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CHAVRUTA CHAZON LISRAEL is an independent national registered society for spiritual-cultural and socio-political reform.

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A Statement by the Editorial Board for Passover 5768 (2008)

HAS THE ISRAEL MOVEMENT FOR PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM GONE FORTH OUT OF EGYPT?

For the People of Israel, the generations in Egypt were a period of both physical and spiritual exile. Their spiritual enslavement was no less severe than their physical enslavement. Forty years of wandering in the desert were needed in order to produce a generation freed from the mentality of dependence on others who dictated the conditions of the peoples' existence.

Herzl's Political Zionism emphasizes liberation from physical enslavement. Ahad Ha'am was more concerned by spiritual enslavement. Due to the historical circumstances facing the Jewish people in the 20th century, it was political Zionism which had to develop a plan for action. Cultural Zionism was shunted onto the sidelines, but its day has now arrived.

Reform Zionism is an interpretation of Cultural Zionism. On the one hand, it rejects assimilation in Western culture ("Hebrew-speaking Goyim"). On the other hand, Reform Zionism rejects spiritual enslavement to Halachic Judaism.

Is the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) a Zionist movement?

It could be argued that as long as we live of our own free will in Israel, the nation state of the Jewish people; identify as Jews; and accept the rights and bear the responsibilities that derive from our status as citizens of Israel, then we may define ourselves as Zionists on the individual level. An opposite position, however, argues that Israeli Jews are Zionist only if they join with like-minded others in an effort to realize some vision that derives from their commitment to the idea of Cultural Zionism. In any case, it is difficult to argue at present that what is a **federation of Reform congregations in Israel** constitutes a **Reform Jewish Zionist movement in Israel**. There are two interconnected reasons why this is the situation:

1. **In order for the IMPJ to be a Zionist movement, it must have an agreed upon action plan for changing Israeli society.** Moreover, even if the movement had such a plan, it does not currently have the "soldiers" who could advance the plan. The IMPJ's position in favor of pluralism and democracy in Judaism does not define what it wishes to do in order to realize its positions as a **movement** when the opportunity arises. In practice, there is already a willingness in Israel to accept initiatives by the movement, particularly in the educational sphere. The IMPJ does not take sufficient advantage of this openness.
2. The federation of Reform congregations is **not Zionist in its essence**. It is subjugated in material and spiritual terms to the Reform Jewish movement in the Diaspora. In spiritual terms, the IMPJ brands itself as "a religious Jewish stream offering a contemporary Jewish identity" – a definition that mirrors the federations of Reform congregations outside Israel. In material terms, the major part of the IMPJ's budget comes from donations from the Diaspora.

This situation of spiritual and material dependence is reminiscent of the Halukka system of charitable distribution of Diaspora money to 19th century Jewish communities in pre-Zionist Palestine. Halukka Judaism maintained a life of exile in the Land of Israel. In our opinion, the same is true of today's Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. **The IMPJ has not yet gone forth out of Egypt.**

The IMPJ: An Action Plan for a Free Movement in its own Land

On the basis of a revised ideological platform, the IMPJ must propose a comprehensive action plan in the fields of education, culture, and society. This action plan should reflect an attempt to implement a Reform Zionist worldview in practical terms.

1. Financially independent congregations

In both material and spiritual terms, the IMPJ must develop a plan to cover the operational cost of congregational activities within a few years. By what right does the IMPJ ask Reform Judaism in the Diaspora to finance operating expenses of salaries and maintenance in our congregations? After all, as members of the IMPJ we belong predominantly to social circles that can certainly cover the cost of the religious services we require, and/or to provide these services through internal resources within the congregations.

2. Funding for infrastructures and national activities

We believe that funds from our supporters overseas should be devoted to constructing the necessary infrastructures and to promoting national activities at the national level, particularly in the educational sphere.

3. Reinforcing voluntary activities

The model of the "professional Jew" (whether a rabbi or other professionals) as a paid activist leading a passive congregation is inappropriate to an activist Zionist movement. Volunteers should be encouraged to fill the places of some of the paid professionals, and should be reimbursed for their expenses. On the national level, it is unthinkable that the activities of the movement be undertaken primarily by salaried employees.

4. The top priority: Training educational personnel

Professional training must concentrate on the educational sphere and should preferably be undertaken in cooperation with existing educational institutions already engaged in training educational personnel and open to cooperation with the IMPJ. This will have two welcome outcomes:

- A. The impact of the movement's messages will be enhanced, particularly among those responsible for educating the next generation.
- B. The salaries of our professionals will be covered to a large degree by public funds.

As part of this direction, rabbinical students must gain a teaching certificate during their period of training.

The IMPJ must go forth out of Egypt in both material and spiritual terms in order to open itself to new horizons and enable it to realize itself as a Zionist movement.

The Jewish Identity Crisis among the Secular Public: Ramifications for Israel's National Strength

The question of Jewish identity in general, and in the secular context in particular, has been a central theme facing the Zionist movement and the State of Israel since the earliest days. The Zionist movement aimed to ensure the continued existence and flourishing of the Jewish people by means of a Jewish and democratic state.

During the period in which the state was established and shaped, the solid majority of Zionists who advocated secular Zionist ideology led this process. This public delineated the course ahead and produced the leadership cadres for all sections of the people and the state. This public internalized a narrative of identity and ideology that combined a commitment to Jewish nationhood and culture, on the one hand, with a commitment to a humanistic worldview, secular values, and openness to modernity, on the other. This ideology served Israel during its formative phase, but has since undergone processes of erosion and disintegration as the result of profound internal causes, as well as structural and political reasons.

Over a period of some thirty years, since the early 1970's, a clear tendency to an identity crisis can be discerned among the Israeli Jewish public that lives in the secular realm – a public defined sociologically by its utilization of the state general educational system which provides the school framework serving this section of the Israeli population.

This crisis is primarily faced by the adults and the generation of parents and has clear communal characteristics. However, it is also connected with the protracted failure of the general state education system. The ongoing lack of success of the general state system to address and to contribute to a Jewish awareness based on humanistic and democratic values among its graduates may, God forbid, come to be seen in the future as a decisive factor in the collapse of the State of Israel.

The crisis is particularly apparent against the background of the strengthening of the Jewish identity components among all shades of the Orthodox population. This public does not face any crisis in its Jewish identity. However, the Jewish narrative it conveys to its graduates conflicts in a profound structural manner with the democratic nature of the State of Israel and Israeli society. The ultra-Orthodox section of this public also presents a marked conflict with the ability of Israeli society to create a stable, productive, and prosperous economy in the interests of all sections of society, as expected of a modern welfare state.

This crisis is occurring alongside the realities faced by Israel, including constant and complex existential challenges in the fields of security, society, economy, and demographics, and against the background of a violent conflict with another people over our very right to be here. With this in mind, we should hardly be surprised if we find that graduates of our general state education system who have a weak Jewish identity and who consider the destiny of the ongoing existence and flourishing of the Jewish state to be irrelevant choose to leave us and head elsewhere.

The profound crisis described above presents a long-term threat to our national security and strength in the following fields:

1. The loss of our capacity to shape and maintain a Jewish and democratic state that acts on the basis of an internal sense of justice.

2. The collapse of the minimum essential measure of cohesion and the sense of a shared fate and destiny among the Jewish public in Israel.
3. The weakening of the bonds and affinity between the Jewish public in Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora to the point of disconnection.
4. The loss of legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise and the State of Israel among the nations of the world; this legitimacy depends on Israel's combined identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

This article appeared on the website of Panim: www.panim.org.il (20 March 2008)

Meir Yoffe, a veteran educator and member of Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan, is the coordinator of Panim – For Jewish Renewal in Israel. Meir Yoffe served as the shaliach to the Reform movement in Los Angeles (1990-1992) and studied at the Hebrew Union College there during his stay.

From Ha'aretz, 23 November 2007 – article by Yair Ettinger

Just One-Fifth of Jews in Israel Define Themselves as "Secular"

Just 20 % of the Jewish public in Israel define themselves as "secular." This finding emerged from the Democracy Index survey of the Guttman Center at the Israel Democracy Institute. Since the 1970's, surveys measuring the affinity of Israeli Jews to Jewish tradition, according to their subjective definitions, have shown fluctuations in the relative weight of the different streams within the Jewish public. This latest finding, however, constitutes a new low in the proportion of those defining themselves as secular.

In 1974, for example, the proportion of Israeli Jews who defined themselves as secular was above 40 percent; in 2000, the figure was above 30 percent. The new survey by Eli Sapir from the Guttman Center was conducted among 1,016 Israelis, constituting a representative sample of the Jewish population in Israel in 2007. The survey included a breakdown of the respondents according to ethnic origin – Mizrachim, Ashkenazim, and "Israelis" (Israeli-born respondents whose parents were also born in Israel).

The findings show that 85 % of the Israelis considered themselves to have some affinity to religion, compared to 93 % of Mizrachim and 64 % of Ashkenazim. The definition "religious" was shared by 56 % of Mizrachim, compared to 17 % of Ashkenazim. As in previous polls, the new survey also found a correlation between secularity and age (younger respondents are more religious), level of education (those with academic degrees are more secular), and political views (secular respondents are more likely to identify themselves as left-wing).

Michael Livni

Commentary – The Ramifications of the Misleading Term "Secular"

In my opinion, Meir Yoffe is right ("The Jewish Identity Crisis..."), and Yair Ettinger's general analysis in the article above is also correct. (The exact figures quoted are in dispute).

How can we reconcile the two articles? Yoffe speaks of the commitment to Zionism. Ettinger quotes a survey examining the way the Jewish "person on the street" in Israel sees his/her Judaism. Both Yoffe and Ettinger use the word "secular." Over the past generation, the meaning of the word "secular" has unfortunately been distorted, and it now obscures more than it reveals.

Today, we sorely need two terms that in previous generations made things much clearer. The first term we need is the word "faith." The second is "a free Jew," (*yehudi chofshi*), Jews who see themselves as free of Halachic authority.

Think for a moment. Could anyone describe A.D. Gordon, Berl Katznelson, or David Ben Gurion as "secular" men? They would turn over in their graves! Their faith was based on their own interpretation of the concept of "the Eternal One of Israel will not lie." (1 Samuel 15: 29) They did not believe in a God who issues commandments; they were "believing heretics" (but surely not secular).

They understood "secular" as referring to those who have no trace of sanctity in their lives, those who lack belief in anything beyond the "here and now" for themselves and their family, **those who have no commitment to any vision regarding the Jewish state.** The collapse of Zionist faith in "eternal life" (A.D. Gordon) based on the humanistic and national narrative constitutes the hard core of the crisis we now face.

Ettinger's survey completely fails to identify the true fault line between Zionist believers (of all types, including the type that neither Meir Yoffe nor I accept) and secular Israelis (who are not believers in any sense). For this purpose, "traditional" and "religious" are misleading terms that relate solely to certain ritualistic behaviors. When watching television news, I have noted that quite a few members of Israel's mafia families have a kippa on their head.

Within the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, the question must also be asked: Do we see ourselves as the suppliers of identity on the basis of a liberal-leaning "religious stream" – or are we bound by a Zionist faith, vision, and action plan reflecting the realization of a Reform Zionist way of life – a *Torat Chayim*?

The Reform Zionist challenge is to blend the heritage of all the generations, including the thought and action of the recent generations, in promoting a vision of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. In educating toward this vision we must recruit our symbols, including the God idea, in order to present a modern *drash* on the prophetic messages.

CHAVRUTA – A VISION FOR ISRAEL

"Where there is no Vision, the People become Unruly" Proverbs 29:18
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