"The settlers are not the problem"

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Shlomo Riskin (born May 28, 1940) was the founding rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue on the Upper West Side in New York City, Chief founding rabbi of the Israeli settlement of Efrat in the Judean Hills on the Israeli-administered West Bank, was the dean of Manhattan Day School in New York City, and Founder and Dean of the Ohr Torah Stone Institutions, a network of high schools, colleges, and graduate Programs in the United States and Israel. He belongs to the Modern Orthodox stream of Judaism. The interview was done by the Israeli author Chaim Noll and the German free lanced journalist Martin Jehle.

Rabbi Riskin, why did you leave New York to become Rabbi and founder of Efrat in the West Bank?

As a very young rabbi I was associate professor of Bible and Talmud at Yeshiva University in New York. After receiving my ordination I wasn´t interested in the practical rabbinate. I was interested much more in scholarship. I also got my masters and I was going for my Ph.D.

The Manhatten neighbourhood was changing tremendously. The area that we are talking about was called Hellen´s Kitchen. The West Side Story, the play was taken there, in that area, gang fights etc. A very brilliant major of New York decided that he was going to gentrify the inner city in order to attract large families who had left the city and moved to the suburbs because the family was growing, now would be interested and move back to the city if it was sufficiently cultural and attractive. They built an Upper House, Lincoln House - that was my area, Lincoln Center. They built a theatre, fine restaurants, public parks – projects that were expensive, attractive. Someone started a Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur Service, that was somewhere between conservative and reform in one of the hotels in the area, the Esplanada Hotel. I went as the Rabbi for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for the high Holidays, as a kind of student rabbi. It clicked, we started the Lincoln Square Synagogue, we started a regular Synagogue. They took some kind of study of the area and came to the conclusion that it was a-religious, it was very intellectual and consisted of many artists and musicians and writers and that kind of people who are not really interested in religious Judaism. I decided to beat the odds and to try and we started in an apartment in Lincoln Towers which was one of these fency inner city apartments and it grew and was very successful, and ultimately we built a Synagouge and had about 700, 800 families and 600 singles. I was there for 19 years.

But at the same time I often visited Israel, I always wanted to live in Israel. I believed with all my heart that whatever happens in the Diaspora is a footnote to Jewish history. The chapter headings would be written here. And if I had one chance in life I wanted to be part of chapter rather than part of a footnote. My wife and I first met in Israel, Summer Program. I was teaching, she was studying. She was 16, I was 21, we fell in love, became engaged and promised each other that we when we are married we will live in Israel. I became Rabbi of the Synagouge when I was 24 and she was 19, we had a child right away. Things went very, very well but we weren´t getting to Israel. And I found it hard to get a job in Israel. And I understood later that the reason was that I didn´t have a beard.

Did I understand right? You didn't get a job because you had no beard?

The culture was: An orthodox rabbi has a beard. But nobody told me. Anyway, I looked around, we came almost every summer on various programs. I was counsellor of various camps and toured various programs in Jerusalem in the summer time. But I couldn´t get a job. And the shul in New York was doing significantly and we started some schools, Yeshiva High School for young men, a Yeshiva High School for young women under the Or Torah. Anyway, I was invited in 1975 to a special colloquium of theologians that took place in Kibbutz Lavin. And I went to the colloquium and I gave a paper and every American rabbi who gave a paper was invited to another Kibbutz. And I was invited to another Kibbutz near Ashkelon. I was invited from the colloquium to spend Shabbat in that kibbutz. Then they invited me to come back with my family for the summer. And that was the summer of 76 and I spent the next eight summers until my Alija in that kibbutz as a scholar in residence with my family.

And I met a person Moshe Mashkowitz who had excellent political pull, protection. He was the chief counsel to the Minister of Interior at that time, Avraham Burg. And he listened to one of my classes and he asked what are you doing in America? We need you in Israel! I said: I want to come to Israel but nobody seems to want me in Israel. I can´t get a job. He took me in his car to an empty hill which was Efrat. Listen, he said, Golda Meir, after the Six-Day-War decided that in this area a very special city will be built called Efrat. The biblical Efrat. She felt that the area was magnificently beautiful and it was the Switzerland of Israel. I prefer to say that Switzerland is the Efrat of Europe. But it depends on what the favourite reference is. She felt that this will attract special people. So she said - she wrote in her notebook - here there will be a city called Efrat, 250 meters overlooking Jerusalem and protective of Jerusalem, but under the condition that it be started of two groups of Olim, of new Israeli citizens. Pioneers who will come from the more advanced countries, educationally and economically. Specifically she included in her description the U.S. and South Africa. So he took me to this place one day, it was empty, completely empty, there was absolutely no buildings, no people, nothing at all. He said: I once asked Dizengoff, the first major of Tel Aviv, how do you become the major of a city in Israel?" And Dizengoff said: If you want to become a major of a city in Israel, build a city!" So Moshe Mashkowitz said to me: Rabbi Riskin, let´s be partners. I was in your synagogue in Manhatten, and you didn´t know I was there. There were hundreds of people there. And Yitzak Rabin was there that Shabbat as well. So he knew I had a high profile. "We´ll be partners, you get me the two groups from America and from South Africa to begin the city of Efrat. And I will worry about getting all the permissions in Israel. And you will see, I will be the major of the city and you will be the Rabbi of the city. With God's help! I prayed the afternoon prayer, came back to the kibbutz, told my wife, my wife got excited as well. She came with me. We started with an empty place but with tremendous, tremendous potential. To me it was a very exciting project. It took long time, from 1976 to 1981 every inch was checked over by the High Court in Israel to make certain that there´s no piece of land that an Arab could claim.

And there wasn´t any?

There wasn't. That's why Efrat´s shape is like a banana. Anything questionable we didn´t take.

So this land, in a matter of private law, is undisputed? There are no restitution claims on

this?

No.

And there will never be?

People can always get and come up with whatever they come up with.

Did you call for claims?

Yes. It was in the courts from 1976 till 81.

Since then you have stayed here, committed to this city?

This is my - please God – last stop. This is a dream come true. It´s more than that. The realization of the dream is greater than the dream was. There's a major, there's a city counsel and then there's is a rabbinate. There are six rabbis under me. They work on various places, synagogues. There are 33 synagogues in Efrat and 11.000 people.

How many are native English speakers?

About 35 percent Anglo-Saxon and 65 Percent Israeli.

Israeli born children of Anglo-Saxons?

Many of them, yes.

Is Efrat open for everybody?

Of course. I would never live in a place that isn´t open to people whether religious or non-religious. But this is a self selecting process. Most of the peole happen to be religious who live here. And as I say I never expected Efrat to develop so magnificently. This Shabbat I have four bar mitzvah boys, four different synagogues with bar mitzvahs. I go wherever the celebrations are. I love seeing the development. I love seeing the expansion. The city has developed very well. Whatever you might want in terms of local industry etc. A network of culture, concerts, plays, classes - there must be about 400, 500 Torah classes a week at least. I give a class every morning from 6.30 to 7.15 on a page of Talmud where I get 35 to 40 students every day. The fourth time going through the entire Talmud. And I go swimming every morning, just five minutes away this swimming pool. So we have a very nice way of life, quality of life here. I have also had the opportunity to develop educational institutions. We have 15 schools and 11 campuses. And we have a college and rabbinate school. We are very much into women's rights and divorce. So we have Midreshet Lindenbaum which is a women's college and rabbinate school. We have students from Universities, the top Universities from England and United States. And we put out some 25 to 35 rabbis and educators every year and they will be sent all over the world. Germany is an example there. North America, South America, I mean literally all over the world, South Africa, Australia.

So there´s an increase of populace?

Of course.

That means it has to be built.

Well, yes and no. We are part of the building freeze, unfortunately right now. So we haven´t been able to build during the last 5 months. We are anxiously anticipating the end of the building freeze

to be able to continue to build.

To build on undisputed land?

Right. Yea, legally. There were a number of building projects however that were started before the freeze and they are able to be concluded.

The idea of the place was bringing together religion with modern life on the basis of people from developed countries as you mentioned. Is there reflection on things like low crime rate, low rate of drug abuse etc.?

That were the original two groups. Efrat is an open city. So we have people from all over. We have native Israelis from all over, we have people literally from all over the world. I think it´s fundamentally a middle class community and we have wonderful educational institutions. We drive a great deal of joy, we take pride in the kids. We have some alcohol and drug problems, in fact one of my sons runs a special school for youngsters who have been ejected from High School programs because of drug or alcohol abuse. He has a 96 percent success record making them useful citizens, passing all the matric exams after High School an going on to the army.

So the social data are about the same as in any other Israeli middle class city?

We are probably below two percent of kids at risk. And kids at risk include kids who are friendly with those who are drinking a little bit and taking drugs a little bit but not yet involved in doing it. And we try of course to set them straight.

So Efrat is one of the places where you can grow up safely, where you can have a childhood without too much bad influence.

I think that´s really true. I take great pride in the city. The overwhelming majority of kids grow up in established, very fine, moral and religious lifestyle. There are close to a hundred marriages between people from Efrat. But we also have problems. We don´t mask over the problems. Problems of divorce, problems of violence, but all in all it´s wonderful to live here. My children live here. I have four married children, fifteen grand children - everybody lives in Efrat. One of my granddaughters is an officer in the army. Because one of our programs in the Midreshet Lindenbum, the women´s college, is the yeshiva there for women where the women go to the army and study Torah at the same time.

Is it the only institution of this kind in Israel?

When it began it was the only one. It was considered radical. Meanwhile there are at least two more like that.

Have other things you did been considered radical before?

Yes. For instance women lawyers for the religious courts. Because they have to go through a whole system of Talmudic education and there are many places that don´t teach women Talmud. It was certainly considered radical but now it´s totally accepted.

What is your position regarding converts to Judaism?

Let me try to explain because we’re dealing with a very important and crucial topic. First of all I am very, very much against the present religious establishment towards conversion.

Why?

There are 36 places where the Torah, the Bible tells us you shall love the convert. And the Talmud says specifically that the love that you must have for the convert begins as the gentile shows interest, possible interest in converting. In other words: Fundamental Jewish law tells us that we must be user friendly to people who want to convert - my first position.

The Talmud very, very clearly states: Don´t be too examining, don´t be too harsh. So first -of all, I believe very strongly in a user friendly attitude towards those who wish to convert. That´s number one.

Unfortunately, the conversion process has been high jacked by the haredi sector. Religious courts that deal with this used to be religious-zionist, modern orthodox, but have been hijacked by the haredi world. I think it´s a tragedy. I think our user friendly attitude is crucial. Remember, there are close to 400.000 people from the former Soviet Union who came in under the right of return and are not halachical Jewish.

One grandfather or one grandmother…

That´s right. In other words you see the right of return was based on whatever kind of relationship the Nazis would consider to be Jewish. But not the halachic definition of being Jewish. So there are many Israeli citizens from the former Soviet Union who came in under the right of return who are not halachical Jewish. So it´s behoves us to convert them . They are living in Israeli, they are going to the army in Israli, they are going to the universities in Israel. It behoves us to convert them. So first of all: user friendly. Number one.

Number two: I do not believe in any way compromising Jewish law for the exception of conversions. Jewish law says: Number one, A would-be-convert, if a male, must be circumcised. Number two, females and males must have ritual immersion in a mikveh and the acceptance of the commandments. On these issues I would not compromise at all. However no one expects that the convert be completely knowledgeable in all areas of Jewish life. Because I am not even completely knowledgeable in all areas of Jewish life and I have been living all my whole life as a Jew who studies the religious texts. I would say you teach the largest areas, Shabbat, the festivals, basic kashrut, basic family purity, mutual purity, give enough charity, loving kindness. But you need not teach every detail. Now, the third point that I would make about conversion - the first being user friendly, the second being: nobody is expected to know everything, but the important things, the major issues, actually the Talmud itself mentions Kashrut, Shabbat, Charity - the third thing that I think is very important: Once a person has been converted Maimonides clearly rules that conversion can not be nullified. Maimonides says specifically that even if a convert goes back to idolatry, his or her status is that of a non observant Jew, a Jew committing idolatry, but a Jew. And his marriage is a marriage. So this notion of nullifying conversion, the notion that every convert becomes a conditional convert if ever they find him or her doing something not in accordance with religious law or costum – this is nonsense, religiously legally speaking.

So you try to bring your position from an alternative into the accepted middle.

I am not alternative. I want to say it differently. My view has been the view of the great rabbinical scholars for the last hundreds of years. Suddenly, the haredi group made changes. They are the reformers – in my eyes. They made changes in a lot of other things, too. For example: The Talmud says specifically that it is good to study Torah and also to have a profession. That's the Jewish way of life the Talmud prescribes. That´s what Jewish law always has called for. Jewish law did not want young people making hand outs for studying Tora. Again, this is a reform that was created by the haredi world. They introduced a lot of changes like that into their life. So I´m not alternative. I should be mainstream, considered mainstream orthodox. The religious court of the chief rabbinate was always that way.

You are one of the first orthodox rabbis who try to bolster Jewish-Christian-Relationships. You even founded a center for this reason and try to reach out into the Christian world.

My interest in Jewish-Christian-Relations began thanks to Germany. During the second Intifada no one was visiting us. We are beyond the Green Line, so no one was visiting our place. And I want to make a very strong point about settlements: The settlements are not the problem at all. Between 1948, the declaration of the State of Israel, the end of the War of Independence, and the Six-Day-War in 1967 there were no settlements, there was no Green Line. But Arabs were killing Jews all the time. And the Six-Day-War was started before there were settlements. And the intention to drive us into the sea. And it has be left Gush Katif in Gaza, and we gave them Gaza completely, not a settlement freeze, we left. Their response was to send Kassam rockets into Israel, to cities like Sderot and Ashkelon. The problem is the Palestinians don't want us here, let me put it better: The leadership of the Palestinians don´t want us here at all, the normal Palestinians have accepted our presence, they draw much use from it, have a much better quality of life than most Arab countries… So, the Middle East problems have nothing to do with the settlements. The settlement is just a red flag. The myth is - and the myth is unfortunately what the world believes - that the Palestinians are here like the Blacks in South Africa and we came like the Bures and occupied their territory. It´s nonsense. Jews have lived here in a non broken chain for 4000 years. So what I want to make very, very clear is that we are very right to be here.

But this right is not undisputed…

All Israel today is disputed territory. There are two peoples, we both live in the land, we both want this land. We have to do is to divide the land. The problem is we recognize their right, we recognize the possibility of a Palestinian State. But they do not recognize to this day our right to be here. That's the tragedy at all. They talk about the settlements but they mean Jews being here in general.

But only their leaders do. The Palestinians on the ground we have a wonderful relationship with. We have a lot of business with all the village Arabs who live here. We have a wonderful, wonderful relationship. We take care of their medical problems as much as we can to a great extend, several hundred of thousands of Dollars a year extend. We really try to help them very much. I see them as an extension of my own community. Our medical centres accept them.

Let us talk about your relationship with Christian friends.

Now, during the second Intifada none was visiting us. I got a telephone call, I got a delightful visit from Schwester Martha in Darmstadt, a group of Sisters of the order of Mary, Protestants nuns. They came here to visit me and I visited them. They have a kind of kibbutz. Of everything they

raise and sell, they give all their profits to Israel. And through that meeting I began to realize there is a whole world of Christians who have very close ties, friendship with Jews, especially those Christians - the Evangelicals - who are very much into what they call the Old Testament and what for us is the Bible.

What you describe is a political relationship. But from Christian side the intentions may go deeper. First, as far as I know, many Christians have a very deep love for Israel.

Yes, many of them have, and there is nothing to say against it. I also say very strongly that it is fine to teach the Bible and the commandments to Christians. Because they accept the sacredness of our scripture. Some years ago we began teaching. There are thousands of Christians who come to our portal. Almost every day we have group of about 25 people visiting us. We have whole staff that teaches. The Jewish meanings of Christianity. Jesus the Jew.

The most famous Jew on earth.

Correct. And I get a great deal of satisfaction from it. And I have made wonderful relationship as a result of it. There are - no doubt - practical political reasons for an outreach to Christians today. And it is as you say there is a lot of love for Israel.

You have mentioned the political reasons for an outreach to Christians. Could you also imagine - and I think of it because you are a pupil of Rav Soloveitchik - a theological approach? Let me quote what Rabbi Soleveishik wrote about it: "The relationship between the two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated." This statement carefully avoids any information about a dialogue in the theological field. Is it, because such theological discussion is still looked on with a lot of mistrust from the Jewish side – after centuries of attempted conversion?

It´s a misreading of Rabbi Soloveitchik. Did you read his marvellous essay called "Confrontation"? I have given a whole lesson on this section. I gave a lecture on it recently. Rav Soloveitchik is not against theological discussion. He is against theological discussion if Jews are not grounded in the allegiance towards Judaism. He is against theological discussion with Christians who see us as being inferior. He is against theological discussion with Christians who want to convert us. And he is against theological discussions if Jews want to change Christians.

You could imagine to discuss theological questions with Christians?

Absolutely.

You would teach to Christians, you would even give a Drasha or Divrej Torah in a church?

It depends. If the church does not have a candid symbolism. But in general it´s possible.

My last question is about something you said about Jesus during the last weeks I read about it. You said that Jesus was a Rabbi as you called him, a Rabbi who stood with his people in a difficult time.

I believe as I also wrote that using the expression "Rabbi Jesus" to a Jewish audience, especially in Israel, doesn´t work. Because they have too many negative associations with what European Christians did to Jews in the name of Jesus. However, I do believe that there was a historic Jesus who was a Jewish religious teacher. And that it is important, especially when one is teaching Christians, to make this point as clearly as possible and I was making this point in a group of

Christians. I believe, by the way, all dialog with Christians, it´s crucial to emphasize the fact that there are differences between us, very real differences. For me and I always emphasize this Jesus was not the son of God. We are equally God´s children. And for me Jesus was not the messiah. Because the messia is the king of Israel in a time of peace and redemption. And it hasn´t come yet. But I do believe that Jesus was fundamentally a religious Jewish teacher.

You said about Jesus, I quote from a recent article in the Jerusalem Post: “And I have constantly come back to the study of his personality and his teachings, which are very strongly rooted in Talmudic teachings.”

I had the great privilege to study the Gospels in Greek in an unforgettable Hebrew University course by Professor David Flusser who was a mentor of mine and who has written many books in this area. And that´s precisely his position and is therefore mine as well.

There is a new chair at the Lateran University in Rome, the University of the Pope, and this new chair is especially dealing with the Christian relations towards Jewish people and Judaism. Could you imagine to teach there? To give a lecture there to an audience of Catholic theologians?

Yes, of course.

Rabbi Riskin, we thank you very much for this interview.

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