

# A ZIONISM WORTH RECONSTRUCTING

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*The attachment of younger North American Jews to Israel is not what it used to be.*

As recently as 30 years ago, the State of Israel was central to Jewish identity in North America. After the Holocaust, Jews took pride in Israelis' self-defense. Israel was viewed as a shining example of the dogged commitment to democracy and human rights in the face of the unremitting hostility of its neighbors. It held the promise of Jewish revival in a new, modern idiom. Visits to the Land had the emotional intensity of pilgrimages, of returning home after two millennia.

That is no longer the case. Many North American Jews question the relevance of Israel to their Jewish identity. They feel no deep connection to land in general or to the Holy Land. One leading cause of discomfort and alienation for liberal Jews is the official control of the Orthodox rabbinate over personal status issues and the unofficial prevalence among Israelis, at least until recently, of the notion that the "Judaism I don't practice must be Orthodox Judaism." That cause is rivaled for North American Jews by

their discomfort with and alienation from the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and other violations of the rights of Palestinians.

The question of Israel's relevance is definitely a challenge for a not insignificant number of Reconstructionist rabbinical students, teens, and young adults with whom I have worked on summer and year-long Israel programs for the past fifteen years. Reconstructionists do not believe that Israel is the land promised to Jews by God.

Without this theology, even rabbinical students who feel deeply connected to Israel have difficulty articulating how Israel will be relevant to their American rabbinate. They are not sure how they might "use Israel" to help those they serve to strengthen their Jewish identity, and they do not see why those they serve might prioritize connecting with the half of the Jewish people living in Israel or with the land itself.

One response comes from Reconstructionism itself, a response that might be useful to those outside the movement as well. Rabbi

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, promoted a “New Zionism” that imagined Israel as the key to reconstituting Jews as a people. Understanding that the vast majority of North American Jews were unlikely to make aliyah, Kaplan still believed that the Jewish people had to be “situated in its homeland” in order for the Jewish tradition to remain “relevant to the very ideologies, cultural, economic and sociological, which challenge it.” (*Judaism Without Supernaturalism*, p. 167).

Only in Israel, Kaplan taught, can we truly test whether Judaism can be a civilizing force. That is why Israel is necessary to the identity construction of all Jews. Stated differently, outside of Israel, you may feel responsible for what is going on as a human being. You may even feel an imperative to act, as a Jew. But the ills of your community are not the fault of the Jews. In Israel, however, the Jews are in the majority. So when children are starving, it is my fault; when the environment is being destroyed and when drugs are running rampant, it is my fault; and when the rights of Palestinians are being trampled, it is my fault *as a Jew*.

In the words of Rabbi Richard Hirsh, executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, speaking in 2003 to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation’s Israel Policies Task Force, Zionism “is not merely an ideology of refuge,

but a long-range process of a people to rededicate itself.” That’s why, when Reconstructionist rabbinical students and teenagers come to Israel, we try to show them this process of rededication: We visit Israelis who are engaged in a long-term process of building a society that will guarantee freedom, justice, and peace.

If the aim of the New Zionism is to situate Judaism within real community, then a critical aspect of these Israel trips is seeing the “underbelly” of Israeli society, the raw materials of economic and social life with which any living ideology must grapple. My students tour the Katamonim, disadvantaged Jerusalem neighborhoods, with activists from *Singur Kehilati* (Community Advocacy Association), and they hear Israelis like a woman named Rut, who told the story of her journey from impoverishment to empowerment and her successful battle to own her own home. They meet with Yael Ben-Yefet, director of *Ha-Keshet Ha-Demokratit Ha-Mizrahit*, and a junior member of the Tel-Aviv City Council, who traces the history of ethnic discrimination against Mizrahi Jews (Jews from the East). They visit the non-profit Gvanim Association in Sderot, which runs more than 40 social service projects for immigrant youth at risk, the severely disabled, and families needing parenting assistance.

We don’t stop at economic poverty. Anat Hoffman, director of the Reform

movement's Israel Religious Action Center, demystifies issues of religion and state. They meet with Palestinian youth in the city of Ramle and learn that when the youth visit Ramallah (in the West Bank) to express solidarity with other Palestinians, they are considered traitors by the Ramallah Palestinians for being citizens of Israel. Students tour with Rabbis for Human Rights, Ir-Amim, Encounter, and Breaking the Silence to hear Palestinians tell their narratives and to hear Jewish-Israelis wrestle with issues of equality, political and cultural autonomy, human rights, and personal security in the context of the complexities of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

They spend Kabbalat Shabbat with the secular *kehilot* (community) Beit Tefilah Yisraeli in Tel-Aviv and Nigun Halev in Moshav Nahalal up north. There are new prayer communities starting up all over the country. Secular Jewish Israelis ages 20 to 50 are now searching inside their own tradition, unafraid to call it their own and unafraid to learn from their American brothers and sisters about Jewish spiritual practice. While many rabbinical students find this new communal practice more like campfire singing than prayer, others describe it as their most meaningful and honest prayer experience in Israel. This reconstruction of secular Jewish Israeli identity is organic, democratic, egalitarian, and process-oriented, and many groups

have prioritized community activism and justice.

Of course, without special effort, being in Israel gives one the opportunity to experience diverse Hebrew cultural expression, a value that is difficult if not impossible to experience in North America. Culture, high and low, happens in Hebrew, with traditional sources being referenced daily in the news, in poetry, and in song. Students also grow attached to the celebration of the *chagim*, the festivals, here. From olive oil and date honey to the hot sun and rare rain to the smell of an etrog and the sound of the *shofar*, the rhythms of the Jewish calendar make sense in Israel. Our civilization here is diverse, and forthcoming generations of Israeli Jews will not only be mixed Ashkenazi-Mizrahi as they are today, but mixed Ethiopian, American, Russian, Indian, and more.

For some students, this encounter with Jewish-Israeli culture emphasizes how different they are as North Americans. While enjoying it, they remain outsiders. Others feel embraced. One student, Amy Loewenthal, described her experience this way:

Old ladies who sit next to me on the bus want to know exactly where I live, how much I pay for rent, why I haven't yet made aliyah: they want to mind my own

business. People scan each other's clothing for a generally easy read of religious identity – what kind of a *kippah* a man is wearing, how much of a woman's hair is covered. These signify volumes. It would be a natural American reaction to feel stifled in this social climate, where freedom of individual expression is not the highest value. Instead, I find myself feeling delighted to be considered as part of a group. Although it is my custom in the U.S. to wear a small *kip-pah* to show reverence for God, Israelis are usually startled and confused by women wearing a *kippah*, because it is considered a man's garment. In Israel, I choose to wear a bandana instead, out of respect for the social norm. Given the choice, I would rather be in relationship with others than insist on my own individuality.

Another student, Evette Lutman, compared her encounter with Israel to the study of Jewish texts:

Reconstructionists are good at analyzing Jewish texts in the context in which they were written. What circumstances

gave rise to the need for this text? How did the unique world political situation affect the Jewish community in this particular locale, and what documents/*halakhot* resulted as a response?

The time I spent in Israel made her, for me, a Jewish text as real and as complicated as the *Tanakh*. Most certainly, Israel has its “textual” ambiguities and contradictions. There is much myth surrounding the rise of the State, and as in our Creation story, there is more than one version of events. Just as there is much in the *Tanakh* with which I struggle, even find repugnant and offensive, so, too, it is for me with Israel. Then I consider the circumstances that gave rise to the need for this, our most modern “text,” and the unique world political situation with which the Jewish community was faced at the time, and I come to a more nuanced understanding of what developed in response. My time in Israel infused in me the value of engaging with this text, of struggling with it, living within its conflict and ambiguity. I am therefore free to challenge her ethics

not as a traitor but, *davka*, as a devoted scholar who finds holiness even in those moments of conflict and contradiction.

For most students, there is something intangible about Israel that enters their being, notwithstanding the challenges. Many find that the reality here is both more painful and much more nuanced than they could have envisioned. There is a quiet understanding and acceptance of complexity

that begins to live alongside a jumble of other feelings. They enjoy immersing themselves in Hebrew culture and they gain spiritual insights from living in the land where our civilization began. There is also hope, generated by contact with the many Israelis dedicated to building a just society with whom my students share values and a vision. That place of hope is also the place of connection between the work they do in North America and their Judaism, and among themselves, Israel, and Israelis.