

Handout 3b

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Jerusalem Road Is Secular-Religious Battleground

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When Avraham Cohen sits down with his family on Saturdays for a festive meal marking the Jewish Sabbath, he hears the hum of traffic passing under his porch on Jerusalem's busy Bar-Ilan Street. To Mr. Cohen, who wears the black hat and coat of a rigorously Orthodox Jew, it is the sound of desecration by non-observant Jews who are breaking religious law by driving on the Sabbath. "It hurts me," Mr. Cohen said today. "I sit at the table, singing songs in a Sabbath atmosphere, and I hear the noise. It's offensive. My children ask me, 'Are these people Jewish? What's going on here?'"

The feelings of Mr. Cohen and his neighbors on Bar-Ilan Street, a major artery that runs through a heavily Orthodox area, are not new and have led to protests in the past. But these have grown frequent and violent since Israel's new governing coalition of rightist and religious parties took office last month. The demonstrations reached a peak on Friday night and Saturday when thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews demonstrated. Some stoned passing cars and battled club-swinging police officers who used a water cannon to clear the road. Members of the militantly secular Meretz party drove by in a convoy of cars, aggravating the melee.

A symbol and contest of strength for both secular and Orthodox Jews, Bar-Ilan Street has become an early test case of the Government's policies on issues of religion and state --an indicator of how the increased political power of religious parties might be translated into action. The struggle pits Orthodox sensibilities against secular demands for personal freedom, and challenges the authorities to reconcile religious imperatives with civil liberties.

The ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem, about 30 percent of the city's Jewish population of 413,000, wants Bar-Ilan Street closed to cars on the Sabbath, like dozens of other roads through religious neighborhoods that are closed on Saturdays. The non-Orthodox majority in the city favors keeping the street open, arguing that it is a major traffic route and that its closure will isolate secular neighborhoods. "They can't bring our lives to a halt," said Boaz Almog, a non-observant Jew. "This is coercion."

Tensions rose last week after Transport Minister Yitzhak Levy, a National Religious Party leader, said that for a four-month trial period, Bar-Ilan Street would be closed on Friday nights and

Saturdays during hours of Sabbath services. Mr. Levy's' decision, the first religious measure taken by the new Government, was immediately challenged in the Supreme Court. The court issued an injunction against any change before it rules, and gave the Government two weeks to explain its new policy.

The order provoked the Orthodox protests this weekend, and set a pattern in which secular Israelis are likely to turn regularly to the Supreme Court to block religious strictures imposed by the Government. "This is a culture war," said Ornan Yekutieli, a city councilman from the Meretz party who has led the secular protests against the closure of Bar-Ilan Street. "Here it will be decided whether Jerusalem, which is the face of the entire State of Israel, will be free and liberal, or go back to the Dark Ages. The coming period will determine whether we take a step toward Tehran or continue to be part of the enlightened nations of the world."

Orthodox residents of Bar-Ilan Street assert that non-observant drivers can easily respect their feelings by taking alternate routes. Upholding the sanctity of the Sabbath, the ultra-Orthodox argue, is a supreme Biblical commandment justifying the most extreme forms of protest, even if it means being killed. "The Holy Sabbath was given to us at Mount Sinai, and we must protest wherever it is being desecrated," said a wall poster on Bar-Ilan Street. "We will give our lives for it."

Both secular and Orthodox leaders promise to bring out thousands of protestors next Saturday to demonstrate for what each side describes as its right to be left in peace. "The Torah faithful will shake the world," an Orthodox poster predicted. "The sound of their cries will echo around the globe, wherever there are Jews."

Questions (discuss these questions with your partner and write your answers):

1. What questions do the judges need to decide?
2. What values in *Megillat Ha'Atzmaut* are in question?
3. How would you apply the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) in this case?