

Israel

by Don Feder



There is a revolution underway in Israel—an upheaval that has nothing to do with rioting Palestinians, a burgeoning Arab birthrate, or Islamic fundamentalism.

Like the movement that gave birth to the United States, this is a revolution in the name of tradition. Perhaps counterrevolution would be a more precise term. Its leaders are orthodox rabbis whose bearded, Talmud-quoting followers have brought to Israeli politics a fervor associated with Hasidic prayer.

The revolution's opening guns reverberated in the results of last fall's national elections. Four religious parties achieved significant gains in the November balloting. But after weeks of intensive negotiations, a new Likud-Labor coalition formed, and the Haredi (literally, "fearful ones"—those who fear God—as Orthodox Jews in Israel are called) were relegated to junior partner status.

Still, their electoral advances are an indication of growing influence. In 1984, religious parties polled 206,501 votes, less than 10 percent of the total. In 1988, their vote swelled to 334,442, or 15 percent. Their combined representation in the Knesset increased from 12 to 18 seats.

They emerged from the 1988 election with the swing vote in the Knesset, enough to give either of the evenly-divided big parties a parliamentary majority. They bargained for power—too much, some would say—and lost. In negotiations with Likud, the Haredi demanded control of the influential ministries of Education, Labor, and Housing, as well as support for their agenda.

Finally, frustrated by these exorbitant demands and anxious to demonstrate national unity in the face of the PLO's latest challenge, Shamir turned to Labor for another

right-left coalition, similar to the one that governed the nation from 1984 to 1988. The now-dispensable religious parties were awarded minor cabinet positions as consolation prizes.

Despite this setback, the rise of religious parties will have a profound impact on the country. Typically, the US media reacted with the disdain characteristic of its treatment of traditional religion, at home and abroad. Haredi leaders were branded wild-eyed fanatics, budding theocrats, kosher Khomeinies. Reflecting establishment incredulity at the election's outcome, *US News* voiced shocked dismay that the next Israeli government might actually be selected by "a handful of tiny religious parties more concerned with Biblical injunctions than with the Mideast peace process." We all know what weird sorts concern themselves with the Bible.

The New York Times assured its readers that "by far the vast majority of Israelis are non-observant." This coupled with the contention that the "ultra-Orthodox" (what the press disdains, it often designates "ultra," with the obvious implication of extremism) represent only 15 percent of the population leads to the erroneous conclusion that most Israelis are antireligious. Actually, Orthodox and completely secularized Jews are probably the same proportion of the population. The majority of Israelis fall somewhere in between.

Indeed, the religious parties drew substantial support from the non-Orthodox electorate, such as Sephardic Jews who might go to soccer matches on Saturday afternoon, but experience pangs of conscience over the lapse and listen to their rabbis on political matters. On the other hand, some Orthodox probably voted for Likud or one of the smaller nationalist parties, putting the land question ahead of

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spiritual concerns.

Demographics is on the side of the Haredi. Alone among Israeli Jews, in obedience to those much-disparaged biblical injunctions, they have large families; nine children is not uncommon. Today Jews making *aliyah*, immigrating to Israel, are mostly Orthodox; they believe God requires them to live in the land he gave their people. Those leaving (the nation lost 21,000 in 1988) are secularists, whose noblest motivation is the desire for a comfortable standard of living.

The socialists who settled Israel had a pioneering spirit. Today, idealism is found primarily in the religious community, which alone offers a compelling reason to accept the sacrifices inherent to living in a state under siege.

Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, leader of Shas (the Sephardic Torah Guardians party), attributes the growing attraction of Orthodoxy to "the general disappointment over the moral condition of Israeli society. The religious are not plagued by emigration, drugs, crime, and suicide. This makes people think and brings them to vote for religious parties."

Like the conditions of their political ascendancy, the Orthodox agenda is widely misrepresented. Its position on amending the Law of Return, which permits any Jew immigrating to Israel to automatically apply for citizenship, was not accurately reported. It is, the line goes, an Orthodox power grab, an effort to delegitimize Conservative and Reform Jews.

To be precise, the issue is not who is a Jew, but who is a convert. (Not even the most pious Orthodox rabbi would deny the Jewishness of the most assimilated Jew.) The problem stems from the corruption of the conversion process by the modernist branches of Judaism. The Orthodox seek to amend the Law of Return to limit its application to those born Jewish, or individuals who have undergone an authentic conversion.

For 3,500 years the definition of Jewishness was well established: a Jew is the child of a Jewish mother or one who converts to Judaism halachically (in accordance with Jewish law). Those accepted for conversion must manifest a sincere commitment to join their destiny to that of the Jewish people. (The desire to marry a Jew was never considered a valid reason for conversion.) There followed an extended period of intensive study. The potential convert had to agree to live according to the dictates of the entire body of Jewish law.

In the past generation, Reform Judaism (and to a lesser extent the Conservative movement) took upon itself to amend a process traditional Jews consider divinely ordained, hence immutable. Reform Judaism's response to burgeoning rates of intermarriage was to facilitate conversion by the Gentile spouse. Many of the historic requirements for conversion were discarded, including, in many instances, circumcision for men and immersion in the *mikvah* — ritual bath — for women.

Some of these conversions approached Las Vegas weddings in their seriousness and attention to detail. (The late Rabbi Emmet Allen Frank of Miami advertised eight-hour conversions.) The Orthodox consider such ceremonies a sham. They are concerned about maintaining the historic unity of the Jewish people, and worry about a time when some Jews won't be able to marry others ostensibly of their

faith, due to questions about the validity of an ancestor's conversion.

As an Israeli rabbi explained it to me, since the state has taken it upon itself to pass on who is a Jew, that decision should at least be based on Jewish law.

Another area of controversy concerns the application of the Sabbath laws. Again, the Orthodox are cast in the role of despots seeking to make the rest of the nation conform to their level of observance. The Haredi believe they are merely protecting their way of life in the face of a secularist onslaught.

They point to the status quo agreement, an accord between David Ben-Gurion and the leaders of Orthodoxy at the founding of the Jewish state. To secure their support for statehood, Ben-Gurion promised to preserve the religious status quo, including the cessation of public transportation and closing of businesses and places of entertainment on the Sabbath, in those communities where the custom then was observed. The Orthodox never pushed for Saturday closing laws in secular cities like Tel Aviv. But since secularists have begun to press for Sabbath movies and shopping in Jerusalem, religious Jews feel their activism is justified.

There are interesting parallels between the politicization of Orthodoxy in Israel and the rise of the religious right in America. Like their fundamentalist counterparts, the Haredi were essentially apolitical until threatened by an antireligious ethos. In the US, it was the attack on tax exemptions for church schools by officials of the Carter administration that animated the Christian right.

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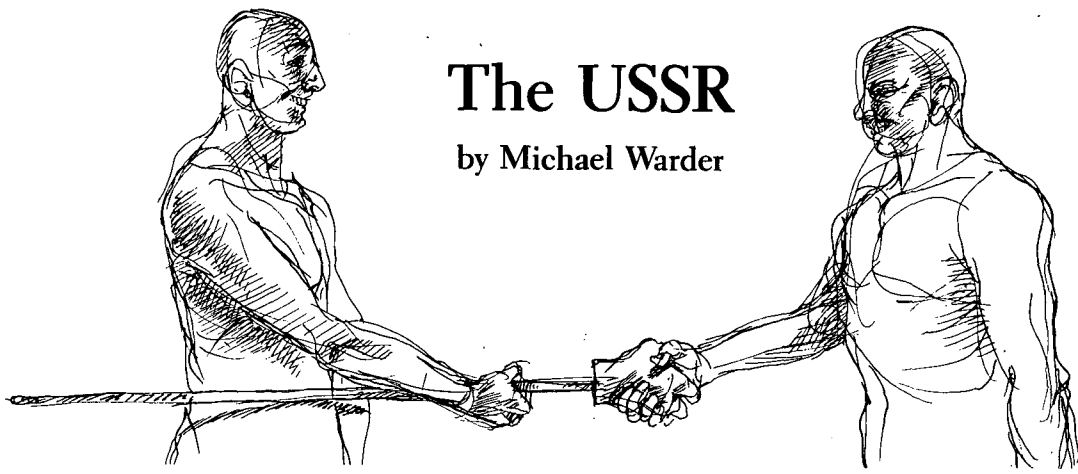
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What formerly was disdained as too worldly was soon perceived to be a matter of grave importance. Every government system must reflect someone's values. If biblical morality is confined to the precincts of church and synagogue, society eventually will be dominated by secularist dogma.

For the Orthodox, a Jewish state that denies Jewish law seems an absurd contradiction. While accepting the pluralistic nature of Israeli society, the Orthodox believe that in essential areas the legal code must reflect Torah values. Besides amending the Law of Return and enforcing Sabbath closing laws, this would include tightening restrictions on abortion and reinstating the ban on homosexual conduct that was repealed last year.

For their part, nonreligious Israelis need the idealism and commitment of the Orthodox. For a nation beset with economic problems and foreign challenges, Israel's religious right provides a sorely needed *raison d'être*. ◇



The USSR

by Michael Warder

I can't remember the last time I was in an airport waiting for luggage along with a flight from Managua. Welcome to Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow. The passport control soldier was in a glass-enclosed booth with a large shoulder-high shelf that hid his checklists. He could look at the calibrations painted on his window to check my height against what was printed in the passport. A mirror behind and above me gave the soldier an opportunity to inspect my backside and the height of my shoe heels. Customs was much easier. The official simply waved me through when my bags went through an x-ray machine. Still, an x-ray machine *after* the plane ride is an unusual debarkation procedure.

The purpose of our tour was to visit religious sites significant to the "millennium of Christianity." Nineteen-eighty-eight was one thousand years after Prince Vladimir of ancient Kiev required his subjects to be baptized in the Dnieper River. Before the trip I had made up my mind that every possible chance I would go off on my own to see more directly the peoples of the Soviet Union. Part of my planning was limited by the fact that the Soviets did not issue the visa until five days before the trip—standard practice. In addition, there was no information about which hotels we would be staying at in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. This, too, is standard practice and has been so for many years now. Even after we arrived in the Soviet Union, we could not learn in advance of our arrival in a certain city as to where we would stay. *Glasnost* has not really changed the basics of travel to the Soviet Union.

Whatever the word *glasnost* means, it is not freedom of speech or press. A more accurate definition is freedom to criticize Brezhnev, Stalin, or any evil that can be blamed on them. I saw an excellent example of *glasnost* one night when, instead of going to an optional circus event in Leningrad, I went off on my own and happened upon a movie playing on Nevsky Prospect called *Assa*.

In one scene a government stooge watches a television program in which former Soviet leader Brezhnev is getting a medal. The rather youthful audience hooted, clapped, and cheered in mock appreciation of this overdecorated five-star marshal of the Soviet Union who received more medals than could fit onto a full-length coat.

Assa also conveyed a veiled warning to other abusers of government power. A middle-aged security official, jealous

of his younger lover's friendship with a rock singer, arranges for the murder of the young man. The young woman, in turn, kills the official.

On another evening, I declined the ballet and went to another movie, *Mirror of Heroism*, which I had seen advertised extensively on billboards. This movie was a bit more difficult to follow, but it dealt with the era of Stalin and the subsequent problems of understanding between the generations. It mocked a Stalinist factory leader and a policeman, both of whom were caught up in their own self-importance and who lacked any capability to think critically about their public duties. It also showed the suffering of the people who labored to make their quotas in the coal mines, and the "heroic" efforts to industrialize.

I was surprised at the freedom of expression in these movies. Both seemed to be saying that there is a new generation and the old ways won't wash. On the other hand, it does get tedious to associate everything bad in the Soviet Union with Brezhnev (dead 6 years) and Stalin (dead for 35). Brezhnev appointees, clinging to past policies to maintain their privileges, still abound, and undoubtedly they and closet Stalinists are the real targets of these movies. The effort Gorbachev is making to purge these old appointees is part of his plan to consolidate his own power.

I had not expected to see party slogans on buildings in the Soviet Union, since I had read that the signs had been taken down as a matter of good taste. In Moscow I saw only a few such signs, but in Leningrad and Kiev party signs and slogans were plentiful. "Long Live Leninism!," "Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union!," the ever-popular "Workers of the World, Unite!," and the like were on top of many major buildings. Perhaps in Leningrad and Kiev the local party bosses feel that they have to try harder. I saw no slogans on billboards that championed *perestroika*, *glasnost*, or *democratzia*. One local said that the building signs conveyed the older slogans because it was rather costly to change them, and that the newer slogans could be seen, though I never did.

There are many things that Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev have in common. Each of their respective metro systems is named after Lenin, and each of these cities has a supersaturation of pictures, statues, lapel pins, memorial squares and parks, museums, libraries, and books of Lenin. In fact, a good working definition of a Soviet kiosk is a place that sells Lenin's works and other things, too. There is no criticism of Lenin these days in the Soviet Union, and the guard is ever-vigilant in front of his mummified remains in

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