

The Masorti Movement in Israel

YIZHAR HESS

Some nine years ago, my wife and I saw an ad in the paper. We were in our early 30s, living in Jerusalem with our first child. We were both starting new careers: I had just received my law degree and my wife, Yael, had just been promoted to a new position in the Israel Defense Forces. We had reached the age when one starts to see the world from an adult point of view, and then we saw a newspaper ad published by the Jewish Agency for Israel that was looking for *shlichim* (emissaries) to serve in the United States. It did not fit in with our careers; and we both felt apprehensive about the prospect of being far from our aging parents. Nevertheless, we had a gut feeling that did not allow us to forget this ad. We responded, and after a long screening process that lasted nearly a year, we landed in Tucson, Arizona, on one of the sweltering summer days of 2000. Soon enough, we realized that there are no balmy summer days in Tucson. Truth be told, spring and fall are quite scorching, as well.

Our three years in Tucson were fantastic. Being a *shaliach* is not a job; it is a way of life. It involves the whole family — the spouse, the children, even the rented house that becomes a natural meeting point. All become part of the *shlichut* to the community. The idea is to increase the number of quality interactions with the community and, with those interactions, the ability to touch people. This turns Israel from an abstract idea into a physical reality; it brings Israel onto first-name terms.

In our case, and I have since learned that this is true not only in our case, the effect was mutual. We gained at least as much as we gave.

Several weeks after landing in Tucson, we received an invitation to the *bat mitzvah* of the daughter of one of the leaders of the Jewish community there. We replied immediately. One of the indications of a *shaliach's* integration into the community is the number of family *simchas* (joyous celebrations) to which he is invited. We were

Yizhar Hess is Executive Director & CEO of the Masorti Movement in Israel

happy to attend. It was a hot Saturday, like all Tucson Saturdays, and Congregation Anshei Israel, one of several synagogues in Tucson, was full. I vaguely remember the service of that Saturday, but one moment emerges in my memory again and again. It was the girl, the bat mitzvah, who had an *aliyah laTorah* (going up to read the Torah). In one of the *aliyot*, she honored her grandmother, who stood next to her on the *bimah* (stage), and they were holding hands.

I was reminded of my own bar mitzvah in a small neighborhood Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem, what I then thought to be the only type of Israeli synagogue. It was the beginning of the summer of 1980, and I was a young lad, my voice breaking as I began to chant from Parashat Korach.

It had been my grandmother's dream that on my bar mitzvah I would read the whole Torah portion. I loved my grandmother and wanted to make her happy. And so I, an average secular Israeli youngster, started going with my father to synagogue every Saturday for almost a year, and also twice a week for an intensive and long private lesson.

I successfully completed my mission. I read the whole portion and realized my grandmother's dream. But at my bar mitzvah, my grandmother did not stand next to me. She was there, but I did not see her and she could hardly see me. She stood in the women's gallery, behind the barrier, trying to get a peek of her darling grandson.

Honor her with an *aliyah*? Hold hands with her on the *bimah*? In the synagogue where I had my bar mitzvah, only men had that privilege.

The Saturday of my bar mitzvah was the last time I attended an Orthodox synagogue. After that, when I happened to visit one, I would leave after 10 minutes. I did not feel comfortable there, not during my bar mitzvah, and not later.

And here, away from Israel, thousands of miles from Jerusalem, in Tucson, Arizona, in the Diaspora, I experienced my first significant Shabbat. How absurd. My family has been living in Jerusalem for 10 generations. Hebrew is my first language. My parents are caring and educated. I followed a common Israeli track — elementary school, high school, youth movement (scouts), military service as an officer and university. Yet it took getting to the end of the world, as far from Israel as only Tucson, Arizona, can be, in order for me to significantly connect with my Jewish identity. This was not just absurd; it was shameful and a missed opportunity.

The Masorti Movement

The Masorti Movement is celebrating its 30th anniversary in Israel. (Some communities were established earlier, but there was no organized movement.) The movement made aliyah some 30 years ago and, on the way, it bravely changed its name. The name “Conservative” Judaism, which is derived from the debate with Reform Judaism, was left behind in the Diaspora. Here, in the land of our ancestors, we wanted the name to connect to the Israeli experience on a most authentic level, and the name “Masorti” (traditional) does just that. It is a true, natural and necessary bridge between the people who tried to leave the Jewish religion behind and tuck it deep into the closet — namely, secular Jews — and those who saw the return to the land as the beginning of their religious redemption. The latter, the modern Orthodox, did not think or did not want to connect the great Zionist revolution with new changes in the Jewish religion and *halakhah* (Jewish law).

The Masorti Movement endeavored to bring a new message to Israel, one that was innovative and could create a fundamental change in the attitude of Israeli society toward Judaism. In many ways, this was the most fascinating solution that could be suited to Israeli society. This was not Reform Judaism, which can be seen to be too progressive and too radical, too un-Israeli and, sometimes, too innovative. It was not Orthodox Judaism, modern or otherwise, which conducts a dialogue primarily within itself and which will never be truly egalitarian or able to accept those that are different. It was not Israeli secularism, which, even in cases where it is self-aware, stays on the intellectual rather than the experiential level. (This point will be elaborated later.)

Thirty years — three decades. The Masorti Movement made many important and significant achievements during these three decades, but let us admit it: The revolution never came.

There are some 50 Masorti congregations in Israel. Some are very prosperous. We have a youth movement (NOAM), a student organization (Marom), and quality educational projects (we are the only organization in Israel that holds *b'nei mitzvah* ceremonies for children with special needs). These are great achievements, but we have not yet been able to become an influential, opinion-shaping force in Israeli society.

It is primarily a question of budget. In Israel, there is no separation of church and state, but the only ones reaping benefits from the situation are the Orthodox organizations (modern Orthodoxy, “knitted *kippah*,” and haredim, fervently Ortho-

dox). Orthodox schools, yeshivas, kindergartens, *mikvaot* (ritual baths) — all are financed by the state. Furthermore, the government employs some 3,000 Orthodox rabbis in rabbinical positions. (It is difficult to obtain the exact numbers.)

Egalitarian budgets would lead to major shifts, but it is not just a question of money. It is also a question of readiness. Thirty years ago, when the Masorti Movement was established, Israeli society was different from what it is today. Wherever it existed, the religious and cultural dialogue with Judaism and with Jewish literature was different. The Israel of 30 years ago was able to digest the Masorti message only if it was well camouflaged. *Tali* schools (schools for enhanced Judaism studies) that were established then by the Masorti Movement are a perfect example of this phenomenon. It is one of the best educational programs in Israel and many schools belong to the system. But in order to enter the Israeli educational system, Tali had to fold the Masorti flag and, along with it, some of its principles. Otherwise, it would not have stood a chance. In order to enter through the main entrance, the movement decided then to relinquish its identity.

Self-Definition

Now, after 30 years of Masorti activity, is Israel a different place? I think it is. But first, let us look at some statistics.

Last year, on *erev Pesach*, a few hours before the seder, I received a call from Rabbi Barry Schlesinger, head of the Rabbinical Assembly, the association of Masorti rabbis in Israel, and the rabbi of Jerusalem's Kehillat Moreshet Avraham. A survey of 1,000 Jewish adults in Israel had been published that morning in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Israel's leading newspaper. Conducted by Dr. Mina Zemach, one of Israel's foremost statisticians, the survey dealt with the Jewish identity of Israelis.

"Have you seen it? Schlesinger asked me.

"Indeed, I have," I told him.

A few weeks afterward, we conducted the first meeting of the leadership of the Masorti Movement, during which we expressed a sense that some of us had had for several years: Something was changing in Israeli society. We discussed the results of the survey.

The survey's first question asked the banal and unsophisticated question that many of us would hesitate to ask because it is so direct: "Do you believe in God?" Seventy-seven percent of the respondents said yes; another 8 percent said they believe in some supreme power; 12 percent said no; and 3 percent gave other replies.

The second question tried to ascertain how we, the Israelis, define ourselves. Fifty percent said they are secular; 30 percent said they are traditional (those that keep tradition, a term unrelated to the Masorti Movement); 12 percent said they are religious; and 8 percent said they are *haredi*.

There seems to be a contradiction between the answers to those questions. If 85 percent of Jews in Israel believe in God or some sort of a supreme power, how can it be that half of Israelis consider themselves to be secular? Who is the secular Israeli?

This question is enhanced by the survey's other findings. According to the survey, 96 percent of Israelis (61 percent always, 35 percent sometimes) make *kiddush* (the blessing over the wine) on Friday nights, and 84 percent of Israelis light Shabbat candles (61 percent always, 9 percent often, 14 percent occasionally).

The survey asked many more questions, some of which will be dealt with further on. They all led to one conclusion: The secular Israeli is not "secular" in the superficial meaning that emerges from the English translation of the Hebrew word "*hiloni*." The secular Israeli is not devoid of religion and is not an atheist. The secular Israeli holds a strong, nonconfrontational and even traditional link to Jewish tradition. Secular Israelis respect their tradition and, if it does not threaten their way of life with coercion, they experience this tradition actively.

This trend, which has been growing in Israeli society for a while, can be seen in the results of this survey. It matches trends such as those in two surveys conducted by the Guttman Institute for the AVI CHAI Foundation in 1991 and 1999.

One must not be confused by these results. They are fascinating and a source for some optimism, but they do not teach us anything about Israelis' level of knowledge of Jewish heritage and of Judaism as a culture and a religion, or about their willingness to experience Jewish activities at the synagogue or to learn about the non-Orthodox Jewish movements.

And yet, the answers to this survey are revolutionary. There was a good reason for the conversation I conducted with Rabbi Schlesinger on *erev Pesach*. This survey showed us that secular Israelis are ready, more than ever, to hear the message of the Masorti Movement. They are ready to accept the non-Orthodox Jewish movements without a need for the latter to hide their identity.

Two questions in the survey dealt with conversion and marriage. The answers to both were significant. Forty-five percent of Israeli Jews support Reform and Conservative conversions. Fifty-three percent believe that the state has to recognize Reform and Conservative marriages.

For someone who does not reside in Israel, these answers seem banal. But make no mistake: This is a revolution. Had these questions been asked a decade or two ago, the percentages would have been dramatically lower.

Israeli society is ripe, more than ever in the history of the State of Israel, to accept the liberal interpretations presented by the non-Orthodox movements in Judaism. It has been a complex and prolonged educational process, but this is a golden opportunity. If it is missed, we will lament it for many generations. This opportunity requires us to be creative, attractive, fascinating and exciting in a way that will completely change Israeli society within one decade.

High Holiday Observance

For many years, the non-Orthodox Jewish movements in Israel had to play a defensive game. They suffered discrimination in public funding, did not get equal legal rights, were oppressed by the chief rabbinate and were ignored by the central government and local authorities. The Masorti and Reform movements felt that they were being persecuted from the day they started operating in Israel. Every change was obtained through major efforts and significant private funding. Every plot of land we received for the construction of a synagogue for one of our congregations was accompanied by legal and public confrontations. The question of “Who is a Jew?” and the struggle to gain recognition for conversions are still unresolved. The battle to receive financial support from the state for our educational and cultural activities, in the same way Orthodox organizations are supported, is endless. And there are still many more unresolved issues.

Nevertheless, we have not lost heart. It is important to continue these struggles even today, but we must also go beyond that. Masorti Judaism in Israel cannot remain in this arena. We must not be identified as a movement whose essence is to struggle for equal rights with Orthodox Judaism. This will not lead to our growth or to our reaching more and more people. This is not the way to deeply influence Israeli society. In order to enter the heart of Israel’s mainstream society, we have to create real opportunities for Israelis to identify with us. Nobody wants to identify with the victim who complains year after year that he is being victimized. This does not mean that we are not right but, while evoking some empathy, we could also cause indifference. Enough crying! It is time to present a different message.

This message will come from the grass roots and we can already feel it budding.

On this past Yom Kippur, 800 people participated in the Ne'ilah service at the Hakrayot Masorti Congregation in Kiryat Bialik. Even the mayor was there. He could little afford not to be there. This synagogue attracted more people than any other synagogue in the northern suburbs of Haifa, and perhaps in all of northern Israel.

Kehillat Tiferet Shalom, one of our three congregations in Tel Aviv, located in Ramat Aviv, the heart of secularity, attracted 450 people to Ne'ilah.

At Hod veHadar in Kfar Saba, 700 crowded in for Ne'ilah and 450 filled Magen Avraham in Omer, near Beer Sheva, during Kol Nidre.

This was the case in many of the 50 Masorti congregations throughout Israel.

I've chosen examples outside Jerusalem. We have nine prosperous and impressive congregations in Jerusalem, but these do not necessarily represent Israel as a whole. In order to examine our influence on Israeli society as a whole, we need to analyze the movement's successes outside Jerusalem.

This year, more than any other year, tens of thousands of Israelis throughout the country chose to celebrate the High Holidays with the Masorti Movement. Indeed, it is a small number when compared to our potential membership, but it is an important trend. It is also important to notice that these tens of thousands of people came to us despite the fact that it would have been easier for them to choose alternatives. The alternatives are easier for a number of reasons. We are not known enough, since the Masorti Movement has not invested in marketing in all its years. Many of our synagogues do not look like synagogues, because some 60 percent of our congregations do not have a place of their own, using instead temporary locations, such as bomb shelters, kindergartens and schools. Therefore, the people who did come to our services, most of whom were Israeli *sabras* (natives), came because we managed to convey the feeling that we are the most appropriate place for them. We are the golden mean that is suited to their Jewish identity.

It is from here that change will come. It is already happening. In all the places where we have presented appropriate spiritual and community-oriented leadership, the Masorti Movement has become the center of Jewish activity, with a widespread influence on the community.

Secular Culturalism

"Where are you going for *tikkun*?" I was asked this question about the gatherings of Shavuot a few days before the holiday by a friend from Tel Aviv, a Ph.D. and a "devout secular Jew." I didn't need any explanation. Whoever is aware of the changes

that have taken place in Israel in the last decade knows about the new secular trend of holding a *tikkun* on Shavuot. It is a variation of the traditional *tikkun* (all-night study session), emerging from the confines of the synagogue. Dozens of cultural institutions in Israel participate in this new phenomenon and come out with diverse, fascinating, colorful and creative educational and intellectual programs.

If we tried to map the non-Orthodox Jewish sector in Israel, the liberal Jewish sector, we would find three very distinct focal points. One is Reform Judaism, which over many years of investing in marketing has managed to turn itself into a well-known brand name, even if it doesn't have a big following. Another is Masorti, or Conservative Judaism, with its dozens of congregations in Israel. Although not well known, Masorti has managed to acquire an ever-growing number of members. The third group is secular-cultural Judaism, which, in recent years, has seen some of its institutions attempting to receive recognition as yet another denomination of Judaism.

The differences between Reform and Conservative Judaism are well known, especially to readers of this article. The more interesting question is, what are, if any, the meeting points with secular-cultural Judaism?

The first signs of this new wave of secular culturalism, an intellectual and self-aware secularism, appeared in Israel at the end of the 1970s. The crisis following the 1973 war led to many changes in Israeli society and culture. Alongside the phenomena of *hazara bi-teshuvah* (return to the commandments), and *hazara bi-she'elah* (return to questioning), new groups of secular Jews appeared who tried to find their own connection with the "Jewish bookcase" — the corpus of Jewish writings from throughout the ages — to learn about Judaism without wearing a *kippah* and with no apologies. Their claim was that Judaism is a culture and not a religion. The definition of Jewish culture was appropriately extended. Every work created by Jews fit into this updated definition. There were no longer secular and religious texts, sacred and secular poetry. And so the extended shelf carried the poetry of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and texts by Amos Oz, talmudic Midrashim and S.Y. Agnon's books, biblical lamentations and poems by Yehuda Amichai. The "Jewish bookcase" became a term that, until today, defines this phenomenon. This process was primarily intellectual but also political, trying to initiate the democratization and popularization of classical Jewish texts. The leaders of this movement claimed that the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud did not belong to religious Jews any more than to secular Jews, and that secular Jews have equal ownership over

them. Furthermore, they claimed that works written by Jews over the past century, most of which are secular works, are literally and historically as important as the religious writings of prior generations. Jewish culture has always been built tier by tier, each generation adding to what was created by its predecessors. The secular Jew is sovereign and not subject to the rabbis. He does not need rabbinical mediation between himself and his cultural roots.

This was and still is a fascinating phenomenon that has accelerated over the last decade. Secular-cultural educational institutions were opened as well as cultural centers and a secular *yeshivah*. There is an organization in Israel that certifies “secular rabbis,” which in itself is a somewhat strange term. These rabbis perform life-cycle ceremonies with a secular interpretation.

Israel’s institutionalized Orthodoxy preferred to conduct a dialogue with secular organizations rather than to confront its counterparts in Judaism, namely, the Masorti and Reform movements. Secular Jews were perceived as *tinok shenishba* — as a kidnapped child raised among non-Jews — as opposed to the Masorti and Reform Jews, who are seen as those who have studied and made their own interpretation. The dialogue with secular Jews was seen by the Orthodox as non-threatening. Even today, in meetings meant to bridge the gaps between religious and secular Jews, the secular organizations work with more lenient Orthodox organizations. The liberal movements are usually absent from such meetings. When it comes to government budgets, secular institutions receive state assistance, but those belonging to the Masorti and Reform movements receive no assistance. Of course, if there were Reconstructionist institutions in Israel, they would be treated the same as the other liberal movements.

Secular-cultural Judaism is intellectually stimulating and appealing, but it is not a widespread popular phenomenon. It cannot be such. Its strength is intellectual and therein lies its weakness. How many people can realize their Jewish identity by participating in weekly study groups? Does a critical study of Talmud, even in a diverse group, formulate the authentic identification created by a community? And if we ignore for now the important question about belief in the Creator, is there a true replacement for the synagogue and the community that is built around it, not to mention the authentic nonintellectual aspects of Jewish culture?

It is important to remember that the Zionist revolution was a secular one. The state would not have been established without the secular revolutionaries, the adamant ideologues who chose to reject the *bet hamidrash* (house of study) and the

religious way of life in order to come on *aliyah* (ascension) to the land of Israel. Those revolutionaries insisted on returning to agriculture as part of the redemption of the land. The best example of this is the kibbutz. The Zionist ethos developed around the kibbutz as an ideal. The kibbutz, this exciting, important and heroic human experiment, tried to formulate a new code for human and social behavior and tried to infuse it with content and with another kind of Judaism. This secular experiment was much more fascinating than the secular wave of our days. New Pesach haggadot were written and new content was given to some of the holidays (Shavuot, Tu B'Shevat). The holidays that could not be integrated into this new Jewish-Zionist ethos, such as Tishah B'av, were cast aside.

It was an exciting experiment, but it failed. Some may claim that this was due to the failing of the socialist model of the kibbutz. I hold a different opinion. It is no coincidence that today most *kibbutzim* celebrate Pesach with the traditional haggadah. The kibbutz's attempt to create a novel Judaism was too revolutionary and too radical, and therefore did not withstand the test of time. The revolution brought on a reaction. The first generation knew the classical Jewish world and therefore knew how to rebel against it. The second and third generations were born into a void. This is expressed in the words of Berl Katznelson, one of the main leaders of the Labor movement, a sharp philosopher with succinct statements. He once said: "We wanted to raise a generation of heretics but instead raised a generation of ignorant Jews." The revolution had been authentic for the first generation, but it was just a bunch of slogans for the second generation; it lacked depth and, therefore, it dissolved. Uprooting Judaism from its natural roots, the religious rituals, the synagogue and pure faith was an unnatural process.

It was here that secularity failed in the past and, today, secular-cultural Judaism is following the same path, albeit less enthusiastically and with less ideology and dedication. Judaism is a religion, primarily a religion, and only secondarily a culture.

Post Denominationalism

The liberal Jewish discourse in the world and also in Israel gives much consideration to the issue of the multiplicity of denominations or, more precisely, what is sometimes called the "post-denominational" state of Judaism. Have we reached a point where the distinction among liberal Jewish streams has become anachronistic? Is the distinction among Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews obsolete in a pluralistic, tolerant and multicultural era? Is it preserved only because

of historical, organizational, and financial considerations, and not because of pure ideological reasons?

One assumes that this discourse will accompany non-Orthodox Judaism in the next generations, and it is hard to determine if those who support the idea of post-denominationalism or those who hold onto classical definitions will prevail. It seems that in Israel the answer is clearer. This discussion is appropriate in an ideological and theological forum, but if we disconnect from ideology, concentrating on and examining the practical aspects, we will see that the post-denominational approach is mistaken. It will not increase the non-Orthodox Jewish camp in Israel; it will actually diminish it.

Israel is a conservative country. Even secularism, as shown in the survey discussed earlier, is very traditional. Therefore, there is great significance to the differentiation among the various movements. Some Jews will be open to the message of the Masorti Movement, presenting an open Judaism that confronts the principles of *halakhah*, whereas joining the Reform movement will be seen as too radical, extreme and unreasonable.

A union — even if only organizational — between the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel, although it has many supporters, will blur the necessary differences between the two movements. It will support the solution that seems clear, decisive and more liberal and will turn the more nuanced Conservative-Masorti solution, the golden mean, into one that is swallowed up by the general statement. In the era of mass media and 10-second sound bites, when statements are reduced to black or white, it will be difficult to maintain a distinct Conservative voice when it is heard together with all other non-Orthodox Jewish voices. The man in the street will see it all as Reform Judaism.

We all stand to lose from this, the Conservative as well as the Reform movements. The post-denominational debate is not relevant to Israel's reality. If there are fewer flowers in the Jewish flowerbed, secular Jews will have fewer chances to enjoy their fragrance and maybe even pick one. The flowers need to be different from each other. A flowerbed full of different flowers with different colors is more exciting than one that is uniform in type and color.

New Directions

The Conservative movement is faced with an immense challenge. We have the key, perhaps the most authentic key, to serve as the bridge for Israelis seeking a con-

nection with tradition and the Jewish religion. The Conservative approach of our rabbis, who create changes in *halakhah* using halakhic tools and with much respect for tradition, as well as the egalitarian familial experience that typifies us, combine to present a worthy, accurate and fitting option for Israeli society. This combination has a chance to take root in Israel in the next decade.

Most of our congregations were established 20 to 30 years ago by *olim* (immigrants) from the United States; today, however, they are becoming more and more “Israeli.” New congregations join the movement and seek a home therein. A few months ago, Degel Yehuda in Jerusalem became the first Sephardic congregation to join our movement. It is an egalitarian congregation that uses Sephardic melodies and customs in its services.

The buds of change have appeared. We, as an ideological movement, have to be determined and brave enough to nurture these buds.

Over the next years, the Masorti Movement in Israel will work in two directions. The congregational arm will aim to develop and foster our existing congregations all over Israel and create opportunities for the establishment of new ones. But let us not delude ourselves; not all Israelis will join these congregations. For that purpose, our other arm will offer open, egalitarian, quality religious services according to *halakhah*. Jews, even those very disconnected from religion, require religious services up to four times in their lifetime: circumcision, bat/bar mitzvah, wedding and funeral services. We have to be there for them. We have to create a situation where we will be the providers of those services. Paradoxically, to build on the old joke, we have to aspire to a state of affairs in which the synagogue that the average Israeli does not attend is a Masorti one.

American-Israeli Connections

And one last point.

The growth and development of Conservative Judaism in Israel, and that of non-Orthodox Judaism in general, may have a beneficial effect on the bond between Jews living in Israel and those all over the world — in particular, North American Jews.

Neither Israeli Jews nor world Jewry can afford to lose the common identifying points between physically remote elements of the Jewish people and thereby allow them to dwindle. The success of the Taglit-birthright Israel project has shown to what extent Israel can be the anchor prism through which young Jews identify with their Judaism. An entirely Orthodox Israel, a clerical and illiberal Israel, will

undermine this effort. In a long-term strategic approach, world Jewry, and especially North American Jewry, must do its utmost to assist the non-Orthodox Jewish movements to establish themselves in Israeli society. This support is an investment in future generations.

American Jews gave me one of the best presents I could receive. I was exposed to the Conservative Jewish way of life and understood that authentic Judaism does not have to be Orthodox. I hope that through a joint effort from both sides of the ocean, we will be able to extend this feeling to many more Israelis.