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A Racist Decree

Real Estate and Israeli Rabbis

By LAWRENCE DAVIDSON

On Tuesday, the 7th of December, some fifty Israeli rabbis issued a "decree" forbidding their Jewish fellow citizens from "renting or selling homes or land to Arabs and other non-Jews." The "decree" was soon endorsed by an additional 250 Israeli rabbis. That makes about 300 in all, most of orthodox persuasion and many of great influence. Just to make sure that those who have property to rent or sell know what is at stake, the same rabbis announced that those Jews who fail to obey will be "ostracized."

There has been some protest about this. Rabbis who do not agree with this command called it a "distortion of Jewish religious law." Well maybe. All law is open to interpretation and the present debate, such as it is, is about whose interpretation is going to be dominant. Prime Minister Netanyahu has said he thinks Jewish law commands that one should treat the stranger with kindness, and wouldn't Jews protest if no one would rent to them? But one gets a strong whiff of hypocrisy coming from the Prime Minister on this note. After all, is it not his government that is chasing all the non-Jewish neighbors out of East Jerusalem?

Therefore, it would seem that the orthodox rabbis who issued the no rent or sell order have the upper hand. Nor is this at all surprising. Consider the following:

1. There are real laws in Israel against the promotion of racism which are not being used in any vigorous way against these offending religious authorities. Some of them, for instance Rabbi Ovadia Yosef head of Shas, are apparently too politically powerful to be held accountable.
2. The Knesset itself is pushing a proposed law that would allow Israeli municipalities to reject residents rights to live within their jurisdiction based on religious affiliation.
3. 46% of Israeli Jews do not want to live near Arabs.
4. 52% of Jewish children go to religious schools where many of them are instructed by teachers who are in general agreement with the rabbis issuing the above "decree." Those who go to public institutions are also taught to see Arabs as inferior and dangerous to themselves and the nation.

In other words, the sentiment expressed by this "decree" is not unusual. It is, in fact, uncomfortably mainstream. This sort of discrimination is a structural part of the Israeli public and private practice. All Israeli governments, from the founding of the state to the

present moment, have purposely discriminated against non-Jews. Often to get a job, with the classic exception of unskilled labor, one must have prior military service and that automatically disqualifies the Palestinians. It is done that way in order to disqualify them. And, a good number of landlords already discriminate against non-Jews. The command of the rabbis is just an impolitic public pronouncement of the norm. As one Israeli citizen told Al-Jazeera, "I'm sure there are a lot of people who are saying that the rabbis are just doing what everyone thinks. No one wants to live with the Arabs." This makes perfect sense in reference to a country that has held up, as one of its highest ideals, the goal of an ethno-religiously pure citizenry.

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When one starts to analyze this situation one cannot help but see it as yet another example of the fact that, through our cultures and ideologies (including religion), we create detached subjective realities for ourselves. Within them the contradictions and ironies of objective reality just conveniently melt away. In this case we find:

1. Irony - The rabbis have forbidden Israeli Jews to rent or sell landed property to non-Jews, the bulk of whom, of course, are Palestinians. And where, pray tell, did the rabbis and their compatriots get this landed property? They forcefully took it from the very people to whom they are forbidding sale and lease. In other words, according to the rabbis, it is against their religion to rent or sell confiscated property to those from whom you have taken it.

2. Contradiction - This entire episode once more reduces Israel as a democracy to something akin to Alabama circa 1950. For Americans and Europeans to see it otherwise can only be because illusion (through the medium of propaganda) has replaced reality. Where you have a state sanctioned segregated society, a minority that is labeled inferior and unwanted, racially tainted education and, no less, the goal of ethno-religious purity sanctified by a national god, there is no room for any sort of democracy worth the name.

Finally, we can thank the rabbis for reminding us that Israel's very questionable policies are not confined to its illegal treatment of those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The 20% of the population within Israel proper, the Arab Israelis, are also under threat. This means if, by some miracle, Israel does go back behind the Green Line, the fight for human decency in that country will be far from over. One will still have to battle for the rights of over one million Israelis who are on the wrong side of the religious divide.

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It has been the fate of establishment Judaism to be captured by Zionism, a deeply discriminatory political ideology. Now, with the rising power of those orthodox rabbis who would issue the above "decree" and espouse even worse as well, one must conclude that the secular Zionist ideologues and the religious fundamentalist fanatics have merged.

It goes without saying that the Palestinians in Israel, in refugee camps, and in exile must

bear the brunt of this evolution. And they have done so from 1948 onward. Yet that is not the end of the story. Events have created another "fact on the ground." And this is that there is now an unspoken connection between the salvation of the Palestinians and the "soul" of the Jewish religion. To all those Jews out there who have tried to ignore what is going on, remember the words of Desmond Tutu, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." If you value the future viability of your religion you must join in the effort to implement the rights of all the Palestinians. It is Israeli behavior that has made their fate one with yours.