And Now, Jews Versus Jews

A second fault line is widening between the ultra-orthodox and the secular communities of strife-stricken Jerusalem

By **SUMANA RAMANAN** in Jerusalem

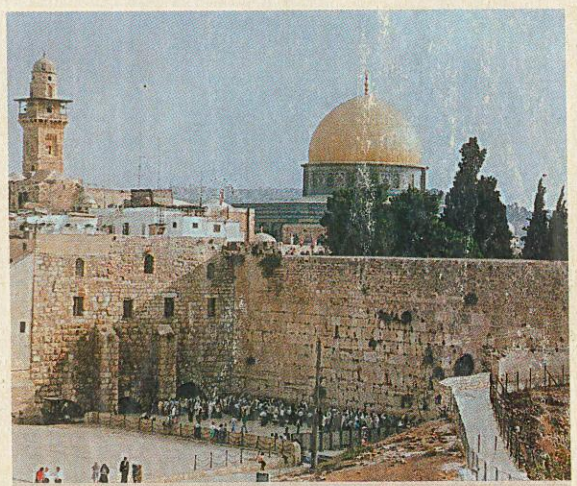
IN the summer of 1956, an angry group of about 50 men wearing black overcoats, black top-hats and shiny black shoes gathered outside the mayor's office in West Jerusalem for a protest rally against the municipality's decision to build a public swimming pool where bare-bodied men and women would be allowed to mingle freely. These protesters were members of the Haredim, a community of ultra-orthodox Jews.

Back then, the small Haredi community, with its idiosyncratic dress and conservative lifestyle governed by the Torah—the Jewish scriptures—was on the margins of civic life in West Jerusalem. And while the protest attracted curious pedestrians and a few columns in the local papers, the swimming pool was built and life went on as before in West Jerusalem.

Now, however, the Haredim is increasingly gaining in popular following and political clout. Five years ago, the Haredim launched a campaign against 'immodest' billboards put up by the Poster Media Company. This time, however, verbal condemnations gave way to arson, and across the city bus stops that exhibited the posters were burned down. But instead of insisting on its rights, the firm reached a compromise with the Haredim and toned down its posters.

Over the years, the Haredi community has grown faster than the secular population. In 1990 they were 28 per cent of the population in West Jerusalem (which is almost entirely Jewish) and are expected to grow to 38 per cent by 2010. The increasing numbers have been successfully translated into increasing political clout.

The turning point in the balance of power between the two sections was the 1993 mayoral elections. For the first time, a mayor was brought to power largely on the Haredi vote. Since then, the clashes between the sections have grown in frequency and intensity. "The situation has become particularly hysterical in the last five months," says Ornan Yekutieli, head of the left-wing Meretz party in the Jerusalem city council. "The Haredim have been able to push ahead even more forcefully with their agenda for the city after a coalition of right-wing and religious parties came to power in the national elections this May."



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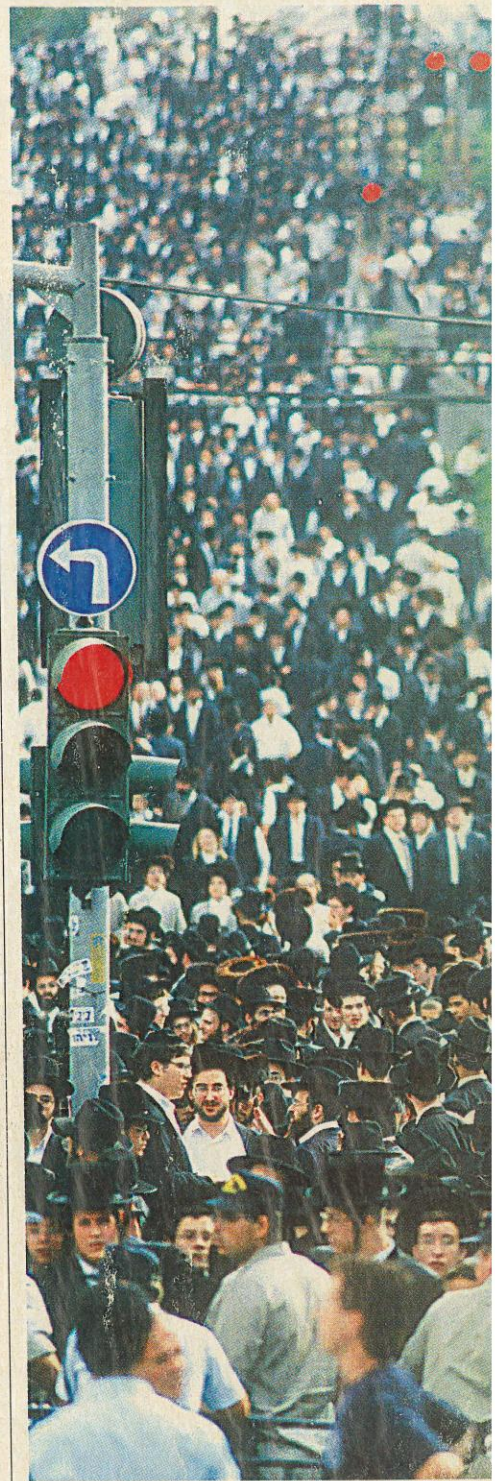
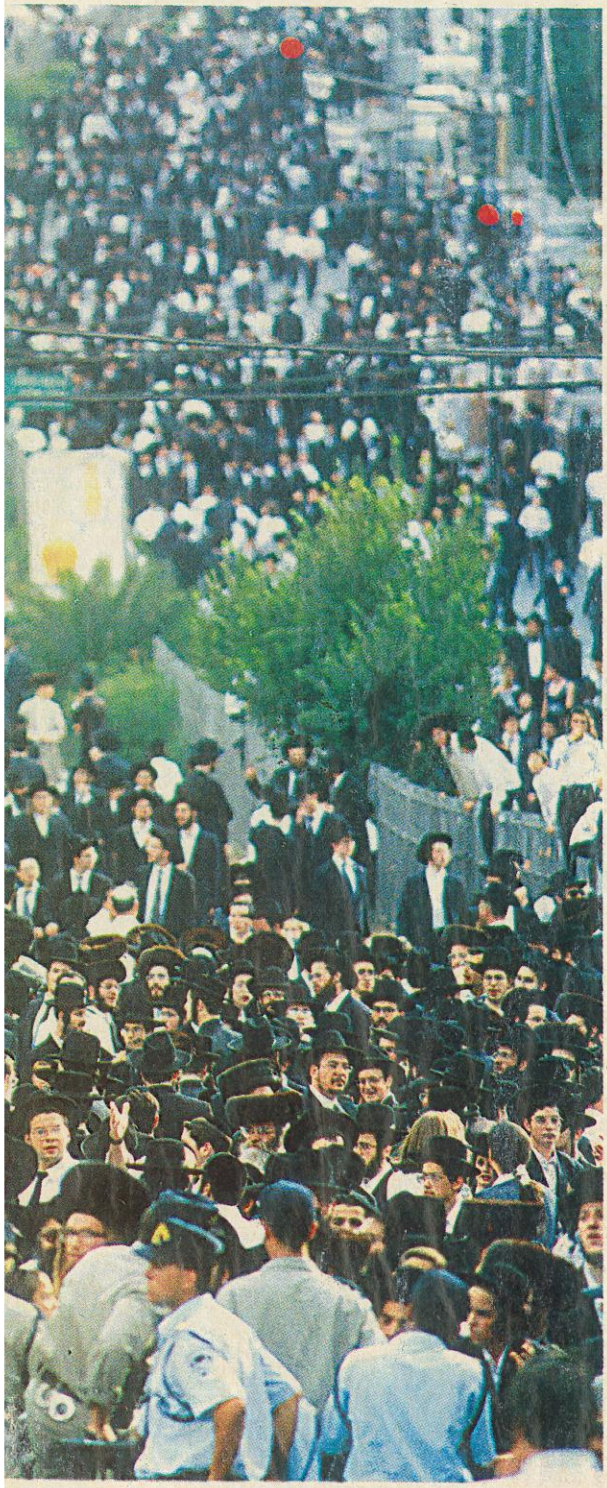
The secular population has never felt more threatened. According to a study published last month by the Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, over 60 per cent of the secular population of West Jerusalem are seriously considering leaving the city within the next five years. And 40 per cent of them say the motivation for leaving is the deteriorating relationship between the city's secular and Haredi populations.



"The secular population is on 'stand-by', waiting to see how things turn out," says Professor Amiram Gonen, director of the Institute. "If nothing is done about this, a 'white-flight' phenomenon is likely to develop in Jerusalem, like in many US cities." A more dire warning was sounded recently by Zvi Zamarett, the chairman of a committee appointed to resolve some of the points of friction between the two sections. "If the



The Wailing Wall (left) and an ultra-orthodox rally in Jerusalem: a city divided

'haredisation' of Jerusalem continues," he wrote in a cover letter to the committee's report, "the city could wane and collapse."

The most open show of Haredi power in recent times was the demonstration this August on Bar-Ilan Street, a major inter-city artery in the north of the city. Hundreds of men blocked traffic and demanded that the street be closed to vehicles on Saturdays, the Sabbath—a day of total rest for observant Jews.

Since the formation of Israel in 1948, the Haredim have shut down about 250 streets in the city, all of which were in their own neighbourhoods. The protest on Bar Ilan Street was the first time that they ventured into common territory and it prompted the three-month-old government of Benjamin Netanyahu to appoint a special committee, headed by Zamarett, to look into the city's secular-Haredi relations.

THE secular population holds freedom to travel, to operate entertainment venues and to frequent centres of recreation at all times, including on the Sabbath, to be an intrinsic part of each individual's personal and civil rights," writes Professor Shlomo Hasson, head of the Jerusalem Institute of Urban and Regional Studies, in *The Cultural Struggle over Jerusalem*. "But the non-secular population regards such activity as a shocking desecration of the Sabbath, to be resisted, indeed prevented, at all costs."

The United Torah Judaism, a party supported by the Haredim, is part of the ruling right-wing coalition. Avraham Ravitz, a party member who is part of the Israeli Knesset, feels that the secularists, now in the Opposition, need a rallying issue. "There is room for everybody in Jerusalem," says Ravitz, who represents the more moderate face of ultra-orthodox society. "We believe every individual has a right to live the way he wants. We expect the secular population to respect our rights as well."

But so fundamentally different are the views of the two communities that confrontation has been inevitable in many spheres of public life. The Haredim regard most archaeological activity, particularly excavation of burial grounds, as a desecration of the dead, and oppose it fiercely. Archaeologists see this as an attempt to curb their scientific freedom.

Haredi ideas of the relations between the sexes and the role of women are also at odds with those of secular society. Reports of students of *yeshivas* (religious schools) verbally and physically harassing women they consider immodestly dressed are increasing.

"Unity slogans notwithstanding, we are not one, but two," wrote political commentator Ze'ev Chafets about Israel, in the magazine, *The Jerusalem Report*. "And the fault line runs between those who want to be ruled by the Torah—presumably all the Haredim and some other Orthodox Jews—and those who want to live in a democracy—presumably most secular Israelis along with the more moderate Orthodox Jews."

The fault line is particularly pronounced in Jerusalem. "The history of Jerusalem has been the history of confrontation not only between Arabs and Jews, but also between the ultra-orthodox and secular populations. Right now this confrontation has reached a climax," says Professor Menachem Friedman, an expert on ultra-orthodox society at Bar-Ilan University.

Jerusalem's older, better-known, fault line is visible as one travels from west to east. First World gives way to Third World, synagogues give way to mosques, and Hebrew gives way to Arabic. This is the fault line that separates West Jerusalem, Israel's capital, and the overwhelmingly Arab East Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967 and considers its own, but which is still contested territory.

The second, more recent, fault line lies within West Jerusalem. As one travels from the south to the north, jeans give way to long skirts, coloured sports shirts give way to black overcoats and Hebrew gives way to Yiddish. In the northern neighbourhoods of West Jerusalem, the Haredim have tried to recreate the life of the 18th and 19th century Jewish towns and ghettoes of Eastern Europe, many of which were centres of religious learning. Here people still speak Yiddish, the language of East European Jews, the men still dress in dark coats and top hats, attire worn by 18th century East European gentlemen, and married women cover their heads with netted scarves.

But these cultural peculiarities are not the only reason why people worry about a 'haredisation' of the city. "The Haredim are largely a community dedicated to religious learning, and therefore, have low incomes," explains Professor Daniel Sperber, one of the members of the Zamarett Committee. "For religious reasons they also have large families. As a result, they pay low taxes and also get subsidised housing from the state."

Experts believe that as the less well-off Haredim increase in number, and the affluent secular population moves out, the city is likely to come under increasing financial strain. "This trend," warns Sperber, "has to be reversed if Jerusalem is to preserve the characteristics of a capital city, one that reflects the plurality of the country and can also provide services to visitors from other parts of the country and abroad." ■