

Infusing Reform Zionism and Israel into the Language of Congregations

The term Reform Zionism is difficult to understand and in the past, during the days of “classical Reform Judaism,” it may have been viewed as an oxymoron. Today Reform Zionism takes a proactive stance in asserting its role in history through an ideological and theological perspective. By characterizing Zionism as Reform, a religious movement, it implies that it is a theology. However, Zionism, a yearning for *Eretz Yisrael* no matter how it is defined, lends itself to an ideology. When “Reform” and “Zionism” are combined it is up to the congregation, led by both clergy and educators, to determine if it is an ideology or theology. Typically the clergy members put forth a theology and the educators put forth an ideology. The challenge congregations face is how to assert a Reform Zionist theology that leads to a heightened sense of ideology, and in turn, action. This challenge incorporates how the leaders of the synagogue will educate their congregants about Reform Zionism so that they will internalize a warm feeling, if not love, for Israel that will strengthen their Jewish identities and enrich their Jewish practice.

Congregations have many hurdles to overcome and the notion of educating about Reform Zionism and Israel seems to be lower on the list than membership, outreach, worship, and youth. According to Steven M. Cohen, at any given moment only 40% of American Jewish adults are members of a synagogue and Reform Jews affiliate and attend worship at a lower rate than Orthodox and Conservative Jews.¹ Perhaps one would view this as a failure of the traditional synagogue model which mainly concentrates its efforts on membership and worship. Other studies show that Jews, while they care about Israel’s survival, do not have a strong sense of Jewish peoplehood and that Israel is not a significant factor in their religious identity.²

¹ Steven M. Cohen, “Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why,” *S3K Report 1* (Fall 2006): 1.

² American Jewish Committee, “2003 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion” (1/11/2004), <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=846741&ct=1051537> (accessed December 25, 2007).

Therefore, it seems that bringing people into this type of meaningful relationship with Israel is major struggle for the American Jewish community. As it is, actively being Jewish, especially Reform, is no longer considered a responsibility, but a choice. Judaism competes for peoples' time and interest in a world where community can be found elsewhere, even online.

Congregational leaders already feel this tension and are torn whether or not to infuse some sort of language about Israel, which may alienate the members they worked so hard to find. Israel is a volatile subject. Many political views are wrapped up within it, making it difficult for congregations to even touch upon it.

With so many obstacles to creating a Reform Zionist theology why should congregations pursue this endeavor? Assuming the premise that an internalized sense of Zionism enriches one's Judaism, congregations can start to tackle the other challenge that lies ahead: why it is important for a congregation to make Israel compelling and meaningful to the life of the congregation and its members. How is this articulated and how is this done? Is it through "one-shot deals" or strategic educational planning combined with organizational and curricular change? How does a congregation ensure that whatever they are able to accomplish regarding Israel education and commitment is sustainable over a period of time, and not just occurring because of a holiday celebration or Israel's 60th anniversary?

One major question is how to measure success. A successful congregation who infuses Reform Zionist theology and ideology into the fabric of its very being will be able to demonstrate this through the language and prayers it chooses for worship, how its holidays are celebrated, the artwork on the walls, the Jewish music taught in the classrooms, how much Hebrew spoken in the hallways, its congregational trips, its expectations for all teens to spend at least a month in Israel, its subsidies offered to families and teens for trips, and so on. There are so many possibilities. While it is difficult to measure theology, one can measure ideology

grounded in the theology that plays itself out systemically and comprehensively throughout every aspect of congregational life. This is how one can tell if the congregation has crafted their Reform Zionist theology in a thoughtful manner. For example, rather than having short-term courses, or only one grade focused on Israel, what it means to be a Reform Zionist is taught to all students throughout the entire life span. Israel does not need to be an independent subject, since so much of what it means to be Jewish such as understanding our prayers and history and learning Torah is intertwined with language and notions of Israel. Not just within geographical, historical, or mythic Israel, but also with the people Israel.

In the Spring 2007 issue of the CCAR Journal Rabbi Michael Marmur proposes one notion of a Reform Zionist theology in order to help rabbis combat these issues. Using the metaphor of the four or five cups of wine from the *Seder* he emphasizes the importance for congregations to create a liberal Israel theology to help bridge Israelis and Jews in the Diaspora and strengthen one's relationship to Judaism while keeping political tensions in mind. Writing from an Israeli's perspective he claims that Jews in the Diaspora feel distant from the Israel portrayed in the media.³ He faults Jews in the Diaspora for being less interested in engaging in a meaningful dialogue with Israelis. Just as God becomes present when Jews participate in learning, prayer, and community "God becomes present, too, in the people Israel and the State of Israel, when we display the confidence to face up to the inadequacies, the honesty to face up to the often grim prospects, and the energy to appreciate the huge achievements."⁴

Even if they subscribe to the notion of Reform Zionist theology that Marmur presents, or any other, congregational leaders have a difficult time translating it into an ideology.

Traditionally this has been a problem that the Movement has yet to solve. Barry Chazan writes

³ Michael Marmur, "Happiness inside the State: Toward a Liberal Theology of Israel," *CCAR Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 2 Issue 212 (Spring 2007): 86.

⁴ M. Marmur, 94.

about this in his article “Israel in American Jewish Schools Revisited” in 1979 and in 1999 Walter Ackerman also tackles this issue. Chazan faults congregations for their inability to clearly articulate their goals for teaching Israel and for not being able to address the underlying question of what Israel means to American Jews living in America.⁵ Ackerman criticizes formal Jewish education for only being able to create a symbolic ethnicity which leads to positive attitudes and some identification with Israel, but no change in behavior.⁶

In a study of Israel education in Reform congregational schools, Lisa D. Grant found that 25 years later these issues still exist. Educators do not seem to have a carefully planned Israel education program. While congregations participate in formal and informal Israel educational activities across the spectrum of youth, adult, and family education, many cannot concretely articulate why Israel should matter in the life of a Reform Jew. Israel is taught as a sacred symbol, content area, or means of developing and reinforcing Jewish identity.⁷ The goals for a Reform Zionist ideology have not changed much over time and when absent of a theological framework do not seem to make sense to a congregation.

One educator in Grant’s study remarked that the reason it was difficult for the congregation to create a strong Israel curriculum is due to the Reform Movement’s ambivalence of why Israel is central to Reform Jewish identity. Historically the Movement has struggled with its relationship to Israel. Each platform and conference since the mid-1800’s demonstrates this. Originally Reform Judaism rejected nationhood as an organizing principle for the Jewish faith and then changed its views in 1937, when the Columbus Platform asserted the ideological statement that all Jews have an obligation to help build the Jewish homeland, not only as a refuge

⁵ Barry Chazan, “Israel in American Jewish Schools Revisited,” *Jewish Education* 42:2 (1979).

⁶ Walter Ackerman, “Israel in American Jewish Education,” *iEnvisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of Norma American Jews*, Along Gal, ed., (Jerusalem and Detroit: The Magnes Press and Wayne State University Press, 1996), 173-190.

⁷ Lisa D. Grant, “Israel Education in Reform Congregational Schools,” *CCAR Journal*, Vol LIV, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 3-24.

for the oppressed, but a center for Jewish cultural and spiritual life.⁸ Forty years later the Centenary Perspective furthered this premise of “obligation” by creating a category about the State of Israel and the Diaspora. This added a theological dimension by recognizing that all Jews are bound to the land of Israel and Reform Jews, but maintained the ideological premise that all Jews must help the State define itself while creating strong Jewish communities wherever they lived, building the synagogue as the foundation.⁹

In 1999 the CCAR accepted the Pittsburgh Platform and created a more programmatic view for Reform Jews, which moved Reform Zionism solely into the ideological realm defining “Israel” as *Am Yisrael*, *Klal Yisrael*, and *Eretz Yisrael*. Jews were charged to help strengthen Progressive Judaism in Israel in order to enrich the spiritual lives of both Israelis and Diaspora Jews.¹⁰ The platform affirms and validates Jewish life both in and outside of Israel encouraging each group to learn more about the other. While the State of Israel is a home for Jews it is most certainly not the center for Reform Jewish life.

Today the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) asserts as its mission: “To provide vision, leadership and programmatic support to Reform Jewish congregations and to perpetuate and advance Reform Judaism.” To fulfill this mission the URJ lists four major goals, one of which mentions Israel. It states: “A commitment to *klal Yisrael*, the entirety of the Jewish people, with special focus on the people and the state of Israel, and on world Jewry, particularly on the needs of Progressive congregations everywhere.”¹¹ This is the Movement’s Reform Zionist ideology which has removed Israel from all tenets of Reform theology: *Torah*, *avodah*, and *g’milut*

⁸ Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Columbus Platform,” *The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism* (1937), http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=40&pge_id=1606 (accessed December 25, 2007).

⁹ Central Conference of American Rabbis, “Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective,” (San Francisco: 1976), http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=41&pge_id=1606 (accessed December 25, 2007).

¹⁰ Central Conference of Reform Rabbis, “Pittsburgh Platform,” *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, (Pittsburgh: 1999), http://ccarnet.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=44&pge_id=1606 (accessed December 25, 2007).

¹¹ Union for Reform Judaism, “About the Union for Reform Judaism,” <http://urj.org/about/> (accessed December 25, 2007).

chasidim. This message of Israel, standing as an independent entity devoid of theology, is not what should be espoused to the Movement's congregations.

Jonathan Ariel, in "From Herzl to Herzliya – Notes Towards Recasting Israel Education," proposes moving towards a model for the younger generation that involves initiating, elevating and liberating in order to re-imagine Israel and Zion in Jewish life for a global, technological world. He says that Jews identify with Israel less today, which is true, but one could argue that many do not identify at all. Identification has not shrunk, it has completely diminished. He poses as an excellent question which is the paradox of this situation, "Do people feel the way they feel because they know what they know, or do they rather know what they know because they feel what they feel?"¹² Both are extremely important when thinking about the pedagogic model of "Know," "Feel," and "Do." His suggestion, to increase a Jew's commitment to Israel through education, arts and travel, makes sense. Holidays and rituals of life cycles can be framed through an Israel lens. These are creative approaches, but the first step is for a congregation to create its interpretation of Reform Zionism.

Our congregations must craft a Reform Zionist theology with practical ramifications. If "knowing" is theology and "doing" is ideology then education, in a holistic sense, is the "feeling." The words in the prayer books do not necessarily affect one's feelings about Israel, nor does a platform which reflects a movement's stance. Therefore, an integral piece of one's Judaism is having a relationship with Israel. The congregation's role within this is to create many entry points. This may be through teaching Hebrew, which is an entrée into Israeli culture and texts. For some it may be worship; for others, social action. And, for those already along this path, this can be through advocating for Israel amongst Reform Jews of all ages or helping to establish Progressive Judaism in Israel.

¹² Jonathan Ariel, "From Herzl to Herzliya – Notes Towards Recasting Israel Education," *From Altneuland to Tel Aviv: Of Dreams and Deeds*, David Breakstone & Ariel Feldstein, eds., (Israel: The Zionist Library, 2006).

Therefore, one must ask, what is this Reform Zionism all about? In a congregational setting Reform Zionism must be grounded in theology. We are not commanded by God to return to the land, as if we are living in exile, but to support and believe in the land with a full mind and full heart. This means recognizing the inextricable link between Judaism and Israel. We pray towards Jerusalem, for Jerusalem, and for peace with its neighbors because there is nothing more important than the sanctification of human life. We read about the land of Israel in our most sacred texts and follow its seasons through holiday celebrations such as Sukkot and Passover. We also commemorate special days honoring the creation of the State of Israel and memorializing those who lost their life for the State. These are more than just civic holidays like Memorial Day and Thanksgiving which we celebrate in America. Our ancient prayers are included in our ceremonies and services, thus making them Jewish as well as Reform.

To enrich the spiritual lives of their members, congregations must educate all of them about what it means to be part of a collective called the Jewish people. This is the narrative that must be repeated through our words and actions:

I exist in the present with other Jews around the world, but I carry the Jewish people's history with me and work to further Jewish peoplehood. I am part of a long tradition and chain working hard to learn our texts and about our past and marrying a Jew and teaching youth so that I can help to preserve its future. Part of the history I carry is bound up in Israel – as a land and as a State. I am responsible for helping its fights, speaking out when I disagree with its policy, and teaching the future about all of its successes, beauty and shortcomings. I am commanded to do this no matter where I live in the world because this was the covenant into which I entered. I received at birth and I have actively engaged in it ever since. Where does this come from? It needs a citation!

Not only must we work to establish our brand of Judaism in Israel, we must work even harder to brand the hearts of Reform Jews everywhere. This conversation has only just started. Reform Zionism will continue to evolve, as its name implies. However, it must hold an important place in every Reform Jew's life. The link between Judaism and Israel are intertwined tightly and we

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must continue to educate liberal Jews everywhere on how to embrace it. This is our mission and it is not to be taken lightly.

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