

*A Step Toward Bridging  
the Religious-Secular Gap*

I do not like being called a *Dati*, a religious Jew. And I am not alone in disliking the term. Moreover, I shudder when a Jew feels that he must sheepishly confess to me that he is not religious. He may be more religious than I, though it may appear that I do more things that are identified with the tradition than he.

Indeed, no one should ever speak of himself as religious. To be religious is a goal to which one aspires and only one who is arrogant claims that he has already achieved it. Similarly, no Jew ought to affirm that he is not religious. Once he had identified with the Jewish people, he has already made himself a party to the Covenant. He may even deny that there is a God, but he already subscribes to one term of the Covenant - the responsibility of Jews for each other.

How I wish that I could eliminate the term from the vocabulary of our people! Christians are more astute. They speak of themselves as practicing or non-practicing. And virtually all Jews are practicing Jews - some more so, and some less - but once a person asserts that he is Jewish, he is already a practicing Jew in a very significant way. He has placed himself within the fold, and that is no insignificant deed.

One of the sad consequences of the use of the term religious is that it has taken on an obnoxious meaning almost everywhere. It is assumed that it refers only to commandments that pertain to man's relationship with God. Thus in Israel, for example, in a cooperative residential facility in which the owners have agreed to be "religious," a person who observes the Sabbath and dietary laws might not be expelled even if he is a proven thief or embezzler, while one who is honest and neighborly might be excluded because he parked his car there on the Sabbath.

Moreover, use of the term “religious” for the commandments pertaining to relationships between God and man enables some Jews to boast about being “more religious” than others. And this is usually not only arrogance on their part but a violation of the very tradition to which they profess loyalty.

For example, there has been a tendency in recent years to promote more meticulous observance of Jewish dietary laws. Frankly, I am no champion of this trend. It is usually described as the “glatt kosher” syndrome, and there are very cogent halachic and moral reasons for resisting it. To begin with, though, I want to stress that Jews are prone to equate “more religious” with this kind of concern and “less religious” with the lack of it. I would much rather relate the “more” or the “less” to the way a Jew conducts his business affairs, how meticulously honest he is in his concern for other people’s money, how careful he is with his speech, how charitable he is, how neighborly, how civic-minded, etc. But we have come to equate showmanship with cleaving to God, ostentation rather than piety.

My late father discouraged use of two pairs of tefillin in prayer, though many Jews do just that. He relied on several giants of the talmudic tradition, who held that to be so observant gives the impression that one is superior to others. Modesty in one’s religious observance is as much a cherished value as modesty in attire. Today we are witness to the rejection of both values, but not by the same people. The modest in attire are usually immodest in their claim to be religious, while the immodest in attire are usually very modest in denying that they are religious.

He was equally resistant to the glatt kosher movement. First, he felt that one ought not to encourage a practice which not all Jews can possibly observe. If all Jews observed it, the supply would never equal the demand. And for a Jew to engage in a practice which is unavailable to all Jews often serves only the ego and not one’s spiritual excellence.

Second, to insist on glatt kosher is to denigrate what the sages have ruled is kosher. It is tantamount to a rejection of the oral law and its custodians, the rabbis and their published works. One of the greatest rabbis of the last century felt that it was a form of heresy to act in such a way that, in effect, tells the rabbis: “We question the validity of your rulings. We will do better.”

To my father's reasons I add my own. When one day I shall face our Maker in judgment and He will accuse me of being lax with regard to the dietary laws, I shall at least apologize and explain that I was equally lax in my behavior toward my fellow man. I had no double standard. But what will those who want to be "more religious" say when they are confronted with their pursuit of the strictest measures toward God and the most compromising standards toward their fellow men?

There is one more reason why I dislike claiming that I am a Dati. By retaining that term and using it, I am contributing to the most serious division of our people in millennia, a division that threatens the future of Israel. The term is inviting civil strife.

I don't believe that anyone really planned it that way. It just happened. But the trend must be stopped. The *Datiim* and the *Chiloniim* can refuse to be described as such. Perhaps even political parties should cease to describe themselves as "religious." Movements may do so. So may schools. But political parties are organized for power and power inevitably corrupts. No "religious" political party ever succeeded in functioning with a view only to the realization of religious goals. And the state of Israel has provided no exception.

I have no solution to the problem of how religious movements in Israel will influence legislation without their own political parties as they do in the United States and Britain. But I do know that one immediate desideratum is to stop talking of ourselves as religious or irreligious. If all of us are simply practicing Jews, the so-called secularists will not have to organize to protect themselves against the religionists and the religionists will have taken a giant step forward to win the respect of those whom they would like to see cherish the Jewish tradition and its exceptional values and of life.

This would be step number one in the battle against a divided camp and enormous losses to assimilation.