

I. Introduction

The sun was setting over the Mediterranean Sea as we sat with several hundred people on a glorious early Friday evening in July. It was time to greet the Shabbat here in Tel Aviv with the Israeli community, Bet Tefila Yisraeli. Here we sat on the edge of Israel's "white city," its cultural center and heart of "secular" Hebrew culture. As we sang the words of Kabbalat Shabbat, greeting the shabbat bride, we were enveloped in a warm, traditional blanket as we sung the words of generations who have greeted shabbat all over the world. The blanket was made more cozy and comfortable by the melodies and words of contemporary Israeli song and poetry along used in prayer.

The aura of peacefulness and joy was extraordinary as it brought us more than Shabbat – it offered a view of the wholeness that is often fleeting among Israelis and between Israeli and diaspora Jews. In a land where the development of non Orthodox Judaism has been stifled, it is now blossoming into a beautiful garden of creativity, relevant and meaningful, joyous and uplifting. The visionary, courageous and tenacious Israelis who are reclaiming Judaism for themselves and this generation are creating new expressions of Jewish ritual and prayer and reclaiming our tradition's gift of Jewish learning.

Why is this so remarkable? Well, the grand political compromise of the founders of the State of Israel that offered political partnership to an Orthodox hierarchical establishment in exchange for their support of a pre-Messianic Jewish nation had serious unintended consequences. It gave control of Jewish religious functions to a chief rabbinate that has used this control to exert power over education, funding for religious institutions and life cycle events for all Jews who wish to reside in Eretz Yisrael. It has also ruled on personal status issues such as conversion and "who is a Jew" from an extremely narrow set of definitions. It has rejected the authenticity or authority of all non-Orthodox rabbis and thus invalidated conversions of sincere and well-prepared converts.

Perhaps worst of all, it has hijacked Judaism in Israel since the establishment of the state, allowing for only one definition and one way of being Jewish – according to an increasingly ultra-Orthodox designation. The vast majority of Israelis, descendants of the pioneers – the *chalutzim* – who built up the land, embraced a secular messianism, wherein the reclaiming of the Land was experienced as a complete redemption. Back in 1948 they didn't believe they needed Jewish religious practice – they were content to leave this to the Orthodox who would sustain it on behalf of all of us. In the process, they created the modern nation that IS Israel – a modern, secular, western democracy. But in this generation it has become clear that under

the authority of the chief rabbinate, Judaism itself has become inaccessible to the very population that makes the nation hum- - the secular majority.

It is quite amazing that the very institution of the chief rabbinate is not even a Jewish invention – and it is unnatural to the Rabbinic Judaism that our ancestors have shaped over the last 2000 years. Our rabbis created an incredibly democratic system where local rabbis had authority and all could enter the Talmudic conversations that would shape the ongoing discernment of Jewish law for the Jewish people.

The institution of the Chief Rabbi was a convenience created by European rulers and the Ottoman occupiers of Palestine – affording them ease of communicating with the Jewish community through a designated leader. A leader THEY designated--- not someone with mutually agreed authority by the Jewish people. It is a bizarre manipulation of modern circumstance that has given a huge source of power to an entity that is antithetical to the very Jewish tradition that they claim to be protecting.

Why should we care? You may think this is only relevant to Jews who live in Israel. We each have enough troubles of our own. Some of us are averse to talking about Israel, out of concern for Israel's use of power in its struggle to survive. Perhaps the vision of a Jewish state that lacks freedom of religion is so distasteful and unpleasant that we cannot see a way to engage with it.

But I would like to suggest that *this issue is our issue* -- Israelis are our people and Israel is only place on earth that is a Jewish nation – the only complete laboratory for living according to Torah that our people possesses. We need the example and the partnership with this laboratory to help sustain and nurture a dynamic future for the Jewish people. Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish people.

In fact, she is not letting us down. Today, the creativity and Jewish engagement coming out of new pluralistic, non-denominational, contemporary Jewish expressions among Israelis is fulfilling a yearning for Israelis whose Judaism has been too long usurped by an ultra orthodox political machine.

Their yearning is in fact -- our yearning – it is just what we need for our own Jewish engagement – it is hands-on, non-hierarchical, adaptive and responsive to the needs, tastes and interests of a new generation of Jews in the twenty first century.

This was the vision of the founders of the state as captured by Mordecai Kaplan in "a New Zionism":

A New Zionism, by Mordecai M. Kaplan: "If Zionism.... Can be shown to be part of every Jew's striving to fulfill himself as a human being. "Give us first a stone whereon to lay our head," wrote Berditchewski, "and then we shall **dream**."

Kaplan saw the power in the dreams of our people, ignited by return to a Jewish homeland. Yet he also anticipated the problem a pluralistic Jewish society in Israel. Kaplan cautioned us that the regeneration of Jewish spirit in our day depends on a pluralistic, international Jewish community:

A New Zionism, by Mordecai M. Kaplan: "If Zionism is to redeem the Jewish people and regenerate its spirit, it has to broaden its own perspective, and undertake to cope with the two-fold problem of getting the traditionalists to accept the principle of separation of institutional religion from the state and **reconstituting the Jewish people** as an international people, with its nucleus in Israel.

We, the Jewish people, have a long-awaited opportunity to dream. Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded us that our history informs our present:

"What is the meaning of the State of Israel? ... In no other community do we witness such an intense, ongoing search, such an effort to understand itself in terms of a higher vision as in Israel. Mere self-preservation is regarded as an inadequate motivation...

*When the lord brought the exiles back to Zion
We were like those who **dream**. Psalm 126:1"*

We dream of a new awakening of Jewish life that is filled with joy and alive with meaning.

We dream of sharing our Jewish journeys with our brothers and sisters all around the world.

We dream of a Jewish nation that is a laboratory for Jewish learning, creativity and spiritual flowering.

Israelis are dreaming. They are yearning, curious and seeking a life-enhancing encounter with our centuries-old story. They share a deep need to be modern Jews who continue the Jewish narrative and find life's meaning from its treasures.

These dreams have sparked the creation of some exciting new educational programs and institutions that are cropping up all over Israel:

There is a growing network of *batei Midrash* – groups that gather to learn Jewish texts and discuss ideas: ancient, modern and everything in between. Elul, Bina, Oranim, and Alma College – these are all examples of a great blossoming of what Israelis call Hebrew culture.

Another example is the development of a unique Kibbutz Judaism that is responsive to the needs of the people, creatively generated out of individual *kibbutzim* by the members of the community. A generation ago Mordecai Kaplan outlined a new, people-centered way to approach adaptation within Judaism. We call it Reconstructionism – and while it goes by other names in Israeli Judaism, it is the same culture and philosophy of Jewish engagement that we embrace.

As a sign of that connection, here at Congregation Beth Hatikvah we use the moving melody of Unetaneh Tokef prayer on these Days of Awe that I learned at Kibbutz Beit Hashitah.

There is much more we can learn from the fresh creativity of Israeli Hebrew culture. For example, my friend Roni Yavin, director of Bet Midrash Elul, told me that they have begun collaborating with the Jerusalem Cinemateque to provide text study and discussion keyed to new release films, presented right at the theatre for selected movies at regular intervals. What a world of possibilities ideas like this can open up for us!

I had the privilege to attend a play in Tel Aviv this summer called, “Oy Elohim.” The play, roughly translated as “Oh God” is a powerful performance that artfully and poignantly integrates theological and cultural questions and challenges notions of the religious and secular divide. How enriching it would be for us to be able to use scripts like this in translation that weave Jewish values, theology, texts and life’s problems into humorous, emotionally-rich cultural expressions.

While we struggle with raising our own levels of Jewish education across our communities, pluralistic Israelis are creating programs of progressive Jewish education in Israeli schools, such as the Tali, Meitar, Meitarim and Hartman, programs. We have shared needs and goals, and abundant new opportunities for exchanging of materials, approaches, and ideas, and teacher training.

At a time of so much change in our world, we often feel vulnerable. There is a lot of self-help literature on the market, and it’s all very sweet and lovely. But we have something richer and more enduring: Torah. We just need to unlock its treasures. Among the keys is the creativity, passion and expansiveness of our like-minded brothers and sisters whose Judaism is shaped through the living laboratory of Israel.

Israeli scholar and educator Ari Elon, who has also served on the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, captures the joy of possibility in this allegorical story:

Now the time came when the people returned once again to themselves. They rebuilt their homes, reinstated their reign, revived their language. But the Torah remained entrenched within her fortresses, as ever secluded and remote. Until one day the people said, Wherefore have we returned to our native tongue, that our Torah remains beyond our reach? So they established study halls, where some men and women covered their heads with skullcaps, and some covered their heads with flat caps, and some covered their heads with no caps at all. And once again were there no study halls without an innovation, for these men, too, were courageous and confident and creative. They did not storm the bastions of Halakha, but discovered the hidden regions of Aggada. These forgotten parts of the Torah were surrounded by no walls, for they are not concerned with questions of rites and ritual, but with trifles of life and death, good and evil, faith and love. And so the people sallied boldly forth, linking the words of the Torah to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words of Torah were as joyful as when they were given at Sinai. For what was once a source of authority became a source of inspiration, and what filled the people with awe now filled them with elation.

And the Torah was happy, for she was once again the plaything of the people. She liberated them and was liberated by them. She was a reflection of their past, and they were the promise of her future.

From an allegory about the Torah published on the website of the Shalom Hartman Institute, November 2008

Yet, with all this uplifting Jewish engagement – the picture is indeed not all so rosy. Among the issues emanating from the political-religious power structure, the educational system in Israel is terribly broken. This sustains the problems of religious culture and freedom in Israel.

Our Israeli counterparts need our help. They need us to engage in support and advocacy for changing the educational system in Israel to provide opportunities for progressive Jewish education and schools that teach all children secular education, equipping them for our modern world.

With all the Jewish creativity coming out of Israel today, the problem of religious freedom remains a stark barrier to the process of developing a modern Jewish culture.

It's a bit meshuganeh/crazy – who would have thought that the modern state of Israel would become a society that lacks Jewish freedom?

Nowhere is this captured more poignantly than in the works of Israel's top authors. Amos Oz, writing in *The Same Sea*, reflects:

"There are still some people in this country who maintain that the emperor is usually neither naked nor fully dressed, but, for example, wearing clothes that do not suit him. He may even be excellently dressed, but every bit as foolish as the cheering crowd, or the other crowd that is no longer cheering, but jeering, or shouting that the emperor is dead, or deserves to be."

But it isn't much less crazier in our corner of the world The American Jewish community is challenged by cultural baggage and structural craziness that have hampered our ability to educate our own community in the texts, values and ideas of our people.

We are indeed on a shared journey with Israeli Jews.

Mordecai Kaplan taught us that

"the responsibility for the continuity of Jewishness, however it may be conceived.... Must be shared equally by all Jews wherever they are."

Our unity is an outgrowth of

*"the development of the state of Israel as a modern democratic environment for Jewish civilization;
and "the oneness of the Jewish people," (A New Zionism)*

As one people, we share responsibility for each other; to nurture the Jewish soul through education and creative development of our tradition.

Kaplan : *Jewish history and values are the product of the interaction between the Jewish people and Eretz Yisrael. World Jewry without Eretz Yisrael is like a soul without a body; Eretz Yisrael without world Jewry is like a body without a soul.*

Our soul journeys are linked. We need to build relationships that strengthen them, so that they can endure the difficult struggle to right the wrongs of the politicization of Judaism in their country.

They need us to add our voices to cry out to the leaders of Israel to proclaim that Israel belongs to all Jews – not just the ultra Orthodox. They need us to cry out against discrimination against non-Orthodox Judaism. They need us to protest their draconian rules concerning Jewish personal status issues such as conversion, marriage and divorce. They need us to advocate for fair funding for the educational system and equitable distribution of state funds for synagogues and Jewish institutions. They need us to decry the institution of the Chief Rabbinate, so antithetical to Judaism and destructive to its creative unfolding.

Our Jewish journeys are unfolding before our eyes, "kept alive by the power of hope and imagination, transcending the limits of believing" as observed by Heschel. The creativity of the Talmudic rabbis who adapted to Jewish life without Eretz Yisrael kept Judaism alive is an example to us. We live in a time of as much transition as they endured, but in reverse. The land of Israel is once again a homeland for the Jewish people. As Heschel observed: "What seemed unbelievable became a foregone conclusion."

Yehudah Halevi, the famed Jewish poet of the eleventh century, wrote that, "The air of your land is the very life of our soul."

This is what Zionism means --- as Kaplan wrote, it spurs the "moral and spiritual regeneration" of the Jewish people.

Back at the *namal*, the Port in Tel Aviv, the sun is setting in colorful glory. My husband and I breathe in deeply – this is truly Shabbat enjoyment. The setting, the music, the liturgy, the people, the crowd – it's perfect. We don't want to leave. How can we hold onto this moment? Our spirits are filled with the holiness and glory of Shabbat – if we must leave, can we bring some of this home with us? Can we return here – how soon? Will it still be here? If it were just a fleeting moment, well, we'd have enjoyed it. But it is much more – it is a feeling of being part of something new and lovely, something important and much larger than ourselves. We leave filled with contentment but also hope – this is a new Israel, and Israel filled with spiritual potential.

The size and enthusiasm of the crowd gathered for Kabbalat Shabbat filled us with hope. We know we must do all that we can do to ensure the future of this newfound promise.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel need us to support them in being modern, innovative Jews in a new world. This is the spiritual regeneration Rabbi Kaplan envisioned, this hold the promise for a regeneration the world so needs. For this we must provide advocacy for religious freedom in Israel. For this we must nurture relationships to retain the bond between us and the Jews of Israel, participating in the ongoing story of the Jewish people.

We stand on the threshold—through our actions, this dream can be realized.

