

Excerpt From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Section 5 - Educating
for Reform Zionism**

A Zionist Youth Movement for Reform Judaism¹

The time has come for the development of a Zionist youth movement within Reform Judaism. Such a development would relate to both the needs of Reform Judaism and of its youth constituency.

Reform Judaism today affirms the unity of the Jewish people and is vitally concerned with its continued creative survival wherever it may be. The tradition of social action developed within Reform Judaism during the Sixties is now seeking meaningful expression and engagement within the life of the Jewish people. As a result, a Zionist consensus has emerged within Reform over the past decade — a consensus which perceives the Jewish State as a central force in the life of the people and Reform Judaism's growing involvement with Israel as a reflection of the creative potential inherent within Liberal Judaism. Reform Judaism is transcending its immediate organizational concerns and its preoccupation with religious forms. It is emerging as a movement committed to a certain vision of Jewish life. It is seeking the leadership of those who will take upon themselves the vocation of realizing such a vision in their own lives.

The Need: Educating Towards Reform Jewish Community

But the continued creative survival of Judaism and the realization of visions of Jewish life are dependent on *communities* of committed individuals — Judaism ultimately is a way of life that must be expressed in community. It was Martin Buber who pursued the problematics of the breakdown of community, and in particular, Jewish community, as a result of the advent of the Modern Age. The ramifications are many — absence of community means absence of dialogue between individuals, and it means the alienation of the individual from the group. In Buber's eyes, only through organic community could the individual relate to God. This led Buber to the position that without authentic Jewish community, there can be no authentic Jewish experience.

How do we create an environment of Jewish community within which we can educate our children and youth? Let no one think that this is not a real problem

1. 1977, unpublished. Appeared (mimeo) in Newsletter to North American youth considering Aliyah ("going up" to settle in Israel).

even in Israel. But it is a much greater problem in the Diaspora. In the past, an effective relationship to and identification with Judaism were achieved through an organic Jewish community. The effective relationship ensured effective cognition, socialization and acculturation. Such an organic Jewish community is no more.

Reform Judaism, child of the Emancipation from that organic Jewish community and heir to the Western liberal philosophical tradition geared to individual achievement and orientation, rather than group and community consciousness, is not confronting this question. In our society, adolescence is the age where such community consciousness must be developed.

Adolescence and the Peer Community

Adolescence is that period of biological, social and psychological maturation between childhood and adulthood, when identity and life commitment crystallize. In the middle class of American society to which the vast majority of American Jews (including Reform Jews) belong, this period extends from the post-Bar/Bat Mitzvah age through the college years.

The transition period from the defined dependence of childhood to socially recognized and sanctioned independence of adulthood is a stormy one in our society (by comparison to adolescence in other societies at other times). Western society has not defined the adolescents' role clearly — high school and college-age young people are in partial isolation — in a kind of "limbo." Hence the peer group, one's age-mates, becomes a key factor in socialization and acculturation. The great need for peer-group community at the age of youth stems from the necessity of having a framework within which the gropings for identity can express themselves. The peer group becomes the medium through which values and orientation can be transmitted and reinforced.

The openness and the relative isolation of adolescents from adult society in their search for meaning and identity, makes a small number of them vulnerable to such phenomena as Moon and Jews for Jesus. But this same quest for meaning and identity in community can express itself through channels which are ultimately integrative with the contemporary need of Reform Judaism for community. It was a classical function of Zionist youth movements to channel the energies of youth into activities and commitments that served the Jewish people. The time is ripe for a Reform Zionist youth movement to serve a similar function for Reform Judaism.

Implementing a Reform Zionist Youth Movement

Implementing the concept of a Reform Zionist youth movement assumes a Jewish education during childhood and the motivation to continue one's Jewish education, both formal and informal, during adolescence. A Reform Jewish Day School education would be optimal. For the youth constituency itself, it means the structuring of a progression of experiences in Liberal Jewish community which relate innovatively to the reality of contemporary Jewish existence.

A critical element within such a progression of experiential education is the contact that the adolescent has with committed Jewishly and Hebraically literate role-models, professional and lay, representing in their own lives current options for Reform Jewish commitment both in America and in Israel. Identifying with role-models is an on-going process in adolescence. In the case of youth movement, it is the *context* within which such a relationship takes place (in this case, the context of Reform Zionist community and commitment) that leads not only to identifying with a more adult individual, but also generates commitment to the community and group concerns.

Reform Zionist Youth Movement as such would probably manifest itself primarily at the post-High School level, at a time when more concrete demands for Jewish Commitment can be made. Clearly, a purposive Aliyah would be a central (not necessarily *the* central) option for Jewish commitment.

A primary responsibility of the UAHC Youth Division in providing the organizational infrastructure for the possible growth of a Reform Zionist movement is the maintenance and further development of a progression of properly structured and programmed experiential situations in innovative Jewish community settings both in Israel and America, so that various options in Jewish commitment can be weighed by the young individual. This is both the minimum that the UAHC *organizational structure* must provide for the youth constituency and, in a sense, it is also the maximum that it should do. It is axiomatic that when one wishes to give *organizational support* to generate a *movement process* one cannot predict in advance how or what will be generated. Qualitatively, however, we have a right to hope that as in the Zionist youth movements of the past, the works of a Reform Zionist youth movement will reflect its members' personal commitment to contribute in their own lives both as individuals and in community to the continued creative survival of the Jewish people.

A Progression of Experiential Education

The main steps in a progression of experiential community which could constitute the matrix for a Reform Zionist Youth movement already exist:

1. The UAHC Camps in the pre-teen and early teenager period; they provide total community and are a series of introductory experiences and a major stimulus for NFTY youth group activity during the winter. At present to be even more effective, the camps must up-grade the level of Jewish commitment and literacy — in particular among the lay junior staff members.
2. The properly structured Israel experience with a Liberal Jewish orientation. In particular, long-term programs — six months and up — are critical in developing Hebraically and Judaically literate individuals. At present, the particular component of Liberal Judaism must be integrated more thoroughly into some of the Israel programs. The Israel experience is also decisive in imprinting Jewish identity and concretizing the concept of Jewish Peoplehood. Suitable graduates of long-term programs are natural role-models for younger age groups in the Temples and the UAHC Camps.
3. College-age Reform communities (“Batim”) — these are a new development in those centers where there are numbers of committed Reform Jewish students. The basic requirements for participating in such a cooperative living arrangement are more than a mutually agreed level of personal observance. There must be a willingness on the part of the individuals and of the “Bayit” (house) *as a community* to take upon themselves the responsibility for Liberal Jewish “outreach” — whether on campus or within the rest of the community. Clearly, such college “chavurot” have implications for chavura structure in the congregations.

If a significant percentage of our youth will utilize such a progression of experiential education in Liberal Jewish community, then Reform Judaism will succeed in developing a committed fellowship, a “core community” and element of self-generating “movement” within Reform Judaism on a national and international level. Such a “core community” would constitute the future lay and professional leadership of a Reform Judaism capable of a relevant and meaningful response to the challenge of our times.