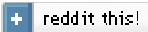


No Place Like Home

Prime minister's demands would be unacceptable not only to Iran, but also to other world powers involved in the nuclear negotiations, the senior official tells Haaretz.

By Sam Heller | Sept. 4, 2015 | 12:16 AM



From a distance, you might well be approaching a community in Tuscany or in Napa Valley. Vineyards line the winding highway, as do high stalks of corn, and lush green forests on rolling hills.

It is only when you get close to Ramat Beit Shemesh Bet that you realize that this is like nowhere else in the world.

This is Israel- 18 kilometers outside of Jerusalem, but the language spoken on the street is primarily English, as the residences are mostly emigres from the United States and Canada.

Unlike most North Americans, however, most of the residences of Ramat Beit Shemesh Bet do not have television sets in their homes, nor do they surf the web. Advertisement

Unlike most Israelis, who are subject to nearly universal conscription in fighting unending conflicts with the Arabs, many if not most of the residents of Ramat Beit Shemesh Bet do not serve in the IDF.

Some of the residents do not recognize the state of Israel, yet they are markedly hawkish on security issues, believing that the army should use all possible force in its military confrontations.

There is no paradox here, only the fact that the community was planned and developed as a haven for haredim, the ultra-Orthodox. And not just any haredim.

The residents, many of them relatively recent arrivals from North America, sprinkle their English with religiously oriented Hebrew words such as Hashem (God). Those who speak Hebrew converse formally, but are unfamiliar with contemporary Hebrew slang and Arabic words.

The main shopping area of Ramat Beit Shemesh Bet reflects the unique needs of the population. It consists of drycleaners, religious bookstores, Judaica stores, supermarkets specializing in scrupulously kosher products, and a workout facility that only allows women.

It is as hot in the summer here as it is elsewhere in Israel, but there are no strapless tops, nor exposed midriffs.

Women do not expose their arms and legs. They wear dark woolen clothing and cover their heads with a wig or scarf. Life is hectic for women in Haredi society, as households often have eight or more children, and women are often the family's bread-winners.

The men dress modestly as well, wearing black felt hats and suits, many sporting long bushy beards. Many study in Kolel, a religious academy for adults, who receive a monthly stipend from the government.

Residents live in Jerusalem-styled homes made with white limestone blocks. Many are explicitly barred by their rabbi from having a television and most choose not to have access to the World Wide Web.

Families receive Hamodia, a Haredi morning newspaper that excludes pictures of women. It is not uncommon for "Baruch Hashem" (Praise the Holy Name) to appear in print, especially if there are no IDF casualties.

The newspaper avoids publishing personal scandals, writing for example that Justice Minister Haim Ramon resigned for personal reasons, not mentioning that he is alleged to have forcibly kissed an 18-year old female soldier.

A 19-year old yeshiva student states that it is necessary to support the Jewish people, but that he cannot support a government that fails to abide by their stringent religious laws. Furthermore, he says, he is aghast that Hatikva-the national anthem of the state of Israel- fails to mention God.

The student defends yeshiva students who choose not to serve in the military. "We believe that we need an army, but by being close to God, we will protect the Jewish people and our soldiers."

He added, "If we have a state of Israel and believe in it, we want to keep a Jewish culture and not accept Herzl's plan of mass conversion to Christianity, only to plan a Jewish state... While the army protects the Jew, the yeshivas keep the Jews, 'more Jewish'."

The pupil defended married Yeshiva students receiving a monthly stipend from the government. "It's crazy, the monthly payment is very low. It's an extremely frugal lifestyle with our wives working and it should be checked how much is given to other cultural projects such as secular education."

The student said he mourns every IDF death and emphasized that he had no sympathy for the Israeli-Arabs victims of Katyusha rockets and went on to express his distaste for all Arabs.

Yaacov, a clean-shaven thirty-five year old who identifies himself as an American Haredi, added that while he is saddened by the deaths of Arabs, the most important priority is his fellow Jews.

"Jewish people are my brothers, whether they are in Israel, South America, or the United States."

Yaacov, unlike most Haredim, served in the military 15 years ago driving a tank for the IDF.

He now works in the high-tech industry. He moved to Israel from Canada when he was 16-years-old, along with his mother, both of them staunch Zionists. They first settled in the northern West Bank region known as Samaria.

During the recent war, working with the charitable service Ezrat Achim, he donated pizzas to soldiers in the north. He is disappointed about the recent cease-fire stating, "This is not the end of the war, and I see Tel Aviv eventually getting attacked."

Like much of the rest of the Israeli population, the indecisiveness of the IDF is a source of frustration for the Haredi community. A rabbi who teaches in a Jerusalem yeshiva remarks that he regrets Israel's actions in the recent Lebanon war.

"The IDF should have bombed Tyre completely and that would have been the end of the war - there would have been no retaliation by Hezbollah."