

## RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

## Separation anxiety

Ofra Yeshua-Lyth doesn't want to do away with Jewish observance in Israel, she just wants to separate it from the functioning of the state. Her memoir/manifesto describes how she came to this conclusion the hard way

## Eretz, Brit

(A State of Mind: Why Israel Must Become Secular and Democratic. A Memoir), by Ofra Yeshua-Lyth  
Maariv Books (Hebrew), 328 pages, NIS 92

## By Ilana Hammerman

A small girl from Tel Aviv, not yet 7 years old, returns home one day crying uncontrollably. Disaster struck while she was playing with friends in the neighborhood, and a terrible secret revealed: She is not a Jew! The girls taunted her, "Everyone knows you aren't Jews."

The event took place on the eve of Yom Kippur 50 years ago, on a quiet lane between Dizengoff and Ben Yehuda streets, then the northernmost (and wealthier) part of Tel Aviv. Residents of the neighborhood were completely secular, but nonetheless, each of the homes was preparing for the last meal before the traditional Yom Kippur fast. All of them, that is, except for the family of the little girl, whose parents, unlike those of the other girls, never stepped foot in the local synagogue. And so the girls turned against her and unanimously banned her from their clique; even worse, from their nation. She and her family weren't Jews. So what were they?

This disturbing childhood incident is etched in the memory of Ofra Yeshua-Lyth, who describes it in "A State of Mind: Why Israel Must Become Secular and Democratic," which was first published in 2004 and is now being reissued in an expanded edition that blends story and analysis in an interesting, original and creative way.

Yeshua-Lyth, it turns out, is the descendant of a long line of Jews, and the product of a perfect Zionist "melting pot" from East and West. Her paternal grandmother, Miriam, was born in Yemen, and her maternal grandmother, Chaya, was born in Odessa. Both parents were born in pre-state Israel.

The book's narrative section consists mainly of the author's personal memories from various periods in her life that tell us something about Israeli society. The analysis is a controversial consideration of the question framed by the Hebrew subtitle: Why don't Israelis have a secular democratic state. The subtitle appears without a question mark, perhaps because the answer is obvious from the start: because there is no separation of church and state in Israel. How annoying and what a shame there is no such separation, for heaven's sake! It is for this reason our lives here are absurdly distorted and we are going from bad to worse. This is the book's painful and angry message.

But if it were only an angry indictment of the destructive influence the religious establishment and the legal standing of *halakha* (Jewish law) have on the character of Israeli society, Yeshua-Lyth's book would almost certainly be less inviting than it actually is. No one would want to read it from beginning to end, because the bottom line is made clear rather quickly. Yet we do, as can be seen in a review of the first edi-

tion written by poet, translator and editor Aharon Amir, who died in 2006. Referring to the original Hebrew title and subtitle, "Land, Covenant: How the Zionist State was Vanquished by the Jewish Religion," Amir, in his last piece of literary criticism, wrote: "Those who assume because of the title and subtitle that the book is a sort of a political-theological tract – perhaps in the familiar spirit of post-Zionism, or the writing of an anonymous academic polemicist – will be mistaken.

In any case, the moment one opens it and sees the table of contents, the misunderstanding is exposed. And if the table of contents provokes enough curiosity and the reader turns to the back cover, he will find a clear and concise summary there, by Amir, of the book's main theme, a colorful and even amusing examination of the way the State of Israel suffers from a basic malfunction in identity: one of the only countries in the world that has not yet separated religion from its network of civil laws. Internal ethnic and social squabbles are the result of this failure, which also lie at the heart of the regional conflict.

"Those who buy the book will have to admit that it does indeed provide a spot-on description of our situation", wrote Aharon Amir. "And they will probably also say

**We should finally be allowed to liberate ourselves from the chains of the covenant that we did not make, we secular Jews who did not seek a covenant with God and did not choose to be a chosen people.**

that, thanks to the light and conversational literary style and consistently tough and straight-talking analysis, they couldn't put the book down."

Amir's review, which serves as the introduction to the new edition of the book, was never published because the newspaper editor who commissioned it dawdled, and then decided the book was no longer relevant. But the book and its message, like Amir's challenging of the public silence on the separation of religion and state, are still timely; in fact, they're more relevant than ever, because things have only gotten worse in the seven bad years since the book was first published.

## Basket of his bicycle

The chapter devoted to that childhood memory of Yom Kippur shows how well



A wedding of secular Israelis in Cyprus

Alex Levac

Aharon Amir described the book's unusual mix of resolute sociopolitical conclusions with a personal narrative that makes the book much richer and more complex, and gives it its power. The stories convince not only the head, but also the heart. They don't convey hatred of religion or of religious people; they convey not ideological extremism but a love of people and life, and respect and openness for the faith of all, as long as they behave like human beings.

And so, in a light conversational tone, we are told of the surprising end to the affair of the social excommunication of a small girl by the daughters of completely secular families, in the spirit of conformism and self-enslavement to the collective, establishmentarian national consensus that has characterized Israeli society since its creation.

The girl's completely secular father, who was born into a religious family but had rebelled against religion since childhood, was apparently an open-minded person and a nonconformist. He understood his daughter's feelings and didn't try to dismiss her concerns, but rather placed her in the basket of his bicycle and took her to hear the Kol Nidre prayer on Yom Kippur Eve. Not in the neighborhood synagogue, so that the neighbors would see her and perhaps change their minds about the family, but at the synagogue regularly attended by his mother, Grandma Miriam, an observant Jew who lived in the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Kerem Hateimanim. There the girl saw the respect awarded her grandmother and uncles, who prayed with sincere devotion. She took a prayer book, followed the service with interest and was relieved: Yes, the family was Jewish and so was she. But this isn't the end of her Yom Kippur experience.

On the way home, she and her father were nearly stoned by a group of young men who had taken it upon themselves to maintain the sanctity of the holiday with coercion and violence. They could have brought the story to a bitter end, but her father was faster than the thugs and managed to get away from them. He won out, and this victory, which from the first was a victory of family tradition, granted further significance to this unfolding Yom Kippur story, which began with ostracism and the fear of losing one's identity and ended with the acquisition of a new type of strength and vitality. As cheery proof, here are the concluding lines of the chapter: "It's agreeable to think that my late father and I were the pioneers of the tradition of bicycle riding on Yom Kippur. Who says there have been no innovations in the Jewish religion in recent generations? When secular Israelis really want to, they can give Jewish tradition new, charming and unexpected meaning. Think about Purim, about

Lag Ba'omer, Shavuot *tikunim* with wine and cheese, bar and bat mitzvahs replete with gifts, disco and trips."

## Not all fond remembrances

But the book is not all lightness and fond remembrances of experiences that ended well. It contains several harsh analyses of the religious laws that dominate the country: the separatism and withdrawal that characterize halakha, its manipulations, and above all, its legal standing and that of the institutions that are guided by it. This is the book's main topic and the reason it was written.

These discussions are based on an analysis of the facts and stories from the near and distant past, and arguments based on the writer's humanistic and universalistic worldview. They too are written fluently and most of them are convincing, though some elicit a certain amount of doubt because of their hasty and sweeping conclusions. The justness of the book's most important conclusion – that there must be a separation of religion and state in Israel – shouts from every paragraph.

A significant portion of the criticism and disparagement in the book is directed at the secular majority of Israelis, at their hypocrisy and cowardice. In the Israel that Yeshua-Lyth seeks, one filled with vitality and human warmth, there is plenty of room for those who observe religious laws out of genuine faith.

Their point of view is represented, for example, in her appreciation for a quotation from a book by Rabbi Moshe Grylak, "Haredim: Who Are We Really?" (Keter, 2002), in which he pleads, almost begs: "Why don't all the secular members of the Knesset make an effort once and for all to courageously decide to separate religion and state? And then leave us alone!"

And we too should be left alone to respect and develop our ancient cultural traditions as we see fit, to celebrate holidays as we wish, to marry whom we want and how we want, to bury our loved ones according to our beliefs and feelings, to respect the stranger and those who are different, and not to be aloof from the other nations who live among us. And we should finally be allowed to liberate ourselves from the chains of the covenant that we did not make, we secular Jews who did not seek a covenant with God and did not choose to be a nation, did not choose to be a chosen people who dwell alone. Let us live, this book asks, with its *joie de vivre* and revealing true stories. It begs us to pay attention – and fast, because it's starting to be too late.

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