
Last update - 21:05 28/04/2009

Making swine flu kosher: A symptom of the disease of Israeli politics

By Benjamin L. Hartman

On what must have been a slow day at the Knesset, the de facto head of the Health Ministry, MK Yakov Litzman, stated Monday that swine flu would be from here on in referred to as "[Mexico Flu](#)," as pork is non-kosher and considered unclean under Jewish law.

While "Mexico Flu" sounds like something you'd contract during a long weekend in Nuevo Laredo, and which could be treated through a quick visit to a local free clinic, swine flu can kill, and if the early reports end up to be correct, it may have already made its way to Israel.

Litzman was quick to point out that the authorities are on top of things and are prepared to handle any cases of swine flu, even though the authorities in question are currently being managed by a man who just tried to rename swine flu so that Jews in the State of Israel will not be forced to utter a reference to pork.

While this may seem to be just the semi-weekly "Haredi government minister gone wild" comment that makes for great office banter, the truth is that it's just one more in a series of state-sanctioned declarations by a government official that serves only to further humiliate Israel in the eyes of the world.

The blame ultimately lies at the feet of Benjamin Netanyahu and the glorious parliamentary democracy that makes Israel increasingly unstable and ungovernable. Israel is blessed by a voting system where if you don't secure a majority, your only recourse is to cobble together a coalition with whichever fellow travelers and fringe parties will agree to sit with you, get the stamp of approval from the president, and then settle accounts with your coalition partners, now waiting in the shadows with a list of demands. While it has been established that Litzman did not want to be named deputy health minister (and with the lack of a superior, the acting head of the ministry), the fact is that under the demented Legoland makeup of Israel's governing system, ministerial seats are assured to those who broker the deals, no matter how horribly ill-suited they may be to the post.

Such is the system that produces a government where a party

representing a community whose media cannot print the word sex, airbrushes women out of photos, and binds them into a strict second-class status, can be put in charge of the Health Ministry, a ministry legally bound to protect the well-being of all Israelis, regardless of gender, race or religion. How can a man who comes from a community which views as immodest talking about or referring to genitalia, be in charge of issues like reproductive health and gynecology, where he may have to hear or say the word "vagina?"

Litzman's absurd first act in office is merely a glaring symptom of the disease of Israeli politics. This closed-door system of coalition building awards shameless men with no internal filter on their mouths, whose absurd statements are most suited to a street corner. By helping form a coalition, they're given control of crucial government ministries and therein a platform, a microphone, and a direct line from their convoluted logic to the press, who are more than happy to snap up a ridiculous statement from a public official. Unfortunately, the hilarity that ensues only brings fleeting relief from our collective humiliation.

This attempted rebranding of swine flu raises another issue about the dangers of Israel's lack of separation of synagogue and state, albeit one less important or divisive than the monopoly held by the religious over marriage, death, circumcision, public transport, and dietary laws. This danger is the constant ability of the religious, when put in charge of government ministries, to make a mockery of a modern, would-be sophisticated western country that sees itself as a beacon of pluralism and modernity in a region darkened by religious fundamentalism and political extremism.

It lessens our ability to see ourselves beholden to a political culture superior to that of our neighbors in the region, giving us more and more in common with those further to the east who banned kite flying, the playing of music, and whistling. On the other hand, that may be the upside of such humiliating comments as those of Litzman, they may actually serve to make us feel like we belong in the Middle East.

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