
Schechter Rabbinical Seminary and the Religious Masorti *Hashkafa* (Worldview) and Spiritual Home

EINAT RAMON

A Framework for Differences of Opinion: Denominations, Boundaries and Globalization

For the past 150 years, most Jews (with the exception of the ultra-Orthodox) have prided themselves on upholding a religious philosophy that follows the Mishnah from the Ethics of the Fathers (5:17):

A difference of opinion (*machloket*) for heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a difference of opinion not for heaven's sake will not endure. What is an example of a difference of opinion for heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai (Mishnah, Avot 5:19). What is an example of a difference of opinion not for heaven's sake? The rebellion of Korach and his associates.

The model of the students at Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel presented in the Mishnah below teaches us that Jewish men and women married each other in the midst of very serious controversies among political and religious camps.

Even though these prohibit and these permit, these declare ineligible and these declare eligible, Bet Shammai did not refrain from marrying women of Bet Hillel, nor Bet Hillel from Bet Shammai (Yevamot 1:4).

Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon is Dean of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem. The first Israeli-born woman rabbi, she received her ordination from the The Jewish Theological Seminary of America and her doctorate from Stanford University.

While scholarly portrayals of the ancient disputes between Bet Shamai and Bet Hillel (Ben Shalom 1993) convey a historical reality that was much more complicated than the nostalgic depiction of the Mishnah, the philosophical-political idea behind *tarbut hamachloket*, the culture of differences of opinion, was that each set of opinions must have a clearly defined spiritual home in the form of a *bet midrash*, a school of thought. The modern version of the ancient schools of thought was denominations and/or Jewish political affiliations (particularly in Eastern Europe and Israel). Within one's spiritual home — a family, community or an ideological movement — one's cluster of beliefs and observances were deepened and celebrated while maintaining a common sense of peoplehood through interdenominational direct or indirect dialogue.

Although historically, denominations sprouted from deep religious disputes originating in the anti-ritualistic and anti-national contexts of the 19th century (Eisen, 1998), philosophically they rested upon two assumptions: a) that no Jew holds the key to the ultimate truth — thus, debate on questions of the Jewish norm creates a stronger Jewish culture when the argument is clarified in that context (Alexander, 2001, 168); and b) that each person is different — thus, the channels to Judaism that suit one person, one family or one community may not necessarily suit another and there must be room for all. This forced us to recognize the need for different configurations of Judaism.

Owing, largely, to Zionism's dominance throughout the mid-to-late 20th century, differences of opinion concerning the boundaries and norms of *halakhah* (Jewish law) ceded to the idea that "Judaism begins not with an individual leap of faith, but with a leap of solidarity with the Jewish community" (Hartman, 1999, 195). Spiritual homes are important as long as we hold on to the overriding spiritual framework: the Jewish people. I would further argue that as a result of the centrality of the idea of peoplehood, the concept of "heresy" in Judaism is weak, when compared to other world religions. As Rabbi Aba Rav Zavda claimed: "A Jew (an Israelite) even though he had sinned, is still a Jew" (*Sanhedrin* 44a).

Given the fact that denominations served the Jewish people well in balancing the dialectic of solidarity and disagreement, we must ask ourselves, what mechanism does the "post-denominational" mindset offer in its stead? How should we continue to disagree in a civil manner on matters of *halakhah*, Jewish norms and boundaries? In addition, at least half of the Jews worldwide (including Israeli Jews) have never been introduced to non-Orthodox denominations. What does it mean

that while some among us have discovered a need for a particular Reform or Conservative denominational approach to organize our Jewish lives, American Jews have decided that denominationalism is no longer relevant and denominational frameworks should be discarded? It seems that “big-tent” Judaism, which refuses to set boundaries out of fear of controversy, may become too wide and too undefined for others who feel alienated from a diluted religion.

I suspect that while “post-denominationalism” presents itself as an outcome of Jews’ greater agreement with one another, it may actually be a symptom of Western global culture’s fear of differences of opinion and its desire to erase cultural differences in general. One alarming fact is that “Half of all human languages will have disappeared by the end of the century, as smaller societies are assimilated into national and global cultures, scientists have warned” (Knight, 2004). Languages signify cultures and moral perspectives. Yet those of us who are so dedicated to preserving endangered species and the environment seem to be oblivious to the extinction of small-world cultures, including our own Jewish culture, denominations included. We, non-Orthodox Jews, embrace too often the new at the expense of dissolving the old. Organic families, communities and indigenous ethnic cultures that tend to conserve traditional models of ethics are facing real dangers of fragmentation and annihilation (Wade, 2007). Small cultures and small peoples are “impediments” to globalization, since they signify difference, disagreement and, often, criticism of modernity.

How do we draw the line between the blessings and curses of modernity? The tension between embracing universalism vs. particularistic cultural boundaries, technology vs. technological restraint, is not new. In fact, it is embedded deep within Jewish narrative, already demonstrated by one of the earliest stories in the Torah, that of the Tower of Babel:

Behold, they are one people, and one language for all, and all this they have begun to do. Now, nothing that they scheme to do shall be withheld from them (11:6).

As Rabbi Jonathan Chipman eloquently summarizes:

The early chapters of Genesis concern the dilemma of how powerful ought man be allowed to be? Judaism certainly affirms human responsibility and free will, but sees a subtle line separating valid use of auton-

omy, intelligence, and initiative, from hubris. The Tower story would say: God's move to limit man's powers is rooted in a moral position. Humankind has been blessed with awesome powers, [...] But with this comes hubris: the desire to transcend limits. The moral life of humanity in fact revolves around the acceptance of limits, and the humility of knowing that we are not infinite, that we are not God, knowing that *nothing* is fail-safe, that even the wisest of men cannot anticipate every last possibility. Without advocating a latter-day Luddism, many of the world's problems today are the result of unforeseen consequences of technological progress.

Judaism, by its very definition, is a civilization that draws boundaries. Boundaries are not walls; they are the vehicles by which the Jewish people and its different spiritual communities build themselves. One of the major tasks of rabbis as scholars, teachers and leaders of the people is to draw the lines for the definition of our Jewish spiritual homes, and on that issue there are serious disagreements.

It is true that to some degree we have seen in our generation how challenges presented by one denomination to the other have been taken seriously and have created change. An example of that could be the recent embrace by Orthodox Judaism of religious feminism and the Reform movement's shift from anti-Jewish nationalism to an identification with Zionism. And yet, many, many disputes remain unresolved. Among these are old differences of opinions regarding the degree to which we must embrace Hebrew, Jewish law, Shabbat observance and Zionist commitments, and the effort to set a boundary vis-à-vis intermarriage. Today's questions often also concern issues of gender: Is it within the boundaries of our hermeneutical approach to tradition to ordain women or to count them for a minyan? Is it immoral if we do not do so? Should the traditional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman continue or cease to be the norm? Is educating for a covenant between a man and a woman central to Jewish peoplehood and Jewish civilization or not? Jews today clearly disagree over such issues, because different Jews have different moral intuitions on such topics we cannot simply fit into one big tent.

Rabbis are the people responsible for setting the boundaries. But can our task to educate, set boundaries and serve as role models be carried out in a global context that is culturally antagonistic to boundaries and "small tents"? To be the children of Abraham and Sarah is, perhaps, more difficult today despite, or because of, technological advancements.

Rabbi Yehuda used to say [about Abraham]: The entire world is on one side and he is on the other side (VayikraRaba 42).

The deeper meaning of Judaism, according to this midrash, is challenging human civilization and the total unity of humankind. It is our role to be *ivrim*, those on the other side. To emphasize that humanity is an expression of accepting human vulnerability and admitting that we need particularistic limits that link us to the particularistic combined voices of our fathers and mothers, through whom we connect to Jewish peoplehood. Yet how could we do so in a society so antagonistic to the acknowledgement of human differentiated vulnerability? Perhaps the solution lies in preserving the idea of a camp full of “small spiritual tents.” We begin our morning prayers at the synagogue by chanting

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel

Our Torah celebrates Israel’s many tents and many dwellings. A tent is a defined space with clear though not rigid boundaries. Thus, perhaps the bureaucratic, dogmatic denominational structures may no longer work for those who grew up in them and for those not yet introduced to them. However, *batei midrash*, rabbinical schools, each with a worldview and a circle of communities that share that worldview, may be our future dwellings. Such minimovements will be the new forms of Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel, schools of thought in theology and in interpretation of Jewish law (Shay, 2007, 200–201) that have differences, and yet convey solidarity with each other in the midst of differences.

Features of the Schechter Rabbinical School’s Masorti “Tent”

What, then, are the features of our “small tent” — that of the spiritual home of the Masorti *hashkafa* (worldview) as promoted by the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem (established in 1984)? Our theology draws from two ideological sources that are historically intertwined: Zionist thought and Rabbi Zacharias Frankel’s positive–historical approach to Judaism (Germany 1801–1875). It has been a common understanding in Zionist thought, beginning with the early days of the first *maskilim* (the Enlightenment’s Hebrew writers) in Eastern Europe that the Jews’ return to their land demanded a new way of thinking about the Jewish religion (Feiner, 1998). Yet, by the same token, there has always been a concern that the renewal of Jewish tradition in Israel must take a different shape and form than the

evolution of modern Judaism in the Diaspora. Living in the land of Israel, in a sovereign Jewish state, of necessity entails moral and physical demands.

It was Gershom Scholem (1887–1882), the major scholar of Kabbalah at the Hebrew University, who articulated this idea very clearly: The restoration of a religious Jewish culture related equally to *halakhah* and to the Zionist secular rebellion against *halakhah*, is, according to Scholem, an unavoidable necessity. It responds to the growing existential emptiness among secular Jews, on the one hand, and to Orthodox extremism on the other. When the Jewish people live in their own land, the “religious” (Orthodox) and the “secularists” participate together in this dialectical process. Both contribute to the return of Hebrew secularism to its Jewish religious roots. Both camps, together, help formulate a religious position in Israel that is neither rigid nor totally individualistic. In other words, in Israel the renewal of the Jewish religion is a national-Zionist task in which different spiritual homes simultaneously participate. While Scholem hoped that its Israeli context would cause open religious Judaism to blossom, he also feared the simplistic import of non-Orthodox individualistic theological thought patterns from the United States. Thus, his article “Thoughts on Jewish Theology,” published in 1974, states that “it is clear that the question of the significance of secularization for contemporary Jewry is a piercing question”....

However:

... must we accept the values determined by today’s permissive American society, which are a logical outcome of extreme secularism? ... it seems to me that this question must now be open to debate. ... I am convinced that behind the secular façade Zionism inevitably includes religious content, and this religious potential is much stronger than what is expressed in the “religious Zionism” of political parties. Why? Because the central question is the dialectics of a living tradition, and within the framework of Judaism this means primarily the tradition of *Halakhah*. Even if it challenges tradition, this question will be asked here in a more fruitful manner than by cowardly laws enacted for the benefit of political parties, where it [*Halakhah*] is confined today. The secular nature of the Zionist movement has always contradicted the involvement of religious issues, which are inescapable ... As long as faith in God represents a fundamental phenomenon for everything created in God’s image, and cannot be liquidated by

ideology, the complete secularization of Israel can, in my opinion, be prevented. Confronting this secularization, with its truth and limits, is fruitful and crucial. (Scholem 1976: 586–590)

It is to that challenge, the nonindividualistic renewal of Judaism, out of the Zionist moral and cultural revolution, that the Schechter Rabbinical School wishes to rise, by introducing the voice of dialectical thinking signified by the positive–historical worldview. From its inception, theological and halakhic interpretation by the positive–historical school of thought, later known as the philosophical approach of Conservative Judaism, was marked by looking at Torah as God’s will that enfolds through rational interpretations focused on the vision of establishing a community that conducts itself in holiness. It therefore had prided itself in its ability to adapt *halakhah* to the times, while setting clear boundaries and limits to changes that deviated from the spirit of *halakhah* and of the Jewish people. On the one hand, the positive–historical school of thought was always committed to “normative pluralism” that respected conflicting stances, not for lack of conviction, nor from a desire to gradually eliminate the opinion with which we disagree (whether it be Orthodox, Reform or secular), but from a respectful recognition of all spiritual abodes within the Jewish people (Sagi). The courage to set limits to change based on historical research has its beginnings in the legacy of Frankel, founder of the movement and head of the Breslau Rabbinical Seminary, who said:

Not all streams of influence of the times have their source in the divine; we do not wish to slight the spirit of our time, but neither do we want to ignore its shortcomings; concessions are made mainly because of passing impressions, or temporary pleasures, and in our haste we lose much of the exalted, that which could enable us to attain a deeper understanding.

Frankel’s adversary, Rabbi Avraham Geiger (1810–1874), relied upon a clear halakhic ruling that permits the publication of Jewish prayer books in German (Mishnah, *Sotah* 7:a), with which Frankel fiercely disagreed. He felt that the spirit of Geiger’s words was an evasion from the critical national and religious task of his generation: “to teach Hebrew to the youth — so that it understands both worship of God, and the sacred writings.”

By setting up these hermeneutical principles, the Masorti worldview serves as a spiritual home for two groups: those who observe a *halakhic* way of life but feel

that orthodoxy, however modern, constricts Judaism with its pedantic and stringent rulings; and those who come to it aspiring to *halakhic*, values-based inspiration even if they are unable to commit to a *halakhic* way of life. Thus, the movement is a varied human mosaic whose common strand is a conscious and public commitment to the preservation of traditional *halakhah* through selective adaptation, abiding by clear intellectual, historical principles.

Our challenge is that Israelis, being Jews from different ethnic backgrounds who live together, tend to be suspicious of non-Orthodox sectarian divisions and definitions. Most Israelis, including the nonobservant ones, still vaguely and intuitively hold on to Orthodox theology and *halakhic* philosophy upheld by the religious institutions of the State of Israel (Tabory, 1981, 1982). So how can we, Israelis who feel the urgent need to educate according to the worldview of the classical “positive-historical” perspective, reach out to our people in a “post-denominational” age, in a secular spiritual setting that was never denominational to begin with (Tabory, 2000)?

A similar challenge is that of the rabbinic vocation. Institutional processes that have affected the definition of the rabbinate in the West (Schorsch, 1993), where there is a greater political separation between religion and state, have been absent in the State of Israel (Tabory, 1981, 1982, 2000). Due to the absence of official state (and therefore public) recognition of Masorti rabbis as clergy in Israel and the resulting lack of funding (Golinkin, 26), the work of Israeli Conservative/Masorti rabbis is more difficult than that of their colleagues in the United States, Europe and South America. Most of our rabbis, therefore, end up working simultaneously in a number of jobs and must become experts in diverse rabbinic professional fields. This, too, sets a particular creative challenge to our rabbinic program.

In response to this vision and its challenges, the structure of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary’s curriculum emerges from a synthesis of *yeshivah*-style learning and common curricular paradigms employed in academic theological seminaries. Similar to students in *yeshivot*, our students spend the bulk of their time in school studying Talmud and *halakhah* (although these do not make up the majority of courses). Prior to their formal classes, students study talmudic, midrashic, halakhic and philosophical texts in *hevrutah* (pairs) at the *bet midrash*, while the teacher instructs the students individually. Applying a four-tiered approach to a Masorti-Conservative Jewish context entails the following commitment for persons interested in becoming spiritual-religious leaders: They are required to gain

a strong foundation in biblical and rabbinic sources; to understand Judaism's historical development and the history of the Jewish people, especially in light of the moral and political implications of Zionism; to understand fully Judaism's various hermeneutical principles and boundaries vis-à-vis the Torah; and to develop the professional skills required to fulfill the role of a religious leader in modern times (including leading prayers, employing music and art in the development of a religious community, counseling and utilizing educational and administrative skills).

Training rabbis who can respond to our fascinating and complex Israeli reality means that we must search for strong and courageous people who do not fear to be *Ivrim* — those on the other side that challenge both orthodoxy as well as secular and Reform modes of thinking. They must listen to various ethnic traditions that were brought into Israel through the ingathering of the exiles and reconstruct those lost traditions while weaving them back into revived biblical and rabbinic traditions. They should be able to serve as halachic and moral role models. Then will they be able to responsibly interpret and transmit Jewish law, while setting the appropriate boundaries. We believe that by creating a dialogue among many conflicting voices, we, lay leaders and rabbis who share the Masorti worldview, can bring about a thriving Israeli positive-historical school that will respond to the deep thirst for meaning among our people. We know that it is not upon us to finish the task, yet neither are we free to neglect it (*Mishnah*, Avoth II:21).

Bibliography

Alexander, Hanan A. *Reclaiming Goodness: Education and the Spiritual Quest*. Indiana: Notre Dame University, 2001.

Ben Shalom, Israel. *The School of Shammai and the Zealots' Struggle Against Rome*. Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi Press and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1993 (Hebrew).

Eisen, Arnold M. *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commitment, Community*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998.

Feiner, Shmuel. "Yalag as an Anti-Clerical and an Activist in the Jewish Cultural War." *Sadan: Studies in Hebrew Literature*. Ed. Ziva Shamir. Vol. 3, 1998: 211–229 (Hebrew).

Golinkin, David. "The Current Situation: Visions for Strengthening Judaism in the State of Israel." *Women's League Outlook* 75.3, 2005: 22–26.

Golinkin, David. *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* LXII, 2000: 194–196.

Gordon, Aharon David. *Mivhar Ktavim* (Collected Writings). Jerusalem: The Zionist Library, 1982. (Based on the edition published in 1951–1954). (Hebrew).

Gordon, Yehuda Leib-Yalag. "Our Redemption and the Redemption of our Soul." *Hamelitz*. Vol. 18, March 22, 1882 (Hebrew).

Knight, Will. "Half of all Languages Face Extinction this Century." *New Scientist*. February 16, 2004. <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn4685.htm>.

Lichtman, Gail. "Changing Traditions." *In Jerusalem*. Friday, July 28, 2006: 20–22.

Ramon, Einat. "Every Question is the Cultural Translation Question." *Minds Across Israel*, edited by the department for Jewish Zionist Education. Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2003: 413–424 (Hebrew).

Ramon, Einat. *God, The Mother: A Critique of Domination in the Religious Zionist Thought of A.D. Gordon* (1856–1922). Dissertation submitted to the Department of Religious Studies and the Committee on Graduate Studies of Stanford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. November, 1999.

Ramon, Einat. "Our Zionist Vision." *The Rabbinical Assembly Proceedings*. Vol. LXV 2004: 104–108 (Hebrew).

Sagi, Avi. "The Jewish Religion: Tolerance and the Possibility of Pluralism." *Iyun* 44, 1995: 175–200 (Hebrew).

Scholem, Gershom. *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*. Ed. Avraham Shapira. Vol. I. Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1976 (Hebrew).

Scholem, Gershom. *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance*. Ed. Avraham Shapira. Vol. II. Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1986 (Hebrew).

Schorsch, Ismar. "Emancipation and the Crisis of Religious Authority: The Emergence of the Modern Rabbinate." *From Text to Context: The Turn of History in Modern Judaism*. Brandeis: The University Press of New England, 1993: 9–50.

Schweid, Eliezer. *Judaism and Secular Culture*. Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz Hameuchad, 1981. (Hebrew)

Shaked, Gershon. "Between Jewish Tradition and Western Culture." *Ariel* 42, 1976: 74–85 (Hebrew).

Shapira, Avraham, ed. *Continuity and Rebellion — Gershom Scholem in Speech and Dialogue*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1994 (Hebrew).

Shay, Scott. *Getting Our Groove Back: How to Energize American Jewry*. New York and Jerusalem: Devora Publishing, 2007.

Tabory, Ephraim. "Freedom of Religion and Non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel." *Journal of Reform Judaism*. 1982: 10–15.

Tabory, Ephraim. "The Influence of Liberal Judaism on Religious Life in Israel." *Israel Studies*. 2000: 183–203.

Tabory, Ephraim. "State and Religion: Religious Conflict Among Jews in Israel." *Journal of Church and State*. 23.2, 1981: 275–283.

Wade, Nicholas. "The Evolution of Morality." *The Dallas Morning News*. September 30, 2007. http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/points/stories/DN-wade_3oedi.ART1.State.Edition1.4300c6a.html