Reform Judaism in Israel - Why Is the Movement Marginal?

Stanley Ringler

Over the course of the last several decades, an organized effort has been made to advance the institutional and communal interests of Reform Judaism in Israel. Each of the arms of the Movement has played a role. The College-Institute dedicated its Jerusalem campus in 1963; the CCAR has given special consideration to colleagues who have made aliyah, and has encouraged the work of Maram, and the U.A.H.C. and World Union have helped develop the congregations and organs of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

The physically integrated Jerusalem campus of the College, The Israel Movement, and World Union symbolizes Reform Judaism's presence in Israel and makes an impressive architectural statement on the King David Street landscape facing the Old City walls. But for all this, the fact of the matter is, Reform Judaism in Israel remains a marginal phenomenon. The Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism has not been able to gain acceptance in Israeli society. It has not been able to integrate into the normative religious and communal life of the country.The rabbis of the Movement continue to work without official standing or support. The philosophy and history of Reform Judaism are still not included in the general Jewish studies curriculum of Israeli schools. And most significantly, the numbers of Progressive (Reform) congregations and identified members have hardly increased. In short, Reform has still not won acceptance or legitimacy in Israel.There are objective, as well as philosophical reasons for this. Demographic factors have a lot to do with the situation. So too do their political implications.

Demography and Politics

Israel's Jewish population today numbers over four and a quarter million people. Of these 15 to 20 percent are considered Orthodox. In addition, however, some 40 percent of the population consider themselves "traditional," which commonly means that the pattern of their religious observance is inconsistent. Its form is nonetheless Orthodox. In comparison, the Reform Movement in Israel is quite small. Its numbers do not exceed 2,500 members in about a dozen congregations. In addition there are another ten or so listed congregational communities that do not have regular activities. Only half of the congregations have rabbis, many on a part-time basis. An exceedingly large percentage of Movement members are Jews who immigrated from the West.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Jewish religious life in Israel is dominated by the Orthodox. This is due in part to the overwhelming numerical majority of the adherents of Orthodoxy. It is also a consequence of the political activism and acumen of the Orthodox communities in Israel. Modern Orthodox Jews and their haredi (ultra- Orthodox) Ashkenazi and Sephardic counterparts have broad-based well-established grassroots political organizations. The principal groups are, the National Religious Party (NRP or Mafdal), the Party of the modern Orthodox community, and the parties of the Ashkenazi

haredim, Aqudat Yisrael and Degel Hatora. In the 1992 Knesset elections the latter two parties ran in an alignment called the United Torah Judaism Party. Finally ,there is the Sepharadi haredi party Shas - the Sephardi Torah Guardians. Together these parties currently hold a formidable sixteen seats in the Knesset.

Given the fact that no party in Israel has ever won a majority of seats in the Knesset, coalitian governments have been formed through alliances between the party winning the greatest numbers of votes and smaller parties with whom acceptable compromises can be made. This procedure has historically served to advance the interests of one or more of the religious parties whose sectarian interests are usually given precedence to foreign policy matters. This reality is not likely to change. In fact, even electoral reform proposals intended to raise the threshold (the minimum) of votes needed to win a seat in the Knesset will not, as some believe, change matters. At best such proposals will encourage certain of the religious parties to form political alignments enabling them to "pool" their votes and thus to ensure their gaining control of a significant number of seats in the Knesset.

The N.R.P. and Shas parties have also shrewdly developed a voting constituency within the Israeli Arab community. The precedent was established by the National Religious Party, which for many years held government portfolios controlling budgets and services with direct impact on Arab towns and villages. Arabs who supported the N.R.P. were in a position to ensure that their communities would benefit from the political patronage largesse of N.R.P. ministers and ministry staff. In recent years, Shas Party leaders have also actively cultivated support within the Arab sector; they have also been particularly adept at cultivating support among the growing number of Israeli Arab Islamic Movement adherents! Shas activists have stressed their shared commitment to principles of religious fundamentalism along with Shas' interest in favoring "friendly" communities with priority budgetary assistance. In the last national elections (1992), the Shas party received enough Arab votes to ensure one of the six seats that it won.

Beyond the fact that the so-called religious parties have a substantial following, there are many Orthodox Jewish voters who support other parties. One expression of this is that the Labor, Likud, and Moledet parties each have Orthodox M.K.'s within their Knesset factions. The Labor party (no doubt the Likud as well) even has a "Religious Division." This department is responsible for maintaining relationships and building political support within the Orthodox Jewish religious community. In point of fact, it is estimated that 30 percent of the registered members of the Labor Party are Orthodox.

Orthodox Jewish activists in political parties are obviously well positioned to play influential roles in defining party policy positions regarding issues of synagogue and state. They also do so in their party platform convention committees and they do so in their continuing leadership roles in national and local party organizational frameworks. To put this fact in perspective, it can be said, somewhat as an understatement, that in Israel, electoral interests greatly influence the shaping of domestic policy. Obviously, therefore, religion, as one of the central concerns of a substantial part of the Israeli electorate, plays an influential role in the political life of the country. This is no less true

for the other states in the region than it is for Israel. The reality is that in Israel, as in the rest of the Middle East, religion is one of the principal affairs of state and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

In the Middle East, and to a lesser extent in western Europe, the principle of separation of religion and state is unnatural. In this region, the cradle of religious civilization for the three monotheistic faiths, religion in many ways transcends the narrower interests of nation-states. Today, of course, the polyglot communities of believers identified with Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are spread throughout the world. Nonetheless, throughout much of human history the commonality of religious belief often took precedence in the life of believers over the often artificial boundaries separating groups according to ethnic or geographical factors. In fact, many national traditions, cultural norms, and social customs were shaped on the anvil of religious systems of belief and practice. This is as true for Judaism as it is for Islam and Christianity. For Jews, it was the religious idea that bore our people, but it is the land which has served as the womb and historic home in which our faith was nurtured and is to this day focused. Throughout the two-thousand-year period of exile and since our return to Zion, the land and its polity have served as central organizing principles in the evolution of Jewish life and practice.

Thus, it is not at all odd that religion and state are so intertwined in Israel. To put it plainly, in Israel Judaism is the state religion. In fact, each of the countries in the Middle East has a state religion. This is the case for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq, not to mention Iran. Beyond the region this is also the prevailing norm throughout the Mediterranean. In countries such as Greece or Italy, in which the Orthodox Church tradition is dominant, or in the North African countries of Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia, where Islam prevails, religion is not only a driving force in the life of these countries but often a major political power.

The American reality is different. America is a country born, in part at least, in reaction to the comprehensive and intolerant religious domination of European society. In this sense America is an exception to the norm. The principle of separation of church and state, born on American soil, is not readily transferrable to other areas in the world.

There are, however, other forces that act as moderating influences on religion. These are the forces of time, modernization, and social progress. Thus, Orthodox religions which strive to define social and cultural norms and which, due to their comprehensive character, functionally regulate many aspects of public as well as private life, are themselves subject to subtle and evolutionary changes in thought and practice in many societies. This has been especially true in the Western world.

In European society the central role and influence of the Church has diminished in modern times. Still, even today, most European states continue to define themselves as Christian countries with official state churches. While the influence of the religious establishment in such countries is not ultimately determinative of all things, nominally, at least, the Church does continue to influence political life in countries throughout Europe.

The day may come when in the Middle East, too, the forces of modernization and social advancement will act to break down the protective walls of religious Orthodoxy. For the foreseeable future, however, the reality in the Arab world and to a very large extent in Israel as well is that the integral relationship of religion and state is unlikely to change. Certainly, it will not come about as a result of the artificial imposition of the American principle of separation.

In sum, therefore, demographic and political factors, linked as they are with the aforementioned ideological realities, have created an inhospitable cultural milieu for Reform Judaism in Israel. Under such circumstances, the Reform Movement is destined to continue to be marginal.

The Israel Movement

There are also other internal reasons for Reform's marginality in Israel. Unfortunately, Reform has not been effective in establishing itself in Israel as a force for change or as a Movement attracting a significant community of enlightened believers. This is due, in part, to the way in which the Movement is presently organized and functioning. Instead of seeking an integrative solution - that is, instead of seeking to normalize the Movement through the involvement of Reform activists on a collective or individual basis in major public, political, and social service voluntary organizations, thereby gaining acceptance and appreciation for the ideas and values of Reform Judaism, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism has sought, more and more aggressively, a separatist solution. This criticism is not meant in terms of its objectives, for most assuredly, the Reform Movement in Israel has aspired to acceptance, legitimacy, and normalization. The problem is that Reform in Israel has defined for itself the functional role of gadfly of the religious and political establishment.

Thus, on a continuing basis, much of the financial resources contributed by interested parties in the world Movement, principally through ARZA, have been used for this purpose. Instead of winning important allies and building influential coalitions, the Movement, supported by the American Reform community, has fostered a good deal of antipathy in Israel. This, unfortunately, has served only to reinforce its status of nonacceptance and abnormality.

The high profile role of the Israel Religious Action Center exemplifies better than any other fact of religious life the activities of the Reform Movement in Israel. Modeled after the movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, IRAC is engaged in a continuing advocacy struggle in the Israeli courts and media. Unlike its Washington counterpart, however, IRAC concentrates almost exclusively on fighting to win "rights" for the Movement as a legitimate stream in Jewish life. Unfortunately, the legitimacy sought in the courts does not have theological or philosophical relevance; it is solely of legal consequence. Ironically, therefore, the most important victories gained in the Israeli courts have done little to change the reality of life for the Reform Movement in Israel. To be sure, IRAC's victories have been admirable achievements of principle. In a tangible sense, however, it is unrealistic to think that such victories will make a significant

difference in transforming the Movement's status in Israeli society. The spread and influence of Progressive Judaism as a theological or ideological movement in Israel is not dependent on the courts. The fact of the matter, is virtually nothing has changed in terms of Reform's number of adherents or its relevance to Israeli life as a consequence of favorable court decisions of principle. Even in the case of the most far-reaching institutional victories, functionally there is no certainty that real change will result.

One example is the Israel Supreme Court's decision that the appointment of representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements on local Religious Councils must be approved by the Orthodox majority. More than a year later, no such appointments have been approved. And even if some day they are, no doubt the Orthodox religious establishment will isolate such representatives and directly or indirectly prevent them from exercising a degree of control over local religious life by denying them access to resources or services provided by the Local Council.

Whether one approves or not, the fact of the matter is that the Orthodox religious establishment is pervasive in Israeli life. It exercises political control of all of the public financial resources budgeted by the State for the maintenance and support of Jewish religious life. It also controls all appointments of service providers, including rabbis, in all areas of Jewish religious life in the country. In this regard, the influence and control of the religious establishment are growing, not diminishing. This is the consequence of the fact that the religious political parties today play a decisive role in determining the political balance of power in the Knesset. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the major political parties in Israel are inclined to accommodate the demands of the religious establishment. Even when the consequences of accommodation are uncomfortable and require compromises of ideological principle, pragmatic political reasons and matters of national interest continue to necessitate such accommodation. The result for the Reform Movement has been the reinforcement and perpetuation of its state of marginality.

It is regrettable that so much energy and so much money, particularly in the last decade, have been invested in Reform's public, legal battles, instead of concentrating on the educational and spiritual needs of the Movement's real and potential members. For example, due to a lack of trained progressive teachers, a lack of appropriate Jewish educational materials for use in schools, and because there are few really vibrant synagogue- based communities, the Movement is not growing in numbers or influence. Furthermore, IRAC's one-dimensional image in terms of its expressed area of interest and activity has won few friends and, as noted above, only Pyrrhic victories.

In November 1994, at the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism biannual convention in Jerusalem, there was discussion about the work of the IRAC and the value of its being given priority in the allocation of resources. Rabbi Meir Azari, the former director of the Movement and now rabbi at Beit Daniel in Tel Aviv, asserted that for the Movement to gain strength and to spread, greater investment must be made in the development of congregations. "I believe," he said, "that when the congregations expand and are successful on the grass roots, the attitude of politicians towards the Movement will change. One cannot ignore the strength of numbers." Azari also made the point that the

Israeli public is interested in our dealing with spiritual matters, and that the way to build the Movement is on the basis of positive activities. "The public," he said, "wants to know who you are, not who you are against."

Even today, after more than a generation of development, building, and public life, few Israelis know very much about Reform Judaism. And the little that they do know is not always complimentary. For example, a recent headline story in the Israeli press reported on the IRAC director's role in informing Canadian authorities that the State of Israel practices religious discrimination and deprives people of their human rights (sic). Other leaders of the Movement, in the same article, condemned this as an act of "anti-Zionism," "anti-Israel," "anti-Jewish," and "anti the Reform Movement."

Unfortunately this is the case because the state's educational institutions, no less than its religious institutions, have not concerned themselves with the teaching of Reform Judaism. But it is also because the Progressive Movement in Israel has not made education a priority. Even the several Movement-"controlled" schools have few teachers who were educated and trained as progressive Jewish educators. Other than the sometimes vociferous activities of the IRAC, few expressions of Reform Jewish life or belief are noteworthy. Most regrettable is the fact that in the eyes of the political establishment in Israel, because of IRAC, the Reform Movement is perceived at best as sometimes noisy and bothersome but otherwise not a factor of consequence in the life of the nation.

Sometimes the efforts at intervention on the part of the American affiliates of the Movement serve only to exacerbate the image of the Movement in the eyes of the political establishment. This was the case in the fall of 1994 when the president of the U.A.H.C. sent a "threatening" letter of protest informing the prime minister of the State of Israel that he would lose the support of American Reform Jews for the peace process should agreements be made with Orthodox religious parties considered to be antithetical to the interests of the Reform Movement! The threat contained in the abovementioned letter, namely, that the Reform Movement is prepared to jeopardize the success of the peace process because of a proposed coalition agreement between the Labor party and the Shas Orthodox Sephardic party dealing with the religious status quo, is an incredibly naive expression of political simplicity. For Reform, however, most troublesome is the statement that the letter makes regarding the centrality of the value and importance of life in Reform Jewish thought, the value considered primary in the drive for peace. Not surprisingly the aforementioned letter did not evoke much of a reaction in Israel. It was simply dismissed as distasteful and irrelevant. A more judicious and focused expression of concern, without linkage to threats of opposition to the peace process, resulted in a meeting with the prime minister. In this meeting he explained to the representatives of the non-Orthodox streams in Israel why his priorities are, first of all, the pursuit of peace and security for Israel. The prime minister also made clear that although he sympathizes with the principle concerns of the non-Orthodox movements, at this time priority must be given to the effort to secure peace for the Jewish state and people.

To summarize, it would serve us well to understand that the policy of engagement, confrontation, and prophetic denunciation as practised by IRAC and its American Movement supporters is an ineffective and even counterproductive approach to the advancement of Reform interests in Israel. Historical, religious, and political realities are such that tendentious intervention from abroad and vociferous protest by marginal elements in Israel, in matters of state, are of little consequence. To the degree that such efforts are perceived as problematic they will only serve to reinforce the degree of marginalization, irrelevance, and rejection already experienced by the Reform Movement in Israel. Parenthetically, it is this kind of negative and critical approach regularly expressed by the representatives of the Movement in Israel and their supporters abroad that has contributed to the apparently deepening sense of alienation and bitterness felt by diaspora Reform Jews toward Israel.

When meeting with Movement representatives in Israel on missions or tours, the message delivered is almost exclusively angry and bitter. No word of ahavat yisrael, or kedushat hah\aim, of the place of Zion in the life and mind of the Jewish people; no message of kibbutz galuyot or of the historical drama of war and peace is communicated. The message is usually one-dimensional, critical, and alienating. Is it any wonder, therefore, that Reform Jews, particularly in America, are increasingly disinterested in learning about, visiting, or supporting Israel? Even those who are minimally curious are given information which, while it may be intended to make them angry enough to give money to IRAC and/or ARZA-ARZENU, even more effectively prevents them from feeling any sense of positive existential engagement with the Jewish national home. Unfortunately, the consequences of this fact may be far more devastating to the future of Reform Judaism in the diaspora than the growing rate of intermarriage and assimilation, for it has been broadly accepted that a positive Israel experience, can be a social and spiritual force of Jewish affirmation and an enduring source for the reinforcement of one's Jewish identity. But this depends on how one "meets" Israel in the context of avisit, tour, or mission to Israel, through the absorption of information in an ARZA newsletter, or by the way in which educational programs are conducted at one's synagogue. Much depends on the depth of positive feeling, commitment, and sophistication in the communication of knowledge, ideological and informational, about the place and role of Israel in Reform Judaism and in the life of the Jewish people.

In Israel, the Reform Movement would do well to transform its visibly confrontational and therein separatist approach to Israeli life into a constructive integrative mode. That is to say, if the advocates of Reform Judaism were to become sympathetically involved in institutions and organizations that represent large national constituencies, the likelihood of their being positioned to quietly but effectively advance the Movement's interests would be greatly enhanced. This is true on both a grass-roots local basis and on the national level. Admittedly this represents an evolutionary and indefinite approach. Nonetheless, it is more likely to bring results than is the current publicly alienating posture. The same might be said for the role of the Movement in the diaspora. The synagogue in particular, and the rabbinate most of all, must lead the way. A dynamic positive Israel educational program can greatly enhance the depth and breadth of the synagogue community's life. Creating meaningful personal and collective linkages to

Israel on both a movement and larger community sociocultural or political basis can bring drama and great purpose into the life of the synagogue. Strengthening this dimension of synagogue life will redound too to its educational program and other activities intended to deepen Jewish identity and involvement.

Aliyah as a life option ought to be a principle around which there is spiritual struggle in the contemporary progressive synagogue. The ideological debate is passe'; it is an anachronism. But in a spiritual sense, every Jew ought to be so deeply conscious of and moved by the reality of Jewish statehood that fulfillment becomes a matter of spiritual consternation and existential longing. Imagine the qualitative impact such a reality could have on the character of synagogue life!

And if in the end, the Reform Movement in America is more focused on Jewish peoplehood, more linked to Zion, and more nationally identified, perhaps the real numerical presence and therefore strength and influence of Reform Judaism in Israel will finally begin to grow because of Reform aliya if not to natural growth and outreach within Israel itself. Both efforts are important: an integrative role for Reform in Israel in the direction of normalizing Reform as a part of the Israeli national reality, and the role of constructive existential engagement on the part of the Movement in the diaspora.