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REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Section 7 - The
Reform Kibbutzim

Pioneering Zionism and Reform Judaism: New Ideological Horizons¹

This year the first kibbutz of the Reform movement (which in Israel is called the Movement for Progressive Judaism) was established. The Telem and Nir settlement groups founded Kibbutz Yahel, some 65 kilometers north of Eilat.

A new pioneering movement would seem to be emerging among Reform Jewry. This article discusses these ideological changes in one of the main Jewish streams in the largest Jewish community in the world.

We are currently witnessing a revolutionary transformation in the Reform movement's attitude to Zionism. An apparently surprising combination is emerging of two antagonistic movements, both of which developed in response to the problems of post-emancipation Judaism. We must understand the historical background to this antagonism, which is now reaching its end.

The understandable emotional rejection of some of the characteristics of Reform Judaism by the Zionist movement prevented a neutral historical examination. Our approach to the history of the Reform movement is highly reminiscent of the "treatment" meted out in earlier generations to the messianic movements (such as that of Shabbtai Zvi) at the hands of the founders of modern Jewish studies (many of whom, interestingly enough, were Reform Jews!).

After the Emancipation brought down the walls of the Jewish ghetto in the West, the communal and social frameworks that had provided the authority for the traditional Halachic approach of Rabbinical Judaism largely disintegrated. In terms of Western history, this was an essential side effect of the elimination of medieval organic and community-based society. Under the influence of the Enlightenment and Liberalism, the European societies lost the traditional patterns based on mutual responsibility that followed from the "natural" affiliation to the community.²

1. Shdemot, *A Platform for the Kibbutz Movement*, Issue 62, Winter 1977 (translated from Hebrew).

2. See Stanley Meron, *Society and the Individual*, Ihud Hakibbutzim VehaKvutzot, 1966. Also in Michael Langer, ed., *Reform Zionist Perspective*, UAHF Youth Division, New York, 1977, p. 38.

There emerged the nation state, in which “contractual” relations exist both among the citizens and between citizens and state. The state demanded that the Jews abandon their communal autonomy and reduce their Judaism to a purely religious affiliation (analogous to the Protestant faith) and integrate as individuals in the new nations.

The Emergence of Reform

The Reform movement arose in response to this situation, and attempted to prevent the mass exodus from Judaism, particularly in Germany. The response of this movement was as follows:

- a) We accept as a given that emancipation and the revolution have brought a new age in human history. Intermediate communal frameworks separating citizens from the authority of the new state are no longer viable. Judaism must adapt to this situation. The Jews must be “citizens of the Mosaic persuasion,” loyal to the state. Accordingly, we clearly negate the concept of a distinct Jewish people with an affinity to its historical homeland. The Reform thinker Geiger even stated that a scientific and historical perspective shows that Judaism developed and changed greatly from Mt. Sinai onward. There was a period when there was a need for an autonomous people in order to maintain God’s Torah. Now Judaism can forego the material world and function as a purely spiritual element: the carrier of the moral values that underlie Western society as a whole. Judaism carries the universalistic mission to be dispersed among the nations, serving as an example and thus giving new meaning to the expression “to be a light unto the nations.”
- b) As enlightened moderns, the position of the exponents of Reform Judaism toward the Halacha was that the Torah was as much (if not more) Moses’ Law rather than God’s Law. In other words, the Written Law and Oral Law were from the outset the joint composition of humans and God. This cooperation must be expressed in new interpretations and even new laws in each generation, according to changing circumstances and as human wisdom develops. There were (and still are) differing views within the Reform movement as to the nature of the cooperation between humans and God, and the nature of the relationship between God and Israel.

In conclusion, Reform Judaism negated the national and communal basis of Judaism as anachronistic in modern times, while affirming the value-based

dimension of Judaism. In practice, Reform also affirmed the Halacha as the practical expression of Jewish values, while advocating an ongoing process of Tikkun (Reform) and the right to enact new legislation. The leaders of the movement in the nineteenth century even attempted to formulate new Halachic principles.

Classic Reform *separated the national, group-based element of Judaism from the culture (religion) itself*. The movement negated the ethnic element of Judaism, while affirming the religious element provided that this undergo reforms according to the spirit of modern times.

There were two main weak points in this approach:

- 1) The Reform rabbis failed to appreciate that a binding Halacha was an impossibility in the absence of a communal framework providing the authority and infrastructure for this Halacha in everyday life.
- 2) The theory of Liberalism emphasized individual rights and liberty. This approach served as an “ideological passport” for Jewish religious freedom and the integration of the Jews as individuals in general society. In internal Jewish terms, however, the ideological ramification of this was that each person could do as he or she saw fit. The problem was not whether people chose to keep the commandments. The problem was that every Reform Jew, Reform rabbi or Reform community was authorized to develop Halacha. On the basis of the principles of religious freedom and individual rights, it was no longer possible to impose communal authority. It should be noted that to this day there is considerable tension within the Reform movement on the issue of acquiescence to central authority.

Political and Cultural Zionism

Zionism in its modern sense was established two generations later. Its emergence followed the discrediting of the basic political assumptions of Reform Judaism by the rising tide of European nationalism. In order to properly appreciate the ideological connection between Zionism and the Reform movement, we must examine their shared identity as an attempt to meet the challenge posed by the modern era to Judaism as a viable way of life. Such a comparison requires a distinction (however artificial) between the political stream of Zionism and its dimension of cultural renaissance.

Political Zionism was established in response to anti-Semitism, reflecting a feeling that in a world based on the nation state, the Jews would also require their own national framework in order to guarantee their physical existence. In such a

world — and it was here that the pessimistic prediction of political Zionism contradicted the optimistic Liberal vision of the Reform movement — there could no longer be a safe place for the Jews anywhere but in their own nation state. In postulating this position, political Zionism was of course established in order to solve the problem of the Jews, rather than the problem of Judaism. It should also be noted that within the Reform movement there was a minority that also saw the need for a Jewish state due to a political assessment that differed from that of the majority (Rabbis Gottheil and Magnes were among the first political Zionists in America at the time of Herzl).

In our opinion, the cultural Zionism of Achad Ha'am provides a better basis for appreciating Zionism as a response to the problem of Judaism. This stream argued that a national Jewish center was needed in order to guarantee the creative existence of the Jewish people *per se*. This argument was based on the assumption that Judaism is the cultural expression of the Jewish people, and that the people and its culture are inseparable. In contrast to political Zionism, this approach reflected the assumption that Diaspora Jewry would continue to exist, and that the function of the Jewish center would be to preserve the quality of this existence.

The practical issues faced by Zionism heightened the contrast between political and cultural Zionism. There were, however, always those who advocated a combination of both approaches (and they would later come to form the majority of the Zionist movement). The Reform and Conservative rabbis who joined the Zionist movement in America mainly emphasized their affinity with cultural Zionism.

The Ideology of the Chalutzim

In the Land of Israel itself, the starting point of the pioneering Zionist movement (the *chalutzim*) was for the most part a particular type of cultural Zionism. The pioneers advocated the revival of Hebrew language and culture. However, the pioneering Zionist movement was far more radical than the cultural Zionism of Achad Ha'am in its analysis of the condition of the Jewish people and of what was needed for its rehabilitation in modern times. The pioneering movement concluded that it was not enough to advocate a Jewish center in the Land of Israel; there was a need to evolve a communal way of life different from that that was gradually deteriorating in Eastern Europe. The social basis for the renaissance of the people in its land must be founded on social justice as embodied in the

philosophy of the Prophets and as expressed in modern times by the aspirations of Socialism.

The pioneering Zionists were also more extreme than Achad Ha'am in terms of their attitude toward religion and tradition. Achad Ha'am's secular approach underwent a "metamorphosis" in the pioneering Zionist movement, which came to identify Rabbinical Judaism with the conservative regime of the Jewish ghetto. The revulsion at the social values of the ghetto was due to the perceived alliance between the rabbis and the communal leaders of the East European *Shtetl*.¹ This led many pioneering Zionists to an almost total rejection of the Halachic religious tradition. It seemed that the new Socialist message, based on universalistic values, would provide the ideological content for the new Jewish culture. After all, Socialism itself had emerged under the inspiration of the values of social justice rooted in the writings of the Prophets. This anti-religious tone predominated in the pioneering movement, despite the reservations of such spiritual leaders as A.D. Gordon and Berl Katznelson.

The pioneering Zionist response to repairing the state of the people also had its weak points:

- 1) The pioneering Zionists ostensibly achieved their immediate goal, at least partially. However, their rejection of Jewish tradition and their total negation of the Diaspora raised serious questions of Jewish identification and the attitude toward Jewish culture among the next generation within the pioneering Zionist endeavor.
- 2) It now seems that Socialism functioned as an intellectual "crutch" enabling a certain section of Jewish youth in Eastern Europe and Russia to develop their thoughts and actions in the ideological context of that time. Presently the Socialist movement (both the democratic and totalitarian branches) is becoming increasingly sterile. Anarchistic Socialism, perhaps the most promising from our standpoint, has been almost completely eliminated. In the kibbutz movement, official adherence to Socialism as an ideological theory guiding our thoughts is now an anachronism (if not idol worship). The time has come to remove these ideological crutches.

Reform and Chalutzit: The Mirror Image

It should be noted that the classical manifestations of the pioneering Zionist movement (as of the Reform movement) generally distinguished between the national or group-based element of Judaism and the religious and cultural

1. Small Jewish town.

element. The pioneering movement broadly rejected religious-cultural tradition, but affirmed the affiliative and group-based element. However, in affirming the group-based and communal element the pioneering Zionist movement demanded extensive changes (reform) in the ecology and social structure of the new Jewish society in the Land of Israel.

Moreover, both movements preferred universalistic values to Jewish values. In Reform Judaism, the universalistic mission of the Jews among the nations replaces the particularistic basis of this mission. For its part, the pioneering Zionist movement replaced Halachic Judaism with one or other of the shades of Socialist ideology.

While these two movements differ profoundly in origin and outlook, each serves as the mirror image of the other. This contradiction contained the latent potential that a natural and creative reconciliation of both approaches might one day emerge. An examination of the courses taken by both movements shows that such a reconciliation could be possible when both movements once again adopted a full perspective of Judaism, no longer advocating separation between the people and the heritage of its generations. Why did it take three generations for the circumstances to emerge that could allow this logical combination of the ideas of Reform Judaism and pioneering Zionism?

The Evolution of Reform

In this context, a number of factors are usually postulated as influencing and eventually "softening" Reform Judaism:

- 1) The rise of Jews of Eastern European origin to key positions in the Reform movement, in place of the leadership that had its roots in the central European Jewish immigration to America in the mid-nineteenth century. The ethnic basis of Judaism was negated mainly by those who had been through the process of emancipation in Germany.
- 2) The influence of the philosophy of Mordechai Kaplan (founder of the Reconstructionist movement) among young Reform rabbis in the USA. Kaplan defined Judaism as a developing religious civilization, and saw the Jewish people as the bearer of this civilization. This idea is very similar to that expressed by Geiger seventy years earlier, but now the element of the people became of central importance.
- 3) The growth of Nazism in the land of Reform Judaism's birth and the absence of a place of refuge for those persecuted by Hitler led Reform

Jewry to accept as early as 1937 an official platform encouraging the development of a Jewish center in the Land of Israel.

- 4) Following the Holocaust and the struggle surrounding the establishment of Israel, no anti-Zionist element could gain anything more than marginal support (though these marginal groups, such as the American Council for Judaism, were Reform). On the other hand, Reform rabbis such as Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise were among the vanguard of those responsible for recruiting Jewish and general support for political Zionism in America.

Despite this, the Reform movement continued to adopt a relatively reserved approach to the Zionist movement until the mid-1960s. Leading Reform Zionists worked mainly through Zionist organizations, rather than through the institutions of their own movement.

The acceptance of Zionism as an integral part of Reform Judaism began no more than ten years ago. This process was characterized by a situation whereby a small and active minority moved forward, established facts on the basis that there was a "vacuum" and that "there is no decision against this," and then later received official approval. This is a well-known process in Zionist history.

The Reform Rabbinical Seminary (Hebrew Union College) opened a branch in Jerusalem. At first, the center concentrated on Biblical and archeological research, but it was later agreed that every rabbinical student would be required to spend one year in Jerusalem. The headquarters of the World Union of Progressive Judaism were moved to Jerusalem. The Reform movement's Youth Department began to organize annual summer programs in Israel with hundreds of young Reform participants. The influence of Israeli culture was felt in the summer camp experience in America. After two dialogues between Reform educators and rabbis and members of the kibbutz movement, the idea emerged of establishing a Reform kibbutz, ostensibly under the auspices of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, but actually as the initiative of a number of American rabbis in the movement's Youth Department. The author of this article was recruited as the first Shaliach to the Youth Department and the Israel Affairs Committee of the Reform movement in America, in order to develop Zionist educand assist in recruiting a *Garin*¹ to settle the Reform kibbutz.

In 5736 (1976) the World Union of Progressive Judaism joined the World Zionist Federation. After the United Nations passed an anti-Zionist resolution, Rabbi Schindler, President of the Reform movement in America, declared before the biennial conference of Reform congregations that, affirming the eternal

1. Settlement group.

covenant between the God of Israel, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel, “we are all Zionists.” Rabbi Schindler was surely referring to Zionism in its cultural sense. In May 1976, however, the Board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations passed a resolution accepting Aliyah as one of the options for personal Jewish self-realization. The resolution also advocated encouraging individuals and *Garinim* in the spirit of Progressive Judaism. The convention also discussed the role and position of Progressive Judaism in the emerging future of Judaism in Israel. There can be no doubt that the decision about Aliyah was influenced by the facts that were already being established “on the ground.”

The growing trend toward Zionism does not imply satisfaction with the State of Israel. It is obvious that the absence of legal and religious recognition of the status of Reform rabbis and institutions in Israel is the source of grave frustration. There are also Reform circles that severely criticize Israel’s internal and external policies.

However, the above description of the “Zionization” of the Reform movement relates to no more than some five percent of the one million members of Reform synagogues. The vast majority have too marginal an involvement in Jewish life for any influence to be possible.

What led a small and active minority to move toward practical Zionism as one of the expressions of Reform Judaism? I believe that a number of factors are involved:

- 1) By the early 1960s the existence of the State of Israel was already an accepted part of reality. However the universalistic and prophetic mission of classical Reform demanded that the practical expression of these ideas for enlightened Jews must be in America. The time was right for such an approach: the struggle for Black rights, the peace movement, and Kennedy’s New Frontier all attracted young Reform Jews. They had a wide range of possibilities for expressing their identity as Americans and as Jews. This also expressed a sense of responsibility to help achieve the goal of “America as a Second Zion.” On a positive note, it should be stressed that young Reform rabbis who participated in general American movements emphasized their Jewishness, in contrast to the accepted approach in the past.

However the years of enthusiasm were followed by an awakening to reality. Kennedy’s New Frontier and Johnson’s Great Society turned sour as the nightmares of Vietnam took over. The trend within the Black rights movement to reject the involvement of any outside bodies in its struggle

("If I am not for myself, who will be for me?") led to considerable discomfort.

- 2) Just as enthusiasm with social and political activism was waning, the Six Day War occurred. For many Jews, including young activists, this period was a watershed. They began to ask whether another Holocaust might occur while the Jews were busily engaged in universalistic missions such as the peace movements, the struggle for Black liberation, ecological issues, and so on. The equivocal position of the American Administration toward saving European Jewry in the Holocaust had only recently come to light. Accordingly, and without rejecting the traditional Reform mission to all peoples, a trend began to develop of intensifying the practical ties with Zion. This process was only partially conscious. The Yom Kippur War and the UN resolution against Zionism were to intensify this line of development.

Israel: The Search for Jewish Identity

The combination of the Reform religious expression and pioneering Zionist expression also required developments on the Israeli scene. After two generations of almost total devotion to political Zionism, the rehabilitation of cultural Zionism began against the backdrop of the fateful events that Israel had undergone.

The Eichmann trial, the excavations at Masada, the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, and the UN decisions condemning Zionism were all milestones in the renaissance of Jewish awareness and Jewish identity among the young generation in Israel. The search for new approaches also opened the door to religious alternatives to Orthodoxy. Moreover, Israel as a Jewish state now came to be a subject that preoccupied the kibbutz movement, as can be seen in almost every issue of *Shdemot*.¹ Following the increasing rejection by other nations of our right to exist as a people in our own land, we were pushed into finding strength in our own spiritual sources.

This process, in which we have been engaged since the early 1960s, prepared us as a movement to cooperate with the Reform movement.

In conclusion, a few guesses as to what may prove to be the ideological ramifications of the combination of Reform Judaism and social pioneering Zionism:

- 1) As Rabbi Shalom Lilker, a member of Kfar Hamaccabi, notes in his

1. The literary quarterly of the kibbutz movement.

doctoral thesis on Judaism in the kibbutz¹ (and see also Ben Chanan, "Marking Holidays in 'Godless' Kibbutzim," *Israel Horizons*, September 1975), a "secular" Halacha has already developed in the kibbutz movement and is implemented by a network of committees and institutions in each kibbutz, each movement and even on the inter-movement level. The authority of this Halacha derives from the communal framework. The scope of this "Halacha" includes relationships between individuals, and between the individual and the community. There is also a growing tendency to develop traditions regarding holidays. Combining Reform Judaism in the kibbutz framework raises the possibility of conscious Halachic development free of the shackles of the Orthodox Halacha and not limited by the processes of change sanctified by that stream (see Yedidia Cohen's article "Can There be Changes in the Halacha?" *Shdemot* 59 [1976]).

- 2) An increase in the Progressive Jewish stream's strength diversifies the religious and political options available. At present bodies such as Gush Emunim operate almost unchallenged from their foundation in Jewish tradition. I believe that a response to extremist Jewish nationalism is required that draws on Jewish tradition rather than on Socialist ideology.
- 3) In terms of political activities and the ramifications thereof for the Jewish people as a whole (as distinct from party political activity in the State of Israel), the question will arise regarding the position to be taken on issues of "religion." The entry of the Reform movement into the public Zionist arena may be the harbinger of a new element in Zionist ideological responses. This element will reflect a different approach to the Jewish perspective on everyday issues. The political parties with ideology based on class and economic interests borrowed from other nations will become devoid of meaning.

The liberation of the Zionist movement from the party political system of the State of Israel could serve as a healing agent for Zionism in ideological terms. In the new ideological map of Zionism, it is reasonable to assume that "kibbutz" Zionism and "Reform" Zionism will find a common language on many issues relating to the continued creative existence of the people.

(Gesher Haziv — New York)

1. Published as *Kibbutz Judaism: A New Tradition in the Making*, Herzl Press, New York, 1982.