

Holy Water

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HE APPEARED OUT of nowhere. Literally. The Israeli Police needed a new commander. The last one had come to the end of his term of office, several senior officers had been accused of molesting their female subordinates, one had committed suicide after being accused of corruption. So somebody from outside was indicated.

When Binyamin Netanyahu announced his choice, everybody was amazed. Roni Alsheikh? Where the hell did he come from?

He does not look like a policeman, except for his mustache. He never had the slightest connection with police work. He was, actually, the secret deputy chief of the Shin Bet—the internal secret service.

Malicious tongues whispered that there was a simple reason for this strange appointment: the Shin Bet chief was about to move on. Netanyahu did not want Alsheikh to succeed him. So he sent him to command the police instead.

The name Alsheikh is a corruption of the very Arabic al-Sheikh—“the old one”. His father is of Yemenite descent, his mother is Moroccan.

He is the first police chief to wear a kippah. Also the first who was once a settler. So we were all waiting for his first significant utterance. It came this week and concerned mothers mourning their sons.

Bereavement, Alsheikh asserted, is really a Jewish feeling. Jewish mothers mourn their children. Arab mothers don't. That's why they let them throw stones at our soldiers, knowing that they will probably be shot dead.

Sounds primitive? That's because it is primitive. It is also rather frightening that our new Chief of Police, the man responsible for law and order, has such primitive perceptions.

A FEW days later, our Minister of Defense, Moshe Yaalon, who controls a vastly larger empire, repeated this assertion. Arab bereavement, he declared, cannot be compared to Jewish bereavement. That's because Jews love life, while Arabs love death.

When our gallant soldiers (all our soldiers are gallant) sacrifice their life, it is to defend the life of our nation, while Arab terrorists carry out suicide missions in order to go to paradise. Their mothers encourage them. That's how

Arabs are.

All these super-patriots are too young to remember that Jewish mothers in Palestine encouraged their sons and daughters to join the underground organizations in the fight against the British occupation (a fight for life, of course). Perhaps the British policemen imagined the same about the Jewish mothers—forgetting that just a few years earlier millions and millions of white Christian Europeans joined the armies with their mother's blessing and killed each other. For life and freedom.

When two such high-ranking officials repeat such mindless nonsense almost verbatim, there can be only one reason: they are reading from the “explanation sheets” sent out daily by the Prime Minister's office to all government ministers and high-ranking officials. (In Israel we don't like to use the word “propaganda”—we call it “explanation”—hasbara in Hebrew—instead.)

ONE WORD about police chief Alsheikh's kippah.

When I was an adolescent in Tel Aviv, I hardly ever saw anyone wearing a kippah. Neither in school (I left at age 14 to work for a living), nor in the Irgun underground, nor in the army did I see a fellow pupil or comrade wear such headgear. Young people were ashamed to wear it.

Nowadays almost half the people on TV proudly wear kippot. True, some of them wear them in such a way or of such a size that the camera cannot see them. But government appointees wear them like a badge of honor, to signify that they are true believers in the ruling ideology. Like a red star in China or a tie in the US.

In the last few months Netanyahu has appointed new people to several of the most important government functions. The police chief is the least of them. One is the Attorney General (called “Legal Adviser to the government”), the most important government official, with vast powers. Another is the new chief of the Shin Bet. Unlike any of their predecessors, they all wear kippot.

To explain the significance of this, one has to understand the Jewish religion. It is quite unlike, say, the Christian religion, and far closer to Islam. All talk about “Judeo-Christian” tradition is based on ignorance.

THE HEBREW word for religion is “dat”. Like the Arab equivalent “din”, it basically means “law”. Judaism is a set of commandments (613 in the Bible alone) im-

posed by God. In return, God has “chosen” us as “His” people and “given” us the Holy Land. One cannot be a Jew without belonging to the Jewish people, which owns the Holy Land forever.

For 2000 years and more, Jews were dispersed throughout the world. Their attachment to the Holy Land was purely spiritual. The Jewish people was a religious concept.

Then came Zionism. It was invented at the end of the 19th century. Almost all its creators were devoutly atheist. They did not believe in a God who had “exiled” the Jews.

When I was young, nobody in this country spoke about a “Jewish State”. We spoke about a “Hebrew State”. An extreme fringe group (nicknamed “Canaanites”) even asserted that we are a new Hebrew Nation which has nothing to do with Judaism. Most of my generation thought along the same lines, though not quite with these words.

I am often asked why a determined militarist like David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, exempted religious pupils from military duty. My explanation is quite simple: like most of us, he believed that the Jewish religion in this country was dying out. Zionism had supplanted it. The new Hebrew pioneer did not need all that religious nonsense.

Then came the war of 1967, the “miraculous” victory, the conquest of all the country up to the Jordan River, with all its holy places. Far from dying, the Jewish religion suddenly sprang to new life. Now it is expanding rapidly, kippot can be seen everywhere. Especially among the

settlers.

This rejuvenated religion is closely connected with an extreme right-wing, ultra-nationalist, Arab-hating ideology. This is the wave on which Netanyahu, a non-religious, non-kosher-eating super-nationalist opportunist, is riding now. Practically every day—literally—new nationalist-religious laws and bills pop up.

One bill says that in case of doubt, judges must “consult” Jewish law (the “Halacha”). This ancient law, some of it 2500 years old, treats women as inferior and condemns gays to stoning. It has nothing to do with modern life. Another bill allows the Knesset majority to eject from Parliament elected members who do not recognize the state as “Jewish and democratic” (which may sound like an oxymoron). School textbooks in secular schools are given a religious overtone (but are not yet burnt). Independent-minded teachers are dismissed. The Minister of Education wears, of course, a kippah. Six members of the prestigious Council for Higher Education have resigned because of the government's effort to stuff that august body with nationalist and religious agitators.

Where is the so-called “left” in all this? One may well ask. They are invisible. Except for a few remnants, as well as the beleaguered Arab faction, they keep quiet, in the belief that they must move to the right (also called “center”) to keep their heads above the holy water.

I shall not be surprised if one evening I turn on the TV and—lo and behold—there is Binyamin Netanyahu's head adorned with a nice, neat kippah.