

Towards

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More

Pluralistic

Israel

CONSERVATIVE/MASORTI

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Temple Beth El, Portland, Maine
Rosh HaShanah, Day 2, 5766
Wednesday, October 5, 2005

Over the past few days, I have been talking about what Pirke Avot calls *machloket l'shem shamayim*, a controversy that exists for heaven's sake. On Monday night, we spoke about the great Rabbis Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan who were study partners who constantly disagreed, and it was their disagreement about the implications of rabbinic law that literally kept them alive and kept the Holy teachings alive. Yesterday, I spoke of the disagreement between those who believe that having the settlements in Gaza is beneficial and, those who feel that the best road to peace is by disengaging themselves from that section of land. I focused on the heroism of the soldiers and police who, though placed in the middle of the *machloket* — the disagreement — helped to bring the conflict to a peaceful conclusion. Settler, soldier, or peacenik — all are Zionists, all support and love the State of Israel, yet they have come to different conclusions on how best to keep the State healthy — *machloket l'shem shamayim*. No doubt, it is because of the many who agree and disagree with the way Israel runs that the state is alive and vibrant.

Today, I want to speak of another *machloket l'shem shamayim*, in Israel: the wonderful, but uphill battle of the Conservative movement in a country where the unaffiliated Jews comprise 80% of the Jewish population and who joke that the synagogue they don't attend is Orthodox. When I lived in Jerusalem, and attended Midreshet Yerushalayim, a kind of yeshiva run by the Jewish Theological Seminary, I experienced plenty of discrimination. Some came externally, from

Israelis who were distrustful of anything non-orthodox, and some came internally, from my own movement, where women could not participate equally with the men. In some ways, religiously, it was a very painful year. I wanted desperately to participate in the davening, or to be called up for an aliyah, or even to speak with my Israeli friends about my studies, but women could not participate and my Israeli friends would think that associating with a Jewish organization that was not Orthodox was wrong. When I stood at the Kotel, the Western Wall, it was quiet on my side — on the women's side. But over on the other side, I could see and hear the different minyanim singing and dancing.

At the beginning of my stay in Israel, I only wanted to experience the exotic kind of minyanim — the Kurdish community, the Italian community, any small, Sephardic shul would do. But when the novelty wore off, and I looked for a place where I really fit, there were very few prospects. I wanted to feel that this was my spiritual homeland, but at that time, it was difficult. The good news is that there have been some major changes since I left, but they are largely not supported by the State, and they need support if they are going to exist.

As Diaspora Jews, it is a challenge to know just how we might connect with Israel. In many ways, it is a foreign country to us. The language is different, the culture is unique — to say the least — the atmosphere is charged in a way that we don't experience here, and the landscape is exotic. In so many other ways, however, it ties us to our roots, connects us to our Holy texts and to our Judaism in ways we cannot anticipate. It holds the promise of

some Jewish unity in a secular age, since both religious and secular Jews have a home there. Today, I would like to challenge us to think about how we, as Liberal, Diaspora Jews, can be part of the everyday life of Israel and be true to our own beliefs.

I know that many of us are generous with our funds when asked to give to Israel. Do we know where that money is going? Is the organization supportive of your belief system? What can we do to create a homeland that will welcome us, too? How can we make changes respectfully, and meaningfully? This is our *machloket l'shem shamayim*, our challenge to the State of Israel: to become more pluralistic, and to open itself to different approaches to and different observances of Judaism, just as we, in the Diaspora have experienced.

Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, identifies the centrality of modern Israel as the top of his seven core values for Conservative Jews. He has always spoken of Israel with great passion, and speaks the words of Ezekiel, it is "the most desirable of all lands" (20:6). And yet, he is quite outspoken against its singular approach to Judaism. In 1996, in the wake of Yitzchak Rabin's assassination, he wrote, "...if Israel is ever to moderate the religious excesses to which life in the land of our ancestors is prone, it must find the political will to introduce an equitable form of religious pluralism." Israel, small as it is, is a land of extremes in almost every way. Ephraim Kishon, an Israeli writer, describes its uniqueness in humor: "It's the only country where the unemployed strike," "It's the only country where the mother of a soldier has the cell number of

his officer and he'd better beware," "It's the only country in which between the happiest day of the year and the saddest one, you have exactly 60 seconds."

Schorsh, however, calls our attention to the religious extremism; the kind of extremism from which Yigal Amir, Rabin's assassin, could burst forth and proclaim that he was saving Israel by killing the one who was killing Israel. Perhaps if there was more room for Jewish diversity, there would be fewer 'Amirs,' or, at least the extremists would have some competition.

As it stands now, the Chief Rabbis and the Rabbanut oversee all national religious issues. No Liberal, that is non-Orthodox, rabbi can be a member. Civil marriages and divorces do not exist. A friend of mine who lives in Israel is preparing to be married and would like me to participate as a rabbi. Yet I cannot perform the wedding, unless he first has an Orthodox wedding. And even if I, or any other Conservative rabbi participates in the ceremony, it has no legal or religious status. Even though the High Court ruled that those who have undergone even non-Orthodox conversion outside of Israel are entitled to make Aliyah under the Law of Return, the rabbanut still refuses to accept those conversions. So Jews by Choice from other movements cannot be married in Israel since they are not considered Jewish by the Rabbanut. Further, the Rabbanut controls most of the *mikvaot*, so Reform and Conservative converts, brides or anyone else needing a *mikveh* must find an alternative. Although there is now a place at the Kotel, the Western Wall, where both egalitarian and women's minyanim can meet safely without risk of harrassment, a group of women cannot go to the main

Women's section of the Kotel and read from the Torah, nor could there ever be a mixed minyan.

Although there are Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist congregations, kibbutzim and schools, they do not receive anything close to the kinds of subsidies the Orthodox rabbis, yeshivot and kibbutzim receive from the government. A number of our Masorti rabbis are forced to leave Israel each year because they simply cannot make a living by relying solely on donations. Recently a Reform Rabbi, Miri Gold, has sued the government to receive a state salary as a municipal rabbi, just as her Orthodox colleagues receive. Her suit has not yet been heard, but it presents a strong challenge to the system.

This is not to say that there is an absence of non-orthodox alternatives in Israel. In fact, the movements have slowly been making inroads every year. The Conservative Movement in Israel has been around for almost 30 years. Founded by a group of *olim*, people who made aliyah, in 1979, they chose the name, Masorti, 'traditional.' Like the Conservative movement here in the United States, the Masorti movement is described as a combination of "devotion to Jewish tradition and Jewish law (*halacha*) with an open and positive approach to the modern world, democracy and Zionism." In a society which tends to view everything in extremes, Masorti offers Israelis — olim and sabras alike — a middle ground: tradition and an adherence to halacha, egalitarian practice where men and women share the same opportunities and a pluralistic approach to religious practice. Among their principles is the belief that, "The Torah and halacha are the her-

itage of all Jews, regardless of gender," that "the state of Israel must be a model society and a spiritual and cultural Jewish center, illuminating the whole world," and that "Military/national service — defense of the state of Israel and the contribution to society — are obligations that fall on every citizen, men and women alike." Today, the Masorti Movement in Israel comprises some 50 kehillot and havurot, the Religious Affairs Bureau, a kibbutz, a moshav, the NOAM youth movement, IDF Garinim (Masorti groups in the army), the Marom students and young adults organization, programs for children with special needs, regional and local educational learning centers for adults as well as pre-school programs.

One of the most exciting and successful programs has been the TALM schools — Tigbur Limudei Yahadut, enhanced Jewish studies, roughly based on our Schechter system. Founded in 1975 in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem, a small group of American Olim created a school that was pluralistic, religiously nurturing, Zionist, and offered a great secular education. Before TALM, the schools were either secular or religious; this was a new alternative. Somehow, they were able to get it funded by the ministry of Education and today there are over 50 TALM schools, with programs that effect over 22,000 students, their families and their teachers. There is also a TALM curriculum that secular schools have taken on. Here is a place where Liberal Judaism can have a profound effect on Israeli society.

I recently read an account of an observant — *Da'ati* — teacher who came to TALM to teach yet was concerned that as a member of an Orthodox community, she would be showing acceptance to a 'rene-

gade' kind of Judaism. While she continued to remain active in her Orthodox community, she slowly allowed herself to participate in school activities, including Shabbat prayer. This experience, she said, opened her in ways she never would have expected: "TALI taught me," she said, "to look at things from all points of view, not just from one... I think this made me into a more open person."

On the other end of the spectrum, was a teacher who considered herself to be *hiloni* – secular. Working in the TALI school moved her to examine her own identity:

"Until I came to TALI there were either religious or secular, and I was secular... After I came to TALI I saw that we can be Jews in different ways. There are additional movements and one doesn't have to be at the extreme of secularism or religiosity. I underwent a revolution. It became very difficult to define what I am. Am I secular? Am I religious? Am I traditional? I had a lot of difficulties with these questions since I came to TALI."

She sums up, "I'm a traditional secularist."

And, like many of us who have undergone a spiritual transformation, who now find meaning in what was once rote, or drudgery, she says:

"The change is that when we make kid-dush at my parents', I'm part of it. I'm also the initiator in singing *zemirot*, and also encourage everyone to join me, which was not true earlier [before TALI]. Before it was a burden, another kiddush."

It seems strange for an American model to provide the means for an Israeli to enter into the spiritual world, but it seems to be working. And if the teachers respond this way, imagine the experiences of the children and their families. Clearly, the TALI system is a way that Liberal Judaism has made

great strides into society. They and we need to do more. So what can we do?

One of our connections to Masorti is through Mercaz, the umbrella Zionist organization of the Conservative movement. Mercaz USA is our voice in the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel. The WZO and the Jewish Agency are the "unofficial parliament of the Jewish people" allocating over \$300 million to Jewish organizations promoting aliyah and Jewish life in Israel. Every four years there is an election in the World Zionist Organization's Congress, and this is the year. Their funds are distributed in proportion to the number of votes each organization receives. And so, one way to have a direct impact is to vote, through Mercaz, in the upcoming elections. It costs us only \$7.00 and some time on the computer, but to Masorti Jews in Israel, it is worth much more. The more we can support Jewish alternatives in Israel, the stronger the State will be. Indeed, this is a *machloket l'shem shamayim*, a dispute for the sake of heaven, where you and I can have a positive impact. It won't necessarily change the government overnight, but it will bring needed funds to important programs.

Finally, I want to encourage you to stay informed of where your donated funds to Israel actually go and how they are distributed, just as you should do for your donations here. There are many, many worthy causes. I urge you to explore Masorti and Mercaz, and to speak to those who have been involved in the movement and in the TALI schools. And when you visit, include the Conservative Yeshiva, Kibbutz Hanaton or Ketura or one of the Masorti congregations on your itinerary. I think you will be surprised and encouraged.

Shanah Tovah