



The Pluralism of Pluralism in Israel: A Brief History

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Israel has enshrined an anomaly of Jewish History. The establishment of a state rabbinate which is Orthodox, on the one hand and a political system that gives disproportionate power to the Ultra-Orthodox minorities combine to make matters of pluralism and religious Jewish diversity a political and legal issue. The Jewish Diaspora is diverse and pluralistic by definition in matters of religious choice because the government is uninvolved. The North American reality is such that the denominations live and let live, while in Israel the struggle for Jewish identity and meaning happens despite the state's involvement. And yet, Israel embodies "peoplehood", for there is no where else where one may not find the different religious denominations but the rich selection of Jews from every possible ethnic background lives and breathes here. This piece will look at pluralism from the point of view of religious pluralism.

Increasingly pluralism serves as the latest buzzword for Jewish identity. Yet it can also serve as a not so secret code for inclusivity. Does the word "pluralism" have more meanings than one and therefore a safe place for "agreement" because everyone understands it from their perspective? Or has it been an effective but divisive tool to advance certain interests? I ask these questions because the word itself is shifting in meaning. These changes in meanings reflect a brief and interesting history of religious pluralism in Israel.

In the late 1980's pluralism in Israel meant one thing: creating a more level playing field for non-Orthodox Judaism particularly the fledgling Reform and Conservative Movements here. When the Israel Religions Action Center of the Israeli Reform Movement was founded in 1986 to promote Liberal Judaism in Israel, its Hebrew name was : Hamercaz le'Pluralizim" (Center for Pluralism). The Israelis did not have a clue to what that word meant and they got calls concerning medical ailments and public safety matters. Over the years, the Center became known for its path breaking advocacy work in matters of Religious freedom and choice for the non-Orthodox. Issues of marriage, burial, and conversion were brought to public discourse through the Supreme Court cases arguing

for alternatives, choice and recognition of Reform and Conservative options. The 90's witnessed important decisions regarding the status of the non-Orthodox streams; and "pluralism" became identified with this fight. In fact, for some Israelis "pluralism" was associated with divisiveness. Why were the local denominations insisting on creating conflict, with our Diaspora counterparts agitating as well? The conversion issue, in particular, has repeatedly provoked the fury of North American Jewry, drawing lines in the sand regarding "who is a Jew" and "who is the rabbi who determines Jewishness?"

Since the founding of the state, Israeli Jews lived in the binary universe of secular/Orthodox, you were one or the other. All matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, conversion, burial) were handled by the Orthodox Rabbinate. The non-Orthodox movements have taken on the Orthodox monopoly paving the way for secular and even modern Orthodox to reconsider the status quo.

Parallel to these legal and political battles, the flowering of secular institutions taking back classical text study and venturing into ritual and prayer began to bud. Here, "pluralism" tended to focus on renewed dialogue between Orthodox and secular. "Pluralism" provided the much needed "cover" to allow for serious exploration of secular Israelis to grapple with traditional sources and Orthodox Israelis to wrestle with secular culture. A myriad of "pluralistic" institutions and organizations were founded. In some of these frameworks, Reform and Conservative were deliberately excluded. For some, these denominations continued to represent foreign imports and therefore irrelevant to Israel; for others, Reform and Conservative were too marginal to Israeli society to have a place at the table. Whether included or not, both movements have become increasingly "sabrah" and their slow and steady growth have made them significant points along the map of Israeli Jewish Renaissance. In other words, pluralism has become a force for Jewish renewal and creativity; which should hold great promise for fueling a sense of peoplehood. When we all share Jewish sources and create Jewish culture, the Israel/Diaspora divide is challenged.

The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable shift and breakdown of the dichotomy of secular/Orthodox. There is a great deal of fluidity (another buzzword) and young people, in particular, are exploring different ways to express their Jewishness and Israeli-ness. Now, denominationally based institutions are attracting secular and Orthodox students. At Hebrew Union College, the Reform Seminary and academy in Jerusalem, we are opening "pluralistic" programs. While the Rabbinic program is undergirded with Reform ideology, we are training religious leaders who may or may not serve Reform Institutions. The majority will of course, but we are keenly aware that there are Israelis who do not seek denominational affiliation. More importantly,

programs training educators and spiritual caretakers in a variety of settings are bringing Israelis of all walks of life together.

Now "pluralism" is offering another meaning. With an open tent approach, everyone needs to be around the table without being judged or feeling defensive. To paraphrase Abraham Joshua Heschel (who paraphrased John Donne), "no denomination is an island", we all need each other. Heschel had inaugurated the era of interfaith dialogue by re-writing Donne's statement, "No man is an Island" with "No religion is an Island." Today, pluralism promotes just this, no "Jew" is an island, we desperately need each other, each stream has strengths to bring to the table and we can learn from each other. So pluralism has the potential to strengthen peoplehood. That is the challenge facing us. With nation building behind us, with most Diaspora communities living in safety and affluence, it is time to create this meeting points of safe and fruitful cross-fertilization and dialogue.

The Israeli Religious Action Center ("Mercaz Le'Pluralism") has recently changed its Hebrew name. It is now the "Center for Religion and State." Callers can easily identify its purpose and "Pluralism" has been restored to its proper place away from politics to be used as an educational and cultural tool for embracing diversity while keeping us whole.

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