

MAKING ISRAEL A LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS: CONSERVATIVE ZIONISM RECONSIDERED

Ismar Schorsch

I believe there are at least four cogent reasons why Conservative Jews ought to be active in Israel on a large scale.

First, Israel embodies a unique historical achievement which remains undimmed after forty years: namely, the reversal of two millennia of national homelessness. The recovery of political sovereignty in the very land in which it was lost to the Romans in the year 63 BCE is a singular expression of unbroken historical consciousness steeled by religious faith. What is more, Israel's sterling record of commitment to democracy, political stability, absorption of refugees, social equity, agricultural development, scientific excellence, cultural creativity, and military prowess, compiled under the most adverse conditions, is unmatched by any other state founded after the Second World War. For Conservative Jews to observe this adventure from the sidelines is a travesty.

Second, Israel still represents the most potent force for

unity in a secular age in which the Jewish people is deeply fragmented religiously. Israel stirs the emotions of secular and religious Jews alike, especially in moments of crisis. Its very existence, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel,¹ helped alleviate the anguish of the Holocaust, and its stunning accomplishments inspired diaspora Jews with awe, pride, and ethnic commitment.

THE VISION WE CAN OFFER

Third, as Conservative Jews, we are in Israel to offer an alternative Judaism. The vast majority of Israelis have been religiously disenfranchised, severed from their spiritual roots. To be sure, they are secular by choice, but also in part by lack of choice. How many Jews would be left in the open society of Canada or the United States if Orthodoxy were the only religious option? The national definition of Jewishness in a Jewish State has concealed the catastrophic failure of Orthodoxy to expose some eighty percent of Israeli society to even a modicum of religious vocabulary, study, and observance. And the more introverted and coercive it becomes, the greater the alienation. The introduction of genuine religious pluralism is vital not only to improve Israel-diaspora relations, but also to reconnect Israelis to Judaism. The inroads into Israeli society that we have already made, convince me that Conservatism is ideally suited for that historic task.

Fourth and finally, our deepening involvement in Israel is motivated by loyalty to democratic ideals. The pervasive political ethos of modern Jewry since the emancipation has been democratic and not authoritarian for very good reason. The extension of varying degrees of equality to Jews in countries like England, France, Prussia, and Russia was always related to a broader revo-

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was one of American Jewry's most respected and well-loved scholars and theologians. From 1945 until his death he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary (affiliated with the Conservative movement).

lutionary thrust to restructure the body politic, and hence the advocates of Jewish emancipation were never to be found among the defenders of the old order. Not surprisingly, Jews aligned themselves with the politics of their benefactors and embraced the vision of a free society based on the rule of law. Today Jews in the diaspora remain viscerally committed to the political culture of Western democracy.

The contempt for this political culture in Israel among certain Right-wing circles, and among all too many young people, was voiced for the first time in recent history by Meir Kahane.² In addition to Kahane's poisonous legacy, the messianic temper that infected the *yeshivot* of religious Zionism bred a nationalism that perverted both Judaism and Zionism. Joshua suddenly became the most sacred book of the Bible, and settling the land became the supreme *mitzvah* of Judaism. Palestinians were recast into Amalekites, *halakhah* superseded human rights, and Judaism became incompatible with democracy.

As Conservative Jews, we must loudly reaffirm that Judaism and democracy are compatible, both in Israel and America. Right-wing extremism should not be countered by legal restrictions on free speech, but by a resounding consensus articulated in resolution that Israel's democracy is firmly rooted in the millennial experience of Jewish self-government and in the history of Zionism.

SEIZING THE MOMENT

The challenge of the present moment is immense. Widening rifts, both political and religious, between Orthodox and non-Orthodox in America and in Israel, cannot be papered over by hollow appeals for a rhetoric of unity.

In March 1997, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in North America issued a statement stigmatizing Reform and Conservative

2. Refer to note 15, page 213.

Jews as religious heretics. The timing of this reckless statement clearly reveals that it was hatched in Israel, a diabolical attempt to discredit and delegitimize Reform and Conservative Judaism (which together represent eighty-four percent of synagogue-affiliated Jews in America) just as legislation on non-Orthodox conversions became the subject of Knesset deliberations. But the conversion crisis currently wracking the Israeli government is not the result of a 1995 Supreme Court decision showing that the Chief Rabbinate enjoys no monopoly on conversion as it does on marriage and divorce. On the contrary, the crisis is rooted in the Law of Return passed by the Knesset in 1950.

At the heart of that noble piece of legislation lay two distinct definitions of Judaism, one dictated by Jewish law and the other by the history of the Holocaust. The law gives voice to the Zionist ideal—that every Jew born of a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism has the inalienable right to settle in Israel. But the law also takes cognizance of those non-Jews who were swept up in the murderous dragnet of the Nazis by virtue of marriage or descent and suffered the fate of a Jew. Hence the law admits to Israel the spouse, children, and grandchildren of a Jew, including their spouses, as long as they are not a member of another faith community.

What kept these two definitions of Jewishness (by faith and fate) from flying apart was a Zionist Chief Rabbinate that at one time made conversion easy. Today, unfortunately, the office and its rabbinic courts have fallen into the hands of the ultra-Orthodox, who ruthlessly conspire to do everything in their power to amend the Law of Return by obstructing passage from one status of Jewishness to the other (witness fewer than 350 conversions in 1996). A few years ago, a number of Russian Jewish families approached the Conservative movement in Israel out of desperation to convert their adopted non-Jewish children, which was duly done. Despite the parents' fervent wish to create Jewish households, no official rabbinic court would lift a finger without extracting a promise that these families become strictly Orthodox.

The supreme irony of Zionist history is that the founders of Israel who fled an intransigent Orthodoxy in eastern Europe ended up relinquishing all control of Judaism in the Jewish State to that self-same Orthodoxy. The only difference between the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate is that the former dared to state overtly what the latter believes covertly. No Chief Rabbi visiting the United States would ever set foot in a Reform or Conservative synagogue. Yet Israel will never remain the center of world Jewry, as it should, if the State becomes exclusively identified with but one denomination in modern Judaism. To play that role responsibly, the State must be Jewish, not Orthodox. Conservative Jews must become political and social activists. Toward that end I propose the following four point action plan:

First, Reform and Conservative Jews should stop funding all ultra-Orthodox organizations and institutions for whom religious pluralism is anathema. It is critical that North American Jews begin to hold *yeshivot* in Israel accountable before they fund them. The economic base of much of the yeshivah world is to be found on this continent. Yet not all *yeshivot* are alike. Some are bitterly anti-Zionist, and some are ultra-nationalist. All benefit from a muddled nostalgia that prompts donors to give to institutions they would not want their children to attend. American Jews must stop making contributions to people who privately treat our religious beliefs with disdain and derision.

Second, the promotion of religious pluralism in Israel for Jews must become a top funding priority for UJA-Federation. The concept of Jewish pluralism is alien to Israel, because the country was founded and settled by Jews from Eastern Europe and the Middle East who had never gone through the emancipation experience. Religious movements are the inevitable consequence of political freedom and social integration. The communal structure of American Jewry is predicated on religious pluralism because the Jews who built it hailed from central Europe where emancipation had already begun to take root. The irony today is

that Judaism in the diaspora is far healthier than in the Jewish State. As noted above, the absence of religious choices has estranged the majority of Israelis from any meaningful relationship to the history and culture of the Jewish people. The introduction of genuine religious pluralism is certainly possible. Perhaps as a harbinger of things to come, the faculty of Tel Aviv University decided recently to build on campus a panoply of three synagogues (Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox) rather than a single, exclusively Orthodox synagogue.

Third, it is time to dismantle the Chief Rabbinate and its network of courts. Sustained by political alliance between cynicism and fundamentalism, the system is today without a scintilla of moral worth. In 1994, twenty percent of the Israelis getting married went abroad to circumvent the monopoly of the Orthodox establishment, often to undergo only a civil ceremony. I am not calling for the abrogation of legislation for religious purposes (kosher food, Shabbat, autopsies, archaeology, the prohibition against raising pigs) or for religious privileges (the local religious councils and education), though in each instance fundamental changes are in order, but rather for decoupling the State from a dysfunctional ultra-Orthodox rabbinate. The first two types of legislation express the Jewish character of Israel, the third governing rabbinic jurisdiction makes it narrowly Orthodox.

Finally, this campaign against the stranglehold of ultra-Orthodoxy must be carried out irrespective of the peace process. One thing is sure, the minions of Shas, Agudat Israel, Degel HaTorah,³ and even the National Religious party will not be deterred from advancing their cause openly and surreptitiously,

3. Shas, Agudat Israel, and Degel HaTorah are three Israeli ultra-Orthodox political parties that have won between eight and thirteen seats in the Knesset over the last twelve years. Agudat Israel was founded in Germany in 1912 to represent the interests of many different groups of observant Jews who are opposed to both modern Orthodox Judaism and Zionism. However, in the eighties many of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox, dissatisfied with Agudat Israel, joined rival political

no matter how tortured and protracted the reconciliation with the Palestinians may be. At stake is the ultimate nature of the Jewish State. Israel will not long survive wholly secular or sectarian. Its welfare begs for a religious center for whom piety and sanity are not polar opposites.

REACHING FOR OUR HIGHEST JEWISH SELVES

In 1971 in an essay entitled "Education for Humanity in Time of War," Yigal Allon⁴ wrote: "If we shall be a light unto ourselves, perhaps we will also be a light unto others. Certainly not before." The Judaism of the messianic, ultra-nationalist, Right wing is without light. The basest form of modern nationalism in Jewish garb, it violates the most fundamental of biblical injunctions: "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their customs" (Leviticus 18:3). The Judaism I know cares deeply for the welfare of mankind. The book of Genesis is not only about the promise of the land, but also its purpose. Abraham and his descendants were called by God to be a source of universal blessing, a model of virtue to counter the lure of paganism. And the land was to be a laboratory for a noble experiment: the formation of a just and righteous society. But the vision had first to be limned in blood. Suffering would intensify the passion for justice. After his victory over the four kings, Abraham the warrior could have seized the land immediately, but the experience of oppression and slavery had to precede the

parties. Shas represents Sephardim, and in addition to its religious agenda it seeks to rectify past discrimination against the Jews of Asian and African descent. The Shas party is unusual among the religious in its willingness to consider territorial concessions. Degel HaTorah was organized in 1988; it is an Ashkenazi party comprised mainly of non-hasidic (*misnaged*) ultra-Orthodox Jews.

4. Yigal Allon (1918–1980) was a military commander in the War of Independence. He was later elected Member of Knesset, and he served in the cabinet of several Labor governments, including as Deputy Prime Minister.

achievement of statehood. The Bible's ubiquitous compassion for the stranger, the non-Israelite, is rooted in the degradation of Egyptian bondage.

Nor was the land ever granted unconditionally. On the contrary, its retention came to be regarded as a function of the piety and justice of its body politic. To pervert God's law would defile the land and lead to expulsion. The world harbored enough decadent societies. The language of the Bible is visceral. "So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you" (Leviticus 18:28). God's impatience with Israel throughout the Bible is a measure of the universal stakes.

Jewry's long exilic ordeal deepened the message of its mission. Outside their homeland, they once again became the proverbial stranger of the biblical text. The manner of their treatment would measure the humanity of the nation in which they lived. The recurring struggle by Jews the world over to maintain their distinctive faith and communal autonomy delivered an implicit claim for the existence of an inalienable right to be different. From the Roman Empire to interwar Europe, Jews sought legal protection for their religious and cultural independence. The cumulative weight of their endurance and success legitimized the value and beauty of diversity. In the picturesque words of Moses Mendelssohn⁵ to Christian Europe: "Dear brothers, you are well-meaning. But do not let yourselves be deceived! To belong to this omnipresent shepherd, it is not necessary for the entire flock to graze on one pasture or to enter and leave the master's house through just one door."

Zionism did not triumph by betraying that noble religious

and historical legacy. The restoration of Zion would create, as Alon put it, "a model of a totally moral Jewish existence in a model human society." The parochialism of Judaism always had at its core an ecumenical thrust. Our exercise of power must continue to accord with the lofty moral standards we espoused when powerless, for that is the ultimate biblical sanction of a Jewish State—to validate our vision in the crucible of reality.

5. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) is generally considered the greatest Jewish philosopher of the eighteenth century. The spiritual leader of German Jewry, he struggled to find a way for Jews to acculturate to European society while maintaining Jewish values. He became a legend during his own lifetime, and influenced Immanuel Kant and an entire generation of German philosophers, as well as succeeding Jewish theologians.

“ZIONISM
· *The Sequel* ·”

edited by
Carol Diament

with Introductions by
Gideon Shimoni and Arnold Eisen



HADASSAH

The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.

Israeli Political Renewal . . .

By Ismar Schorsch

As Soviet Jews continue to reach Israel in ever larger numbers, the country remains without a government. This historic immigration, requiring the political will to redistribute limited resources for proper absorption of the newcomers, is left to the bureaucracy to administer. The leaders of America's Jewish community are prolonging the crisis by a deferential silence.

Most assuredly, the fault does not lie with Rabbi Menachem Schneerson of Brooklyn, leader of the Lubavitch movement, or his Israeli nemesis, Rabbi Eleazar Schach of the Torah Flag Party. Their sudden political power and prominence are symptoms of the malaise, not its cause. As leaders of small, single-issue blocs, these religious charismatics are fully entitled to exploit the paralysis of coalition politics for their interests.

The real fault lies with the leaders of the two major parties, Likud and Labor. For years, they have willfully perpetuated the political system by repeatedly succumbing to the reli-

Ismar Schorsch is chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative).

. . . Requires pressure by U.S. Jews.

gious parties' demands in order to form a government. The cost of these unsavory deals to the Israeli taxpayer and American Jewish donors will never be known.

Deep mutual antagonism and a single-minded pursuit of power has deterred the Labor and Likud leaders from uniting for electoral reform.

This was surely the mandate of the Government that just fell. The 1988 election, with its growth in the religious parties' strength and scandalous debate over "who is a Jew?", intensified the outcry for change.

But, as usual, inaction prevailed, because the system of voting for parties and proportional representation frees Knesset members from accountability to a geographic constituency and cushions the parties against public pressure. Thus, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir could tell a reporter that the recent demonstration in Tel Aviv of 250,000 for electoral reform "was a matter of the media."

Some responsibility for this inertia must be borne by the leaders of U.S. Jews. In comparison with their loud, effective protest in 1988 against a prospective amendment to the Law of Return, their silence in the face of today's irresponsible political stalemate is distressing. That amendment would have allowed only those born of a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism by an Orthodox rabbi to be eligible for citizenship.

The need for electoral reform is fundamental and urgent. Each new spectacle of political paralysis costs the Israelis heavily in respect and support abroad. Yet instead of mobilizing again, to enunciate their concern and support the groundswell for reform, U.S. Jews' leaders are solely absorbed with raising the funds to settle Soviet Jews in Israel.

For all of the importance and nobility of this campaign, it is not enough. The freedom Soviet Jews seek goes beyond moving from one party-dominated society to another. The agenda of the American Jewish leadership must include aggressive support for electoral reform that will end the stultifying system of party supremacy.

As Mikhail Gorbachev told Erich Honecker of East Germany on Oct. 7, 1989, one month before the regime in East Berlin collapsed, "Life itself punishes those who delay." □