ZIONIST INSTITUTIONS MUST ADAPT TO REALITY

Eric H. Yoffie

s we approach the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, the primary organizational challenge facing the Zionist movement is this: How do we revive our roots in the community?

I am from North America. Prior to 1948, Zionism was a minority movement in North America, but it was also a mass movement with deep roots in the community. Rallies on behalf of the Jewish state brought out tens of thousands of people, and at dinners and banquets those sitting at the dais were intellectuals, politicians, and rabbis, all of whom were vitally concerned and deeply involved in the implications of Jewish nationalism. Since the establishment of the state, however, the focus has shifted. Leadership on community matters and on Israel affairs has gradually passed to the Federations and the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Today the fundraising leaders in many cases are firmly in place as the primary spokespersons for Israeli concerns.

The first thing that must be said is that the fund raisers have been enormously successful, and we owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for their achievements. They have provided the financial resources and community backing which have been the mainstay of Israel's support. Furthermore, they are an impressive group of men and women. Successful, wealthy, and intelligent, they stand proudly as Jews and give freely of their time and money to the betterment of Israel and the Jewish people. However, we have also paid a heavy price for their success. The Federations and UJA are elite organizations by definition. While the UJA is no longer the closed aristocracy of money that it once was, by its own admission it can be neither truly democratic nor even a real meritocracy. The search for talent to fill responsible positions goes only so far down the list of donors, and almost always ends before reaching the capable Jew who can afford only a \$100 gift.

Rabbi Yoffie is president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The above is an excerpt from his address to the World Zionist Congress in December, 1997.

The point I am making is a simple and obvious one: to the extent that Jews identify Israel as being the domain of the UJA and Federations, then Israel runs the risk of forfeiting its roots in the community. To the extent that Israel is seen as being the prerogative of a small, wealthy elite, rather than the most precious possession of the entire Jewish people, then its future well-being is endangered. Israel exists for all Jews; we must insist, therefore, on broad-based involvement in the affairs of the Jewish state.

And how is this to be accomplished? The answer is clear enough. It is the synagogue that is the grassroots institution of Jewish life. It is in the synagogue that popular Jewish activity takes place. In North America, the majority of Jews are to be found in Reform and Conservative synagogues; in the rest of the Diaspora, in Orthodox synagogues. But make no mistake: it is the synagogues that have the "troops" of the Jewish community, and the success of the Zionist movement depends on its ability to integrate the synagogue movements into its ranks.

Some might suggest that this has been done, but in fact it has not. For twenty years, the Zionist movement has drawn in the non-Orthodox synagogue movements with one hand, and pushed them away with the other. The veteran Zionist parties, all too often seeing the WZO as their monopoly and anxious to preserve their seats and their budgets, have been ambivalent at best about the synagogue world. I also suspect that they have been uncomfortable with what the synagogues represent — a commitment to Zionism rooted in Torah and mitzvah and a religious view of the world. (It should be noted, in passing, that the fundraising world, in North America, at least, has made precisely the same mistake; it too, has often seen the synagogue movements more as competitors than as allies, and has pushed them to the margins.) But for the Zionist movement, all of this is history. Democratic elections, for all their flaws, can bring about decisive change, and they have done so. Those elections have made the Zionist arms of the Reform and Conservative streams major partners in the Zionist enterprise, and we all now have a stake — a very large stake in making that partnership work. This is not simply an organizational issue, but also an ideological one, because I suggest that the primary mission of the Zionist movement is one that can only be carried out in closest cooperation with the synagogue world.

The Jews Are a Religious People

What is it that ails Zionism at this moment? A weakening sense of Jewish peoplehood throughout the world. And if we are to address this problem, we need to recognize that the concept of the Jews being one people is primarily a religious idea. It is rooted in covenant, in Torah, and in religious commitment

and faith. If we are to talk of the totality and interdependence of the Jewish people, we will have to revive the religious ideas on which these notions are based.

Why is it that young Jews are apathetic to Israel? It has nothing to do with the politics of the left or the right, with the policies of Labor or Likud. It has to do with the fact that they are less Jewish. Their estrangement comes not from politics, but from cultural and religious estrangement. And Zionism will only thrive if it sees its primary task as educating these young Jews and deepening, in a profound and serious way, their Jewish commitments.

And again, this can only be done in closest cooperation with the synagogue world, because that is where the masses of our people are to be found.

I understand the resistance to these ideas among some of my Zionist colleagues. They see them as contrary to traditional Zionist work, as they understand it. "Our job is hagshama," they say. "Don't bother us with religious questions. We will bring young people to Israel, and being here will solve their Jewish problem."

But such a view is short-sighted and wrong. There was never a single Zionism; there have always been many Zionisms. For the last 50 years, we have appropriately focused on the political Zionism of Herzl. We have mobilized the resources of all parts of the Jewish people for mass *aliyah*; we have promoted the economy, settlement, and Israel's security. And we have done wonderful work in the area of relief, rescue, and rehabilitation. But these tasks, while crucial, can no longer completely dominate our agenda. Israel is today an economic, political and military power; she is moving toward peace with her neighbors, and is soon to be the largest, richest and strongest center of Jewish life in the world. Political Zionism has triumphed beyond its wildest dreams.

What does this mean? It means that we must now turn our attention to those tasks set forth by the other streams of Zionism — by spiritual Zionism and religious Zionism, which are in every sense a legitimate part of the Zionist tradition. This means that we need to be concerned about restoring world Jewry, with strengthening the Jewish people no matter where they may live, and in strenthening Jewishness in all of its forms. It means that we must affirm that the State of Israel exists not to replace Judaism but to enrich Judaism, not only for its citizens but for the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora.

Will this diminish Israel's role? Heaven forbid. We know the importance of Israel as a spiritual center, and we know too that without Israel, Jewish life cannot be sustained. But we also know that Zionism must commit itself to Judaism — the faith as well as the civilization — and that a Zionism that separates itself from the spiritual welfare of the Jewish people will not survive.

This is not inconsistent in any way with Zionist history. Among the early Zionists, there were angry debates about religion and education. But everyone

agreed, including those in revolt against the Jewish past, that its texts needed to be known, its memories had to be cultivated, and the Hebrew language mastered. Zionists were, at one time, the most active and outspoken proponents of Jewish education in the world. As long as Jews are not living together in the Land of Israel, our unity and peoplehood will be sustained only through Jewish culture, religious tradition and shared values. Therefore, Zionists must increase their educational efforts wherever Jews are found.

We Must Learn Hebrew

I will not attempt here to outline a comprehensive educational plan for the Zionist movement, but I would like to offer two observations. First, we need to recognize how modest our efforts have been in recent years, and how limited our success; the Joint Education Authority has not changed this situation in any appreciable way. And second, we need to recognize our most significant and dramatic default: the failure in the Diaspora to learn the Hebrew language and to teach it to our children. I do not have to remind the delegates of this congress that from the time of Abraham until today there has existed a special connection between the Jewish people and its language. It is a disgrace that Hebrew has not become a second language for Jews throughout the Diaspora. Hebrew is spoken by far more Israeli Arabs than by Diaspora Jews.

The state of Hebrew in North America is exceedingly weak, and my movement is as guilty as any other for this situation. Hebrew as a living language is disappearing, even from day schools, and in supplementary schools it barely exists at all. The Hebrew language is not seen by community leaders — neither Federation spokesmen nor Zionist representatives — as an important instrument for advancing Zionism and for assuring Jewish continuity. Why is it that Jews in the Soviet Union were able to learn Hebrew at a time when teaching the language was illegal, while Jews in the democratic countries of the West do not study Hebrew at all? Without Hebrew there is no serious Jewish education. Perhaps we need to initiated an international campaign for the teaching of the Hebrew language, jointly sponsored by the religious movements and the World Zionist Organization.

Will the religious movements represented in the WZO find it possible to cooperate, at least on some level, in the program that I have outlined to strengthen Torah and Jewish learning throughout the Jewish world, and in this way to assure our Jewish future? I honestly do not know.

I need not tell you that divisions in the Jewish world have multiplied, rancor has replaced civility, and we all seem somehow more intractable than ever before. True, the religious movements are all committed to Torah and to Zion,

but we read Torah very differently, and the non-Orthodox movements are deeply pained by the systematic exclusion which they experience in Israel, and the vituperative attacks to which they are regularly subjected. Obviously, no matter how deeply felt is our shared sense of peoplehood and common destiny, we cannot remain silent in the face of this injustice.

Nevertheless, and without contradiction, I would like to believe that the Zionist movement can be in the future what it has been in the past — a sustained defiance of history, the one place in the Jewish world where all Jews, and especially all religious Jews, can engage in regular conversation and cooperation on the great educational and spiritual tasks of our day.□