

Zionism Today: A Reconstructionist Reflection

BY MICHAEL M. COHEN

The centrality of Israel in Reconstructionist thought has been a constant since Mordecai Kaplan's seminal work, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward the Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*, was published in 1934. With the Reconstructionist civilizational orientation this was, and is, a logical stance. As Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub point out:

The Reconstructionist understanding of the civilizational character of Judaism predictably has led us to Zionist conclusions from the very outset. If Judaism is recognized as the civilization of the Jewish people, then there is no denying the particular attachment of our people to the Land of Israel – the site of our origins and genesis, and the focus of our hopes and ideals through the millennia.¹

The early recognition of the importance of Zionism also touched on another key point of Kaplanian philosophy: the challenge to the concept of a supernatural God. On this, Ira Eisenstein wrote:

Zionism was, for Kaplan, the great revolutionary movement which carried the Jewish people over the threshold from medievalism to modernism because it interpreted the ancient yearning of Jews to “return” to their millennial Messianic aspirations in naturalist instead of supernaturalist terms. Thus, rather than wait for the Messiah to redeem them from exile, the Jews themselves undertook the task.²

It is now more than seventy years since Kaplan put forward the idea of the importance of Israel in the lives of Jews living outside of Israel. The question for us today is: How relevant is Israel to Diaspora Reconstructionist Jews?

Zionism in Reconstructionist Judaism

As a movement, we invest energies in ensuring that Israel plays an important role in what we do. The web page of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF) has a serious multi-faceted section dedicated to Israel.³ Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College are expected to have a high level of pro-

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iciency in Hebrew. They are required to spend a year studying in Israel. This year we are running a Reconstructionist slate for the first time ever in the World Zionist Congress elections. The study of Israel is a part of Reconstructionist youth and adult education. There is a Reconstructionist *minyán* that meets monthly in Jerusalem.

We can and should be proud of these accomplishments. But is there more that we could be doing? Early Zionism saw the Diaspora as a poor second choice of where to live a Jewish life. While Kaplan saw the importance of Israel to living a Jewish life, even making *aliya* when he was in his 90s, he never negated the idea of Jews living outside of Israel. Like many other Zionist thinkers, Kaplan foresaw an ongoing relationship between the Jewish community in Israel and communities outside of Israel. The question is: What should that relationship look like today for Reconstructionists?

Israel and the Diaspora

There are those in the Zionist movement today who still say that living outside of Israel is like being in the audience when the real action is happening on the stage. As Reconstructionists, we reject that viewpoint as a false and even insulting dichotomy. One can make the argument that the explosion of Jewish creativity and learning in North America in the past quarter century is, in part, a direct result of Israel's existence (there are other factors as well). This gives Jews in the Diaspora the emotional, psychological and physical security to

act Jewish and live Jewish lives in ways with which previous generations would not have been comfortable. And that is exactly how it should be. Israel as a hub reaching out to Jewish communities throughout the world was a model that Reconstructionism felt was very important. But that relationship is a two-way street as well, with a Torah also going out from the Diaspora to Israel. And that is also exactly how it should be.

One of the great ironies of the establishment of the Zionist state is that Kaplan's Diaspora model of living in two civilizations also holds true in Israel. In the United States, for example, the challenge is to know how to navigate through a *humash* with the same ease with which one can find the "Arts & Leisure" section of the Sunday *New York Times*. In the Diaspora, most Jews define their Judaism as being religious, while in Israel most Jews identify more with a secular-national identity.

National and Religious Identities

It was Martin Buber who pointed out that the religious/national split, going back to the "Sanhedrin" convened by Napoleon in the early 19th century, is false. As he wrote:

I am setting up Hebrew humanism in opposition to that Jewish nationalism which regards Israel as a nation like unto other nations and recognizes no task for Israel save that of preserving and asserting itself. Israel is not a na-

tion like other nations, no matter how much its representatives have wished it during certain eras. Israel is a people like no other, for it is the only people in the world which, from its earliest beginnings, has been both a nation and a religious community. In the historical hour in which its tribes grew together to form a people, it became the carrier of a revelation . . . Israel was and is a people and a religious community in one, and it is this unity which enabled it to survive in an exile no other nation had to suffer, an exile which lasted longer than the period of its independence. He who severs this bond severs the life of Israel.⁴

The challenge for Jews in the Diaspora is to understand that while the challenge is to live in two civilizations, a national one and a Jewish one, the latter contains a national element as well as a religious one. The challenge for the Jews of Israel living in a secular-national world is to learn how to integrate the religious aspect of Judaism into their lives.

The argument can be made that this is already happening: The language of Israel is Hebrew, the language of the Bible; the Jewish holidays are national holidays. But the holidays are approached from a nationalistic perspective (which can be limiting) and with a content that can often be shallow and superficial. There are those Jews who live a mostly religious Jewish life and put up a wall between themselves and the rest of Israeli and Western influences; and then there are those

who combine the two but in ways that most Reconstructionists would find problematic, in particular with regard to an all-too-prevalent negative attitude toward non-Jews. The ideal that we are talking about here is a wholesome integration based upon an interaction of the values and traditions of Judaism through the lens of experience, intuition, and reason.⁵

Challenges in Israel Today

We read in the Torah, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the Land of Israel” (Exodus 23:9).⁶ We once were powerless, so we should remember when we have power not to abuse it. While Israel’s relationship with her minorities is made complicated by the ongoing conflict, it can be said that the often painful lessons of centuries of being a minority in the Diaspora have not always been applied as Jews find themselves in the majority position. As an example of this dynamic, there is Israel’s national anthem, *Hatikva*, which reflects the aspirations of eighty percent of the country, but not the twenty percent Arab minority.

The Law of Return

The Law of Return is another sacred cow that needs to be addressed. While Jews should always know that they can come to Israel, the Law of Return as it stands now is based on the assumption that the phenomenon of Jews living in the Diaspora should be understood as

temporary. The truth is that most of Jewish history has taken place in the Diaspora, a history that may be complicated, but that also produced some of our greatest accomplishments.

From an environmental perspective, the belief that the land can hold an endless number of people is untenable. From the perspective of physical survival, the notion of all Jews being located in one physical location may also have its drawbacks. Finally it is time to face up to the inequality and injustice of allowing Jews whose ancestors have not lived on the land for thousands of years to return at will, while Palestinians who lived on the land in their and their ancestor's lifetime are denied that right.

There have always been two prevailing perspectives in Zionist thought: the political Zionists, who primarily focused on obtaining a refuge for Jews who suffered from persecution, and the spiritual Zionists, who were more concerned with the type of Jewish society that was to be built in the Land of Israel. The Reconstructionist movement has seen itself more situated in the spiritual Zionist camp.

That said, there remain many areas where many Reconstructionists can easily find Israel wanting: the non-recognition of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism; the treatment of minorities; the ongoing occupation (despite the withdrawal for Gaza); the state of the environment;⁷ and the growing social gap, to name a few. For many Jews in the Diaspora, these blemishes also become reasons to distance themselves from both Israel and Zionism.

The Centrality of Israel

My family and I have been fortunate to have spent several of the past nine years living on Kibbutz Ketura⁸ in the southern Arava valley of Israel. The kibbutz, founded in 1973 by the Young Judaea youth movement, is an Israeli community that is democratic, egalitarian, environmentally conscious and pluralistic, with religious and secular Jews living side by side. Being the home of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies,⁹ the kibbutz also includes Israeli Arabs, Palestinians and Jordanians as part of its community. If the rest of Israel looked like this, my guess is that more North American Jews would feel more comfortable with and better connected to Israel.

Ahavat Yisrael, the love of Israel and the Jewish people, is an existential state of mind that transcends the particulars of how the story gets played out, especially when we don't like the direction in which the script has gone. As Reconstructionists, we should consider engaging with Israel to a greater degree than we do.

- We need to understand Israel on a deeper level, beyond the issues of the conflict on which we so often focus (The web site www.israel21c.org is an excellent source of information about Israeli developments in health, technology, culture and democracy.)

- It is easy to invest the time to know more about the daily news of Israel through such sources as *Haaretz*,¹⁰ *The Jerusalem Post*¹¹ and *The Jerusalem Report*.¹²

- The World Zionist Congress, for bet-

ter and for worse, provides the opportunity for every Jew around the world to be represented in decisions about Israel and the Zionist movement. It is very simple to register to vote in the World Zionist Congress elections.¹³

- Study abroad is an important pedagogic feature of our children's college years. Many are pulled to study in Europe and other continents. There is no reason why a student can't study a semester in one of those places, as well as a semester in Israel. It is a model that we should encourage.

- Israel faces many challenges, and many organizations have been established to help Israel deal with those challenges. For Jews in the Diaspora, these organizations provide opportunities to be involved in building the kind of Israel we envision.

- While *aliya* may not be for everyone, its serious consideration should be a part of the process of how each of us defines and builds our Jewish lives. If *aliya* is not an option, the energies that would have gone into building the Zionist state should be used to create a meaningful Jewish life in the Diaspora.

"The Silver Platter," a poem by Israeli poet Nathan Alterman, is a moving and powerful testament about the establishment of the modern State of Israel. It was based on a quotation from the first Israeli president Chaim Weizman: "A state is not handed to a people on a silver platter." The story of Zionism and Israel is moving and powerful, while at the same time it can be difficult and troubling; in short, it is a complex story. The relationship of Diaspora Jews

to Israel can often be complicated by that reality. The truth is that for 2,000 years, generations of Jews prayed for the reestablishment of the Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Unlike them, we are not only able to pray, we are able to work to turn those prayers, hopes and visions into a reality. That reality includes shaping the society and culture of the modern State of Israel defining the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Judaism, and recognizing the role that Israel can play in helping the Diaspora meet the challenge of creating meaningful and vibrant communities. The Reconstructionist voice has been and should continue to be an important voice in that unfolding story.

1. Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (Elkins Park, P.A.: The Reconstructionist Press, 2000), 65

2. Ira Eisenstein in *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Simon Noveck (Washington, D.C.: Bnai Brith Press, 1985), 274

3. www.jrf.org

4. Martin Buber in *The Zionist Idea*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Atheneum Press, 1979), 459-460.

5. Eisenstein, *op.cit.* 268

6. See also Leviticus 19:34 and Deuteronomy 17-19.

7. www.greenzionism.org

8. www.ketura.org.il

9. www.arava.org

10. www.haaretz.com

11. www.jpost.com

12. www.jrep.com

13. See www.azm.org