

Secular Jewishness—A Fusion of Social Issues, Civil Liberties and Jewish Culture

By Leslie Dyson



The following is the keynote address given at the 2007 Conference of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) in Cleveland, Ohio, on May 27, 2007.

Thank you for inviting me to talk today. I'm here from a small town in the buckle of the Bible Belt of the Fraser River Valley to talk to you as an expert on Secular Jewishness—a fusion of social issues, civil liberties and Jewish culture. An expert is someone who tells you what you already know, but makes it sound confusing.

What social issues are you concerned about? Call them out.

—the environment, global warming, climate change, civil rights, homeland security, racism, poverty, homelessness, preserving our culture, the Middle East—

Enough already! Sounds like we've nailed the modern ten plagues. Where do we begin? How will we find the energy to deal with them all?

Jewish tradition can help pull us out of the quagmire. Tu B'Shevat, the festival of trees with its beautiful message, is a perfect fit and a great opportunity to learn more about environmental issues and *tikkun olam* reminds us our responsibility to repair the world. I'm feeling more optimistic about the environment than I was last year because of all the attention that climate change is receiving. Al Gore and even Arnold Schwarzenegger are sought-after speakers in Canada.

All the other social issues follow closely. Nothing else will matter if we don't have a planet to live on. I want to talk a little about civil liberties and the foes that we are currently facing. I was given the opportunity to talk last year at a conference of the Humanist Association of Canada on the topic, "The Fundamental Threat." They're worried too about civil rights, free speech and the blurring of the line between church and state.

Fundamentalism, according to Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle for God*, is a response to modernization and the fear of obliteration. It provides certainty where capitalism and communism do not. Modernity is seen as a failure, with science and technology out of control. Fundamentalism appeals to those who are not benefitting in the modern world. You can't reason with fundamentalists because they are not rationalists. Rationalism to them is godless.

Jews have a long history of dealing with fanatics from a variety of belief systems, not all of them religious. On the other hand, the Jewish community has

its own fanatics, as you can see from watching the news reports from Israel. The *Haredim* believe that the Holocaust epitomized rationalism run amok. Israel is only for holy warriors. Secularism in the Holy Land is profane. According to Armstrong, they reject the peace process because it's reconciliation with the enemy and, besides, you can't sign away sacred land. The Dome of the Rock, the Muslim holy shrine in Jerusalem, is an abomination that prevents the Messiah from coming.

As secular Jews we struggle to get the respect we think we deserve from our fellow Jews in the religious branches. We have fanatics in Vancouver who have worked diligently to discredit our beliefs and our work with labels like "communist" and "non-Jew."

In today's world, both fundamentalists and secularists feel threatened. Both recall the excesses, cruelties and intolerances of the other. It's important to remember that repression and coercion, whether in North America or the Middle East, always bring revolt.

Definitions quickly turn into labels. For many, calling someone a "fundamentalist" means they're a write-off; there's no point talking to them. Our paranoia is giving *carte blanche* to the racists in our society who are using terms like "Muslim" and "Christian" to brand everyone in these groups as backward, closed-minded or, worse yet, terrorists.

I have been shocked by the overt racism I've seen in the media. I don't think I would like to be a Muslim living in North America. Actually, it's difficult if your pigment is anything other than anaemic, regardless of where you come from. Last year, 17 people were arrested in Toronto. They were labeled terrorists in the media before they were even officially charged.

But I don't think so-called terrorists are the real threat. I'm worried about fundamentalist leaders taking control of our democratic institutions using democratic means. Their agenda is political, not religious.

From the very beginning, religion, with its promise of "pie in the sky when you die," has been used by the powerful to divert the attention of the poor masses from the real enemy—those who hold power and wealth. Our groups must have effective spokespeople to stress that religious or cultural background should never determine whether or not you are entitled to be a citizen with full civil rights.

Flipping the coin, we should stop and examine our own prejudices. I was surprised at the intolerance demonstrated by our brothers and sisters at the Humanist conference I mentioned. Many abhor what they call "tribalism." The humanists believe that everyone, Jews, Muslims and all other cultural groups (with the exception of First Nations people who are trying to overcome past governments' attempts at genocide), should assimilate and unite

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under their banner. If everyone became a humanist, the world would be perfect. Doesn't that sound like religious fundamentalist talk?

Our groups brag about being welcoming and inclusive. I wonder. Our emphasis on Yiddish displays an Ashkenazic bias. At Peretz we have had some success reaching out to secular Jews from Russia and Israel and those from a Sephardic background. We should be reaching out to moderate Muslims and Christians and, for that matter, Jews from other denominations and those uninterested in formal affiliation. Rather than trying to organize people under our banner, find activists with similar concerns, approach them and say, "OK, I'm here, what can I do to help?"

We can demonstrate our relevance by speaking out against the injustice that's taking place in the Middle East. This is another issue for secular Jewish groups such as ours—the expulsion of 711,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948 during the Arab-Israeli war must be addressed. Palestinians call it the *Nakba* (the Cataclysm). *Nakba* Day was on May 15. What did we do to commemorate it?

Can our Jewishness assist us? Is it relevant?

In the words of Itzhak Leybush Peretz, "We hope for a common humanity, but we should never achieve it by destroying unique languages or annihilating separate peoples or cutting down cultures. We have not endured these thousands of years in order now to forget our own way of life. We wish to continue it, so that we may later unite with the company of humanity as equal partners.... We hope for a tomorrow in which there will be a common granary for all peoples... But we wish to bring our own bit of corn and wheat to the common storehouse."

We can't deny our heritage. The Holocaust taught us that. All the idiosyncracies we carry with us, all our passions and beliefs have roots. The glee I feel when the underdog wins the day by using wit rather than violence to subdue the bullies is recounted hundreds of times in the Talmud, folk tales and jokes.

Acknowledging my Ashkenazic background, my day-to-day pursuits are coloured by the quest for *gerekhtheit* (justice) and *kochma* (wisdom); the commitment to *tzedoka* (caring for others while striving for equality) and *tikkun olam* (repairing the world). All these can be summed up in the Yiddish word *mentshlikhkayt*—the constant striving to be an ethical, thoughtful, and caring person in the face of unending challenges.

The irresistible inclination to question authority—typically Jewish. Rejecting phrases that hold little meaning, but finding the right words to express real feelings and beliefs—intrinsically secular. The words do matter.

I think solutions to all these problems must come from a multigenerational approach. Many are so huge that we can't afford to ignore a helping hand from anyone.

It's sometimes difficult to understand the motiva-

tions of those who are much older or younger than we are. Those over 60 want to restore our institutions, boomers want to reform them and the Gen-Xers/Gen-Yers, have written them off.

You've probably noticed that there are differences between Canadians and Americans too. Canadians value peace, order and good government. Americans place greater value on life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Americans are generally more religious. Secularists feel very comfortable in Canadian cities.

Canadians see Americans as god-fearing ...um...Darwinists. You know, a cross between Mel Gibson and *The Terminator*. Americans see Canadians as naïve and goofy little cousins, like a cross between Celine Dion and Mike Myers. Well, that was before we elected our own Mini-Bush, Stephen Harper, whose initials leave us calling him Shrub.

Where's the common ground between all these different groups? Just looking at this multigenerational group, I believe we all bring valuable assets to the table.

Young people are full of energy. They can take more risks and they have more freedom. On the other hand, older people believe they have more freedom, are a little wiser and more experienced, can be more outspoken and comfort-

able with who they are. While older adults are techno-immigrants, young people know no other way of life. They aren't intimidated. They are comfortable with complexity and change and confident in their ability to adapt. Even better, they know how to play.

So what do us boomers and elders bring to the common granary? We're fairly affluent, pretty good at sharing, highly educated, not easily seduced by the consumer economy and have a global perspective. Those seem like the ingredients of a powerhouse for change, whether it's addressing problems with the environment, civil rights or the inequity between rich and poor.

In terms of cultural continuity, I can't shake the belief that Jewish culture faces an uncertain future. We place a lot of pressure on our young people to carry the torch. As older adults, we mustn't renege on our own obligations and responsibilities. We must support the individuals and groups who are trying to keep Jewish culture alive in our own communities. They will wither and disappear without our support. Jewish culture will be reduced to eating bagels and cream cheese on Sundays.

Perhaps you know this story. The High Holidays are coming for a small Jewish community on the frontier. Every year, an argument breaks out over whether, during one particular part of the service, you're to stand or remain seated. There's great acrimony. But now they have a rabbi. Finally, the issue will be resolved. They rush over to the synagogue to talk to him.

"Rabbi! Every year, the High Holidays come and we have a big debate about whether to sit or stand at

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Is Birobidzhan the Model for a New Novel Set in Alaska?

By Henry Srebrnik

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon's new novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (HarperCollins, 414 pages), has been published to much acclaim.

In the book, the Sitka district in the Alaska panhandle has been home for some 60 years to Yiddish-speaking Jews, most of them Orthodox and Hasidic. The initial settlers had survived Hitler's Europe and, as refugees, had been allowed to settle there by the U.S. government. They and their descendants now number 3.2 million.

These Jews, who are called by other Jews the "frozen chosen," live at odds with the indigenous population but have managed to recreate a "Yiddishland" in the far north. Sitka is the only self-governing Jewish entity in the world, the attempt to create a Jewish state in Eretz Israel in 1948 having collapsed "with savage finality" and its Jewish population expelled by the Arabs.

But this arrangement with the American government has never been made permanent, and now the Jewish lease on Sitka is coming to an end. The Jews face eviction, or, as the novel calls it, "Reversion," which will once again leave them homeless, without jobs or property, as has been the case so many times before in Jewish history. So where to next?

This situation forms the backdrop for the plot of this detective mystery, which deals with murder and mayhem, as Meyer Landsman, a detective who lives in the fleabag Hotel Zamenhof, tries to solve the killing of

the son of Sitka's most powerful rabbi.

I've now read at least a dozen reviews of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, including articles in *The Globe and Mail*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and in Jewish newspapers such as *The Canadian Jewish News* and the *Forward* of New York. I am amazed that none of these reviewers has noticed the obvious parallel to a real historical attempt to create a Jewish entity outside the Middle East, one quite similar to Chabon's, and perhaps the inspiration for his fictional account. (One of the streets in his fictional Sitka is named for Khaim Zhitlovsky, who was a major proponent of the Birobidzhan project.)

In the Russian far east, 8,361 kilometres from Moscow, and not that far from the Pacific Ocean, lies the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan, with Yiddish its official language.

It was founded in 1928, the result of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin's nationality policy. It was to be an antidote to the Zionist project to reclaim the Land of Israel. Its topography and climate are not that different from that of Alaska, and it too was lightly populated by aboriginal peoples prior to the arrival of Jewish settlers.

By the late 1930s, as Nazism threatened European Jewry, some 41,000 Jews had relocated to the region. Many hoped it would become a full-fledged republic, but with the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel, and Joseph Stalin's wave of anti-Semitic purges, the idea of an autonomous Jewish region in the Soviet Union became all but forgotten. But officially it still exists to this day.

Today the Jewish population of Birobidzhan numbers about 6,000. The community, while it still survives, is really just a living footnote to history and another far-flung outpost of the Diaspora—just like Chabon's fictional Federal District of Sitka. ♦

PROFESSOR HENRY SREBRNIK of the University of Prince Edward Island is completing a book on Jewish support for the Birobidzhan project between the 1920s and 1950s.

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one particular part of the service. What is the tradition? I think we should remain seated but my good friend here thinks we should stand. We have terrible arguments every year about this."

The rabbi pauses and says simply: "That is the tradition!"

At a minimum, encourage the Jews in your community to celebrate the holidays in their own homes, with their children, grandchildren and friends. Tell them to make it relevant. Change the words. **For that is the tradition.**

Remain committed to life-long

learning. There is still much to know and much to learn from these young *pishers* and us AKs.

If Jewish secularism survives, it won't look like it does today. The founders of the Peretz Centre would *platz* if they saw what we were doing today. "Where are your thrice-weekly Yiddish classes?" they would ask. "Where's the *Muter Fareyn*?" (the mothers' committee that made costumes and held afternoon teas to raise money). I expect I would be shocked to see what Jewish secularism looks like in Vancouver in 60 years' time.

To those of my generation, I offer you words from Molly Ivins, a wonderfully funny activist from

Texas who passed away recently: "So keep fightin' for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't you forget to have fun doin' it. Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats... And when you get through kickin' ass and celebratin' the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was."

To the young adults here today, I leave you with this sentiment from anarchist Emma Goldman: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

And to all, this final statement: You can accomplish anything if you don't care who gets credit for it. ♦