrating their mutual respect and unencumbered communication. I'm surprised at the ease with which I admit idealizations of the scene, as familiar as I am with the reality behind the appearance. Chawa Silberman, who works as a public auditor in the community's administration, descends the stairs, greeting me with a smile and shows me around the building. Is she wearing a wig? Her hair seems to

fall around her face so softly and naturally. With time, I notice that it doesn't move in the slightest, that Chawa never runs her fingers through it nor plays with a single curl.

Today, right now, in the hall of the City Council contracts are to be awarded for a public construction project. The tables have been set up in a semi-circle, at the head sit the council members, men with kippah, beard and tallit, (3) while the businessmen from secular Israel wait impatiently, playing with their cell phones and increasingly becoming irritated. The Chairman of the Council flips through the stacks of paper in front of him, looks helplessly about the room and sinks into his chair with resignation, turning to the colleague sitting next to him and posing questions. His questions are answered with great patience and in equally great detail-time appears to be no consideration. The Chairman is apparently unaware what matter of business is on the agenda, which, judging from the reaction of the council members is nothing new. The businessmen grow increasingly more irritated, they look repeatedly at their watches, make phone calls, tap (demonstratively impatient) on the table, sneer at one another. The man in shorts even shows his middle finger, and the tall voluptuous woman laughs aloud, shaking her head in disbelief - all such behavior goes fully unnoticed or unremarked upon by the Orthodox city council members.

Chawa leans over and whispers, "For a decision to be legally binding, three members of each commission have to be present. Since this has not happened, the regulation was amended. If all required people are not present half an hour after the start

of the meeting, everyone in the room will be made a member of the commission in order to meet the legal requirements. If no one comes in the next few minutes, you'll be made a member, too!" When I asked why the businessmen were so irritated, when they knew what was going on, Chawa shrugged her shoulders, "Yeah, everyone knows. It's a game. The businessmen get angry, the council members ignore them. We don't have to like them, nor they us. We're just doing business. But doing business with members of the Orthodox community, that's difficult. Then you have to make sure you don't make any mistakes at the interpersonal level. You have to like the people, or at least pretend to, otherwise there is bound to be conflict." "The city councilmen seem to be more relaxed than the businessmen," I remark. "Why should you bother with people who don't belong to your community?" Chawa explains, "With your own people, though, that's complicated. Before you know it, you're in the midst of a big fight. One mistake and you're out. Oh, he's here! Now there are enough of us. Too bad, now you won't get to be a city council member, after all." Chawa reclines calmly in her seat. The meeting concerns the installation of recycling systems for PET bottles and waste baskets, as well as street cleaning and heating systems for the mikvehn, ritual immersion baths. There's a problem with the mikvehn in the community of Bnei Brak. In the courtyards and basements, rear buildings and gardens, in the synagogues and public squares there are countless numbers of mikvehn, whose rooms have to be cooled, but whose showers and immersion baths have to be heated. The old systems of now rusty and porous gas tanks, leaking fumes and fuel, have become a massive environmental problem. A company based

in Tel Aviv has developed a green energy concept that uses the residual heat from the warm air given off by the air conditioner to heat the water for the city's mikvehn. This proposal is to be discussed in today's council meeting. "Do you go to the mikveh regularly?" I ask. "Yes, of course," Chawa replies, "Why do you ask?" "Because," I explain, "I'd like you to tell me about it, though I hesitate to ask. It's so intimate, so personal, almost like sex. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean in the pornographic sense. It's just that I'm asking a woman I only know through acquaintance about her body and her experiences with that body." Chawa concedes, "Alright. Before you immerse yourself, you have to be clean. Women shower, wash their hair, clean and trim their nails, remove nail polish and make-up. It's a ritual during which you devote your attention to your body in peace and quiet. Afterward you go naked to the mikveh attendant, who inspects your body to make sure there are no hairs or anything on you. When you immerse yourself, nothing, not even the tiniest piece of lint, is allowed to be between your skin and the water. Then you enter the water, say the blessing, and immerse yourself." "What do you say?" I ask, pushing my luck. Chawa retorts, "Why does that matter to you? It's none of your business." "But, how do you manage to stay under?" I ask, slightly changing the topic, "I tried it once in a river and could hardly stay down. The water pushed me right back up to the surface." Chawa laughs out loud, "In a river? I'd never tried that before! You only have to immerse for a second. You say the prayer, immerse for a second. That's it. Pretty simple."

Chawa gives me a skeptical look, as if to say, "Can you really understand, or are you only here to con-

firm your prejudices? Do you really want to know, or am I wasting my time?" She pushes a plastic cup of water toward me across the table and begins to speak, "Two thousand years ago, people were only allowed to enter the great temple in Jerusalem after ritual immersion in the mikveh. You didn't go through a doorway, but through a mikveh. Since the temple was a place where people took care of lots of everyday things, they were always in the mikveh. When women went into the mikveh seven days after the end of menstruation and then could sleep with their husbands again, it reminded us of this lost tradition and the loss of the temple."

Does the thread of time pass through the female body, preserving what has long been lost? Women's bodies not only bring forth new generations but serve as vessels of history, sustaining our memories of past generations. "Why is the blood of women taboo? Is it because women bleed and their soul is in the blood and, out of respect for the other and one's own protection, one shouldn't come into contact with the souls of other people?" "No!" snaps Chawa, losing her patience, "That's a simplification. It's about remembering the temple. The law requiring women to purify themselves in the mikveh is important, because it is the only way to sustain what was once most important in the temple." (4) Why, then, do men thank God every morning when they wake up that they were not born as women? Why are women asked to offer their bodies, the most personal, intimate possession of all, to the community as a medium for remembering that two-thousand-year-old temple? Why does it have to be the female body that serves this purpose and not something else?

"Seriously?" my secular friend Paulina Ryklin sais as she shakes her head in disbelief, "Really, that's what she told you? I can't imagine that. It's not about the temple, it's about blood! A friend of mine made a film about it. She used to be secular, but now she's ultra Orthodox...In childbirth, the father sits next to her and isn't allowed to touch her. Imagine that! She gives birth to a child and he's not allowed to touch her or his child! Because of the blood, he sits on the side of the bed and just looks at his wife and newborn child. Or, imagine, a couple might not touch each other for three weeks out of the month because the woman's menstrual cycle is long." Paulina reacts poorly, when I tell her about Chawa a few days later. She questions whether women were even permitted to enter the temple two thousand years ago. "Men were the only ones allowed in there. I can't imagine for a second that women ever went in."

I meet Rafi Aloni, who looks like a farmer hiding another identity beneath his clothes, a patchwork person. He has a beard, wears a kippah on his head and a tallit around his waist. But his loose, checkered shirt is longer than usual, nearly covering the tallit, so that only the tassels are visible at the bottom. He clears the air right away by explaining that though he wears traditional clothing, he is a confirmed atheist. "And I'd better put my camera away right now!" He doesn't want to be photographed. If the people from his village found out what he was doing in the middle of Tel Aviv - what a catastrophe! He looks at me sternly, "Me or the camera! You can't have both." "Then you, of course," I say, trying to ease his tension. "Where shall we go?" - trying to check his insecurity with politeness. I explain to him that I want to meet

people who have left the Orthodox community for secular society, people who have gone through an inner migration, an extreme migration, being radically cut off from the lives they had known until that moment they entered a world they knew little to nothing about. Rafi nods and glides through the small, dirty alleys surrounding the Carmel Market with its somewhat oriental feel. “I love this city,” he suddenly blurts out, widening his arms as if to embrace it. In Café Basta in Ha’Schomer Street, he greets the other guests with a handshake, young people. He likes to come here, he says, “totally unkosher, pork and all that stuff”. Here, in this café, everyone knows him and knows his personal history. “They take me as I am,” he proudly asserts. He introduces me to the others with grand gestures. They give a quick nod and turn back to their tables, signaling their lack of interest, as if my presence were something better overlooked. Is my desire to talk to them strange, even absurd, in their eyes? Or do they perhaps have ulterior motives? Rafi orders himself an Arak and, without asking, a coffee for me. “Do you want something to eat? The food here is fantastic! FANTASTIC!”

Rafi is a computer scientist at an IT firm. His wife is a teacher, and they have six children and one grandson. He met his wife at the age of 5 in the sandpit. She was 4. They have been a couple since then. It is standard practice that a matchmaker, working on behalf of one of the couple’s families, finds a bride or groom, to keep the young people from making a mistake. After all, divorce is not desirable and very uncommon, not to mention a great disadvantage for the woman, since Rabbis tend to judge in favor of the man. It’s the matchmaker’s responsibility to bring two people

together, who suit each other, though more often matches are made in the interest of the family: an excellent bride or groom is a status symbol and, ultimately, the match is about money. Rafi grows furious as he explains, “The couple is only allowed to see each other one, two, maybe five times before they’re married. Once they’re engaged, they’re assigned a mentor, a madrich, who is supposed to tell them all the secrets of marriage, even the marriage bed. If things aren’t working out, they’re supposed to call and ask him what to do.”

Rafi says he hasn’t believed in God since he was a child. When he turned 30, he made his decision, but was consumed by fear and sadness that everything he had learned until then had suddenly become useless. “Not guilt, no,” he describes, thinking back, “No, not guilt, but a lot of regret.” He fought with his wife for 6 years and, in all that time, she never stopped hoping he would come back, while he wished she would be willing to make this momentous step to enter secular society with him, to move to Tel Aviv and live a normal life. A normal life - that’s what he called it even then. But then he realized the hopelessness of their battle and they gave up. “It was a very difficult time, but we made it through,” he recalls. Rafi feels compelled, however, to lead a double life, to go into “inner emigration”. “I had to convince [my wife] that I was staying out of love for her. She had always thought I had another woman in Tel Aviv, but why would I have stayed, if not out of my great love for her?”

Suddenly in a dark mood, Rafi gazes through the window and orders another Arak. I begin to feel uncomfortable, like I had created the mood by asking him to tell his story. I feel helpless, unable

to console him, knowing that any attempt to do so could only be awkward at best. Still, I want to know more, because I’m convinced that lots of people of all ages and situations, time and places are experiencing or have experienced this same thing. That this kind of precarious, restless life of transition is more common now than the sense of continuity across generations that is propagated in conservative circles, as the ideal, if not simply a matter of course. I physically sense a kind of restlessness in my own body that is perhaps best conveyed with term like agitation, mourning, hope and fury. These feelings are based on an age-old experience that cannot be located in any of my own concrete past. Finally, I ask him how he deals with traditional life when he returns to his village. “My wife lives the religious life and I do what I have to, to keep from drawing attention. I go to the synagogue, because she wants me to. Of the two hundred people on Shabbat I’m the only one who has a good reason to be seen.” I laugh out loud and Rafi gives me a wink. Contented, he looks through my papers, at the coffee cup, then wanders off into the café to take up conversation with someone at a neighboring table. I am left alone to think. I think about what he said, how the total break with his past would have made it seem like everything he had felt, thought and learned up to that point had been for nothing. I think about my own life, shaped as it is by radical breaks in my environment, and the dominant belief that such breaks are necessary to free oneself, to develop.

Rafi returns to the table and continues his story. “The whole family comes together to celebrate on the Shabbat. We talk and discuss, each of us tells each other about his week. I would never want to

miss that. I speak the kiddush at these gatherings, the blessing, yeah, I do, no problem, it’s only a few words. I like to do it.” However, it makes him angry, that you’re only allowed to say what is in the Talmud and the Torah, that it’s forbidden to express your own thoughts or try to discuss them. And he doesn’t understand the seculars who continue to call themselves Jews. “I am not a Jew,” he proclaims, emptying his glass of Arak in one swig. “A Jew is only allowed to be with other Jews, can only help other Jews. Maybe I’m an Israeli, but that’s something else.” Don’t these seem to be typical anti-Semitic arguments? Rafi chuckles, raising his hands and pointing to his chest. “Am I not allowed to say that? Anti-Semitism is when I’m ridiculed in the street because of my traditional clothing. When I act on the basis of well-founded and carefully considered arguments, that’s critique. Critique is good. It’s hate that makes the difference. Hate is always racist.”

I ask Rafi if he is truly able to hide his identity in his village. “When I drink a beer with a religious person, I murmur the blessing, move my lips. When I enter a room where religious people are, I touch the Mezuzah and kiss my fingers”. (5) His parents know, but can’t accept it, so they argue a lot. There are also families that don’t want their children to play with his. He had to fight for the right to send his children to the Talmud school. Two of his sons served their time in military service. An affront! “If your looking for great, dramatic reactions, for scandals, you’re going to be disappointed. It’s the small, subtle gestures in everyday life that make it clear, you don’t belong.” “Isn’t that even worse?” I ask. He shrugs his shoulders and shies from my gaze, “Maybe.” Now, more insistently, I add, “What about feeling lonely?” Rafi explains, when he goes



Fig. 6: Young man looking for religious literature in a bookshop in the neighborhood of Chawas house. Photos Nurit Sharett 2010



Fig. 5: Kitchen in Chawa Silbermans house. On the left side she is cooking dishes with milk and on the right side only with meat. 2010



Fig. 7: An emotionally turbulent encounter with the dog of a secular couple. Orthodox people believe that dogs are impure animals that the must be feared. Photos Nurit Sharett 2010

to eat with his colleagues from work, the seculars among them, who he would actually like to talk to, send him to the Orthodox colleagues, with whom he can't talk the way he would like to. Home is where he can be himself, with his wife and his older children, or in Tel Aviv, or in this café, where everyone knows him. "You want to know where I like to go best? To the lesbian bar! Right around the corner is a popular gay bar. They love me. They even made me an honorary member. I feel at home there. They exist on the margins of society and many of them lead a double life like I do."

Friday afternoon. In Café Landwehr in Gan Meir Park on King George Street in the center of Tel Aviv an ample breakfast is being served. Rafi traverses the café with a bottle of self-made schnapps under his arm and places it resolutely on the table. Miron Sofer, startled by the noise, raises his head from his overfilled plate and acknowledges us with a friendly greeting. He's wearing a polo shirt, white boxer shorts, tennis shoes and sunglasses. He gulps his food and talks with his mouth full. A crowd of people gather under the trees in the nearby park and loud voices reverberate through megaphones, flyers are being distributed. Miron is a student in business administration, who left the Haredi community to join secular society, it felt to him, at the time, "like a secret with seven seals". Religion he says, has never interested him. Even as a child, he could tell that many in the community weren't really religious but stayed because their grandparents and great grandparents had lived in the community. Staying was easy and comfortable. "Though, I like my people. Why not go to the synagogue every now and then? But that's not possible. It's all or nothing here. Flexibility and mixing, like

you see in Europe, America or Australia, is unthinkable here." As a reflex, he looks repeatedly at Rafi for confirmation, who sluggishly, kindly nods his head and gets up from the table to make his way to the crowd assembled in the park to protest for the rights of children of undocumented guest workers from Eritrea. "Those are the real problems" Rafi says with the wink of an eye and makes his way across the street.

The worst thing about modern society is the loneliness. "There are some who can't deal with it and commit suicide. We're not used to being alone. The idea that someone would die and no one would notice until the apartment started smelling is absolutely unimaginable for the Haredim! If you're sick, someone comes round straightaway to see how you're doing, if there's anything you need!" explains Miron. "Don't you ever meet other ex-Haredim?" I ask naively. He chews quickly and swallows a spoonful of scrambled eggs, nodding his head, "Yeah, yeah, we see each other, if someone's moving, it's perfectly normal for someone to offer a car, an old refrigerator or a bed. Just say what you need, without having to ask. In a manner of speaking, it's in our blood." "What do you do to keep from feeling lonely?" I continue. "I watch TV, work, play on the computer, chat, read or listen to the radio," Miron says. "And sometimes I meet up with other ex-Haredim." It's easier they say. They speak the same language, have the same humor. They talk about movies, music, work and their anxieties about love and sex. "But if a woman lays her hand on my knee, I don't know what to do. If she kisses me, I don't know what to do. If she looks at me full of expectation, it's a catastrophe. What does she want? How does she want

it? Where does she want it? I didn't even know that the man inserts his penis into the woman's vagina. We don't now anything." "So how did you find out?" I ask, to which Miron responds with barking laughter, like an innocent child. "I figured it out on the Internet. Let's just say I learned the technical aspect of sex online."

He speaks profusely. His openness surprises me. He treats me like an intimate friend. Is it the age difference? What does he want? He didn't remove his sunglasses the entire conversation. His expressly sporty attire doesn't really match his plump arms and legs. His skin is pale and seemingly soft. While I sit there wondering about the reasons for his candor, Miron leans over, takes hold of my arm and softly explains that he isn't just doing this for me but for himself as well. Talking about it, again and again, is his therapy. With that he continued, "If a Haredi man comes home and hangs his hat in the bedroom or if he comes out of the shower with only a towel wrapped around his waist, his wife knows he wants to have sex. Those are clear signals we learn in the community. I am used to communicating essential information through signals. I can't imagine articulating what I want. Expressing your needs, the psychological side of interpersonal relationships, is something completely foreign to us. We don't know how to do it."

There are no statistics on how many Haredim have entered secular society, the subject is taboo among many families. Miron confirms, he is one of the lucky ones who was able to maintain contact with his family, although it is very complicated. For most, leaving the community means a

radical break. Their families even hold a wake, a Schiwa, because for them, their son or daughter is dead. "Do you still consider yourself a Jew?" I ask. Miron wipes his hand across his mouth, an intimate question, with an answer that could be political dynamite!

This is the question that may ultimately decide the fate of a democratic Israel. (6) In many ways, Israel's legislative system still follows rabbinical rules. "If Israel were a secular state, there might be more peace between its various groups. Only then will Israel be truly democratic. But a secular state wouldn't be a state for the Jews. I see it as an irreconcilable opposition. I admit, when it comes to the question of a Jewish State, I can't manage to change my attitude." "So what do you do on Shabbat?" I pose one final question. Miron grins playfully, "I eat pork sandwiches!"

We walk down King George Street toward Carmel Markt. In less than an hour all the shops will be closed, the streets empty but right now the sidewalks are bustling. Everyone is rushing about, doing their shopping. You can hardly get through all the bicycles, strollers, and dogs. Miron stays close to me, making sure I don't get lost in the crowd. It feels like he never wants to let go of this time together, as if he longed to continue our conversation forever. Every few feet, he greets someone he knows, exchanging a few words with each. "All ex-Haredim," he explains, looking at me sideways. When he happens to run into so many people he considers friends in such rapid succession, his life seems anything but lonely, more full, even overloaded. But the self-evident nature of love and family is different from the freedom we have

with friends. I thank Miron for our conversation and begin to make my way toward Bus number 25 through Allenby Street toward Jaffa. He holds me back, "But what bus are you taking?" Then after a pause, "Never mind! I'll go with you."

A few days later I return again to Bnei Brak with photographer Nurit Sharett. Chawa Silbermann has given us permission to take some photos in her house. Nurit is hesitant but finally agrees. As we drive along Rabbi Akiva Street toward our destination, Nurit is nervous, almost aggressive. Her mood makes me insecure and I begin to question my plans to take pictures in Bnei Brak. Nurit tells some terrible stories on the way: "They yelled 'You are a whore, a whore!' as I walked through Bnei Brak, and threw stones at me. I was twenty, being harassed by a horde of teenage boys about 13 years old." Then she tells the story of the young man on a motorcycle who fell victim to a wire some Orthodox had spanned across the street to keep people from driving in their quarter on Shabbat. He was decapitated instantly. We find a place to park and get out making jokes to ease the tension. Chawa opens the door. Her face brightens when she sees me standing there. Then she spots Nurit as she enters from the light beyond the dark entryway. Chawa's face turns to a hard, ominous stare. She snaps at me in English, "Do you have former Israeli friends?" Taken aback by the sudden unwelcoming tone and brashness of her inquiry, I retort, "Yes. Do you think I should not?"

In the course of the next few hours, the two women avoid one another. Nurit concentrates on her work and asks me what she is allowed to photograph. Chawa leads me eagerly around the house,

explaining everything about the kitchen, the Book of Esther, the Shabbat dishes, and the velvet sack her husband takes with him to the synagogue. The two women communicate through me to keep from looking at, much less addressing, each another. I, a stranger to both their cultures, have come to serve as the connective tissue mediating between two warring parties. Toward the end of our visit, Chawa invites us to sit at the kitchen table adorned with melon and incomparable, heavenly-tasting vanilla yogurt and then she suddenly turns to Nurit and begins to tell her stories - of the abuse she has suffered at the hands of seculars. Nurit listens attentively, throwing the ball back in Chawa's court with her own horror stories with the Orthodox. In time the duel evolves into a discussion and, finally, to points of intersection where they might meet to find a solution: What should one do when secular relatives come to visit on Shabbat on a motorcycle? Are you allowed to take an Orthodox relative to the hospital on Shabbat in the car? The melon and yogurt have been eaten. Meanwhile Nurit and Chawa's conversation has arrived at private life: family, home, travel, food. Soon they have forgotten me entirely. Still tense about their explosive potentials, I observe the conversation and sense the extraordinary significance of what is happening, without realizing its future.

In the summer of 2011, when secular Tel Aviv was shaken by protests sparked by the international Occupy Movement and protestors were camped in their tents on Shderot Rothschild for weeks, I received an astonishing email from Chawa. It read, "I met your photographer friend in Tel Aviv at the tent protest in Rothschild Blv. Maybe you have read about our social protest over the last two months.

Your friend had some interesting suggestions. We have had a lot of intensive discussions.” That a Haredi woman was among the protestors, that she joined secular women in their tents to talk politics is, though small and inconspicuous, nothing less than a revolution. An involuntary complicated encounter had created the possibility for two people, who would otherwise have hated each other, to squeeze together in a tent to fight for a

common cause. Such an encounter must surely feel turbulent to both parties, especially when thought of in terms of the synonyms of turbulence - namely unrest, tempest, and uproar. Perhaps the most significant issue that these communities have to contend with today might not necessarily be about different religious beliefs and nationalities, but about the need to identify and share the same problems with other concerned residents!

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Endnotes

- 1 For Orthodox Jews, the territorial, geographical possession of the Holy Land would be equivalent to human arrogance, a betrayal of the Messianic ideal.
- 2 In traditional Jewish culture the 613 laws (Hebrew: Mitzwa/ Mitzwot), including 365 prohibitions and 248 commandments, are to be practiced each and every day.
- 3 Kippah: “Traditionelle Kopfbedeckung für Männer. A kippah is a small hat or headcovering and is the traditional headcovering for men. Tallit: is a Jewish prayer shawl which men wear daily and use to cover their heads and shoulders during prayer.
- 4 The Jewish Laws of Niddah (a woman having her regular menstrual period) are based on a passage from Leviticus: “If a woman has an emission, and her emission in her flesh is blood, she shall be seven days in her separation...” Later Jewish law proscribes that the time of sexual abstinence shall last twelve days. The Laws of Niddah are a point of controversy among Jewish women. Many see them as a massive

intrusion on their physical self and the self-determination of their own intimacy. Others see them as a way to celebrate the female cycle, to demand respect and consideration. Still others contend that they are a way of maintaining sexual desire.

- 5 After every activity or occurrence, a special blessing is spoken specifically for that event. A Mezuzah is a small capsule containing a piece of parchment with verses from the Torah. It is affixed to the right hand doorjamb of every room in the house.
- 6 In a program on Swiss Radio DRS 2 from 18 October 2011 in Bern, the journalist Naomi Bubis points out that this summer the author Yoram Kaniuk is the first Israeli to have been awarded Israeli citizenship without being Jewish. He is the first genuinely secular Israeli citizen. Bubis also reports that in the wake of protest movements in the summer of 2011 there is discussion in the Knesset about reintroducing civil marriage. Bubis sees both developments stemming from the rise of a secular class that had long been quiet, but which is now growing active again.