Seeding the Field of Jewish Renewal in Israel

Rabbi Naamah ***Kelman***

The Jewish renewal field is as old as Judaism itself! Our fundamental belief that the world is renewed every day is testimony to this idea and ideal. Every morning, we pray, "Ha'mechadesh et ha'olam b'tuvo tamid ma'aseh Breishit—God renews creation every morning"; this is not just a hope but a "charge." And it has been our beacon generation after generation. In fact the greatest act of Jewish renewal in the 20th century has been the establishment of the State of Israel with the revival of modern Hebrew and of Hebrew culture. In 1948 this volcanic act in Jewish history returned the Jewish people to full sovereignty with its myriad challenges of security, welfare, and education. UJA-Federation of New York and the national federation system were active and key supporters for those "building block," difficult first decades of statehood when issues like the absorption of immigrants, the establishment of infrastructure, education, and welfare were so critical, not to mention the constant threat of war and later terror.

Yet, the essence of Zionism has always embraced a cultural revival along with nation-building. The fact that the founding *chalutzim* (pioneers) threw out their ghetto Jewish practices did not mean that they and their children were not seeking an alternative way of being Jewish in the modern state.

In the 1950s and certainly after the 1967 Six-Day War, the first wave of non-Orthodox American Jews arrived in Israel. In 1963, the Hebrew Union College built its first fortress-like buildings bordering what was then Jordanian no-man's land. The first Reform (in Israel, known as Progressive) and Conservative (Masorati) congregations were formed. In 1976 the first TALI (acronym for Jewish enrichment) school was founded by Masorati rabbis; it evolved into what is now a mainstream nondenominational school system for the non-Orthodox with 82 schools. The 1980s and 1990s brought a great growth in the synagogue center model in the major cities of Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem and their surrounding communities, complete with youth movement activities, educational programs, and preschools. The first Israeli Progressive rabbi was ordained in 1982; others followed, as did Israeli Masorati rabbis.

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In 1986, the Israeli Religious Action Center (IRAC) of the Progressive movement was founded and with it the first concerted efforts to challenge Orthodox political hegemony. Issues of conversion, marriage, the role of religious councils, and alternative burials were brought to Israel's highest court. IRAC put issues of religion and state on the national agenda and introduced the word "pluralism" to the conversation, which came to engage the legal system and the media.

These first building blocks set these liberal movements on a slow, forward trajectory, with no help from the Israeli ministries or local governments. The liberal movements remained marginal and marginalized.

Rabbi Naamah Kelman *is the dean of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem.*

The situation began to change at some point in the late 1980s when North American federation monies were first directed toward supporting the liberal movements. Professional and lay American Jewish activists placed pressure on the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) to fund "streams" of Jewish affiliation, aka the Progressive and Masorati denominations in Israel. This pressure was a direct result of the battles surrounding the issue of "Who is a Jew," which galvanized the leadership of North American Jewry. JAFI funding helped further secure the Progressive and Masorati movements in Israel.

Yet, these developments, as important as they are, have taken a back seat to the more mainstream soul searching of secular Israelis. In 1967, as a result of the Six-Day War, kibbutz intellectuals and second- and third-generation Israelis began to ask questions about Jewish and Israeli identity. Although the educational system had always confronted the challenge of shaping a new Jewish Israeli, in the early 1990s the Ministry of Education established the Shenhar Commission to wrestle with these questions. Professor Aliza Shenhar oversaw the ambitious attempt by the Rabin government to reshape Jewish education in Israel. Its findings that Israeli Jews in the secular school system were at best alienated and at worst ignorant of basic Jewish knowledge and values gave birth to a sweeping and profound set of recommendations for the secular Israeli school system.

In 1996, an ideological earthquake hit with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin and the subsequent election of a right-wing government in which there was increased participation by ultra-Orthodox political parties. There was a real fear that extremism would tear the fragile Israeli society apart. The Shenhar Commission recommendations were shelved, but not the questions and dilemmas it raised. Its findings opened the doors for myriad Jewish initiatives, including those of the liberal denominations, to be implemented in schools.

In the late 1990s, there was a sense that Israel's security and geopolitical plight might be on the way to being assured, and there was a greater feeling of economic stability. It was thought to be the time to direct energies and resources to reexamine our Jewish soul, as the body seemed to be not just surviving but thriving. Coupled with this was the emergence of a third generation of secular Israelis, particularly young leadership from the Kibbutz and Moshav movements, who had a wide exposure to global trends in spirituality and increased contact with American social and religious trends. Many of these secular Israelis began to engage in Jewish text study in dialogue with the Modern Orthodox and the liberal Jewish streams. Yet, the secular/Orthodox dichotomy forged in pre-state Israel and then defined post-1948 by separate school systems and an official Orthodox rabbinate has been a hard barrier for non-Orthodox Judaism to overcome. The support of North American Jewry has been crucial for the development of alternate streams of affiliation.

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Full disclosure is important here. My own professional development and key programs have been supported and moved forward by the generosity of UJA-Federation of New York, particularly in the last decade. Its support has made possible projects of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion under my direction. The first initiatives were in the area of Jewish renewal, and more recently we have been the beneficiaries of the pioneering work of the Caring Commission, which has

created the field of pastoral care in Israel. Professional staff and lay leaders of UJA-Federation have been active partners, supporters, and indeed loving critics of our work. The most critical role that UJA-Federation has played has been in expanding the field, recognizing that secular initiatives and modern Orthodox ones can and must be part of the effort to foster a rich and varied Israeli Jewish experience. It has helped develop Panim, an umbrella group of Jewish renewal programs in Israel. Its contribution has not only been monetary but also the creation of a language of strategic thinking for Jewish renewal in Israel.

One of the largest challenges of the Jewish renewal movement has been to become "players" on Israel's Main Street. Places like Bat Yam, Rishon Le'zion, and the heartland of Israel remain a faraway promised land. We have not succeeded in penetrating the communities where Israeli Jews from an Oriental background (now almost 50% of Israeli Jews) seek Jewish meaning in modern dress. Many Sephardic Jews cannot quite fathom women rabbis, nor do the tens of thousands of Jews from the Former Soviet Union show much interest in the liberal synagogue model. Although the TALI school system with its 82 schools and scores of preschools has had a huge impact in introducing and inculcating non-Orthodox values and ideas, that has not translated necessarily into affiliation or identification. Second-generation Russian speakers define themselves as secular Israelis; their parents were too consumed with adjusting successfully to Israeli society to focus on their Jewish journeys. These populations remain the next frontier.

There is not yet consensus in the Jewish renewal movement on what models work best for Israelis. We have deliberated together, in public forums and in private meetings, about our "labels" and our "brand." When does insisting that we are Reform make us foreign to the Israeli public? When does the Reform "Progressive" label speak to Israelis? Who are the authentic voices?

We now are at a most interesting crossroads. The world economic slump makes our stalwart support vulnerable, and so Israelis need to take the lead in providing support to shaping a modern Jewish (Israeli) identity. This is our next frontier: to ensure that Israelis will fund our dreams of Jewish renewal. The Jerusalem office of the Progressive movement is spearheading this conversation, which will secure the next generation of programs and initiatives.

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It may now be time to take on the challenge of building communities, *chavurot,* and synagogue centers all over Israel. Although Hebrew Union College in Israel is doing all it can to train a cadre of rabbis, educators, and pastoral caretakers to meet and teach and touch Israelis in the widest variety of communal and educational institutions and initiatives, real change will come from the bottom up. In Modiin, a fast-growing city in Israel, the Progressive synagogue center is offering a bold model of community, working with local resources and in dialogue with a full range of Israelis. Local councils and governments in Israel should be more responsive to this new model, as the national government remains entangled in coalition politics, in which a minority party can torpedo the will of the majority.

Our democracy needs reinforcing, our Jewish soul needs nurturing, our connections to American Jewry need strengthening, and best of all, we are now able to give back, in spirit, in vision, and perhaps in resources. UJA-Federation should continue to be the good listener to these stirrings, to push us beyond ourselves, and to stay the course and see these processes take root and blossom.