

The Shaping of Masorti Judaism in Israel

by Rabbi Harvey Meirovich

Foreword

Conservative Judaism-committed to Jewish tradition while at the same time open to the values of modernity-holds the middle ground in American Jewish religious life, between Orthodoxy and Reform. Although observers frequently comment on the gap between Conservative ideology and the religious practices of its laity, most readily agree that Conservative Judaism has indeed become the “third way” for American Jews. Whether such a “third way” can play a constructive role in Israeli society is the subject of this publication by Dr. Harvey Meirovich.

As Dr. Meirovich shows, Conservative institutions in Israel seek to provide a religious Jewish identity for secular Jews who feel alienated from Judaism. Adherents of Israeli Conservatism feel that it constitutes a potential bridge between secular and religious Jews. Whether or not it will succeed may depend on its ability to convince large numbers of nonreligious Israelis, who identify Jewishly with a secular state and its culture, that religion is a core dimension of Jewishness and that the Jewish religion speaks to their spiritual needs.

The Conservative movement in Israel has aligned itself with and generally followed the lead of Reform Judaism in its political and legal battles for recognition of its rabbis and equal financial benefits with the Orthodox. In the process, the distinctive voice of the Conservative movement has been blurred and most Israelis do not distinguish between the Conservative and Reform movements. To be sure, as Dr. Meirovich points out, the alliance with Reform Judaism has brought its share of benefits. But the alliance also has critics within the Conservative movement. The criticism arises from within circles who equate Conservative ideology with a commitment to halakhah and demur from any blurring of lines between that movement and Reform. But criticism also arises from among those who question the wisdom of Reform Judaism’s emphasis on a “civil rights” strategy, thereby projecting non-Orthodoxy as movements that emphasize political and legal matters. These critics argue that the long-run success of the Conservative movement, and indeed of the Reform, is likely to depend less on the cogency of its critique of the Orthodox establishment than on the specific message, be it Conservative or Reform, which the non-Orthodox bring to Israeli society and to Israeli Jews.

This pamphlet is the seventh in a joint series commissioned and published by the Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations of the American Jewish Committee and the Argov Center of Bar-Ilan University. These publications examine particular issues affecting American Jewry and Israel, documenting the ties and tensions that engage the world’s two largest Jewish communities. This particular essay, along with the one that preceded it on Reform Judaism in Israel and the forth-coming one on Orthodoxy, seek to clarify the nature of the religious movements there and thus help provide perspective to the debate over religious pluralism in the Jewish state.

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Perspiration and Inspiration

Masorti Pioneers

The Masorti movement was incorporated in 1979, culminating earlier struggles to launch an Israel-based

Conservative Judaism. Until the mid-1960s there were only two synagogues in the country that identified as Conservative in their religious orientation—Jerusalem’s Emet V’Emunah Congregation, dating back to the mid-1930s, and the Moriah Synagogue in Haifa, established in 1955.

The pioneer of the Masorti synagogue movement was Rabbi Moshe Cohen, who worked under the aegis of the United Synagogue of Israel.¹ After coming on aliyah in 1964, Cohen labored for almost twenty years founding Masorti congregations throughout the country.

In 1971-72 a group of recently arrived American immigrants tried but failed to establish an official Masorti presence on Israeli soil. Almost all of the participants worked for various Conservative parent organizations in the United States, and their radical platform called for the gradual collapse of their separate organizational identities into a unified format. They were determined to eliminate the issues of turf and power that plagued their three primary American parent bodies: the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the United Synagogue of America, and the Rabbinical Assembly of America. But the message conveyed from abroad was unequivocal: the Seminary and the United Synagogue defined their Israeli operations as transplanted replications of themselves. This meant that all Israel-based activities were to be shaped through consultation with their New York offices. Talk of collapsing traditional roles in favor of a unified infrastructure was off-limits, so long as the stateside institutions wielded absolute control over the allocation of funds.

In 1978, a second drive to establish a movement proved successful. This effort was launched by Rabbi Michael Graetz, who made aliyah after the Six-Day War and served from 1973 as the pulpit rabbi of the Masorti synagogue in Omer (outside Beersheba). Since he had also just been appointed president of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel, he realized that Masorti congregational expansion depended on raising funds sufficient to cover congregational subsidies as well as budgets of the United Synagogue of Israel and the Rabbinical Assembly. Along with Moshe Cohen, he decided it was time to try and broaden the base of support by seriously tapping into the pockets of Conservative Jews in America.

The raising of an initial sum of \$30,000 from a major Conservative synagogue in Washington, and a proposed fund-raising event in the affluent Conservative community of Palm Beach, Florida, brought swift reaction from Rabbi Gerson Cohen, chancellor of the Seminary. While he enthusiastically endorsed the labors of his Israeli colleagues, he felt compelled to safeguard the Seminary’s donor base. Through his willing mediation, the Seminary guaranteed the struggling Masorti enterprise an annual sum of \$50,000 over a three-year period (1978-81). Masorti congregations were to enjoy unlimited access to American synagogues, inviting their congregants to subscribe as overseas members. Most importantly, the synagogues consented to coordinate their fund-raising drives so as not to interfere with the Seminary campaign.

Shortly thereafter, the movement was formally launched by the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel and nine congregations established by Moshe Cohen. They included Ashkelon, Ashdod, Beersheba, Haifa, Jerusalem (Congregations Emet V’Emunah in Rechavia and Ramot Zion in French Hill), Omer (outside Beersheba), Raanana, and Safed. To this network were later joined Masorti communities in Arad, Carmiel, Jerusalem (Kiryat Hayovel), Kfar Saba, Netanya, Rechovot, and Tel Aviv. In 1981 the fledgling movement received long-term professional leadership when Rabbi Philip Spectre assumed the post of executive director, a position he held for the next sixteen years. In August 1997 he was succeeded by Rabbi Ehud Bandel, a native Israeli and a graduate of the first class to matriculate at the Bet Midrash. Bandel assumed the title of president of the Masorti movement.

Over the next twenty years, forty-eight Masorti synagogue centers (kehillot) and friendship groups (havurot) sprang up, from Eilat in the south to Nahariya in the north. They ranged in size from fifteen to over 300 families, with a total movement membership of 20,000 families. It was estimated that Masorti

programs reached well over 50,000 Israelis. The movement placed great hope for its future in the graduates of its youth movement, Noam (with 1200 members, from grade 4 through high school), and its innovative overnight summer camp, which attracted over 300 children annually.

Although 135 Conservative rabbis presently reside in Israel (approximately 10 percent of the entire membership of the Rabbinical Assembly), most are employed outside the synagogue setting as teachers and educational administrators. Moreover, only about a dozen kehillot are of sufficient size and means to employ full-time rabbis (usually with substantial subsidies from the movement).

Among the success stories of organized synagogue life were the pioneering efforts of Rabbis Philip Spectre in Ashkelon and Michael Graetz in Omer. Both were passionate believers that the synagogue, qua community center, had a fruitful role to play in the evolution of a Jewish identity in Israeli society. Although their early efforts brought them into regular confrontation with Orthodox officialdom, they were able to prove that the ethos of the synagogue was an attractive feature, not only for American olim but also, given sufficient time and investment, for some native Israelis. For example, Graetz's synagogue in Omer, which began with ten families after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, grew steadily, peaking at 150 families twenty-five years later. The founding families hailed from English-speaking countries (America and South Africa) and included several sabras who had been exposed to Conservative Judaism in the United States. As the congregation increased in size it took on an increasingly Israeli hue, so that by the late 1990s it was dominated by sabras, with fewer than 20 percent of its families originating from English-speaking countries.

From the outset, the Omer synagogue served as both a place of worship/study and as a community center offering a variety of activities, including a summer day camp, to the community at large. Over the years hundreds of unaffiliated residents availed themselves of Rabbi Graetz's services to celebrate or commemorate family life-cycle events. Consequently, the congregation's impact was felt well beyond its walls, to the point that many Omer residents came to see the Masorti operation as "their" synagogue even though they had no formal membership connection.

The Ashkelon synagogue evinced a similar pattern of development. It was founded in the mid-1960s by Moshe Cohen with a nucleus of a dozen members, chiefly from European countries and Sephardic lineage. The congregation eventually grew to 250 families. Two factors account for the congregation's continued stability over the years: the full-time rabbinic leadership of Philip Spectre (1967-82) and Matthew Futterman (1986-present) and a plethora of educational and cultural activities that appealed to the local neighborhood and the broader municipality, such as a summer day camp, bar/bat mitzvah lessons, adult education, and a cooperative relationship with the local school system.

The Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel

The primary funding source for the movement in its initial years was the Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel, which began in 1982 after the initial three-year alliance between the Seminary and the Masorti movement drew to a close. Members of the board represented the major national organizations of the Conservative movement in North America, and the movement was to receive at least 60 percent of all funds collected. Fund-raising was coordinated with the campaign and development departments of the Seminary and the University of Judaism, the Seminary's West Coast affiliate at the time.

Dr. David Gordis, a Talmud professor at the University of Judaism, was hired as executive director, and he worked as the chancellor's personal representative in Israel. Gordis's game plan called for gradually building grassroots support through a methodical educational campaign aimed at convincing Conservative synagogue members in America to contribute to the advancement of Israel's religious and cultural life under the auspices of the Masorti movement.

Gordis's two-year tenure was a moderate success, raising slightly more than \$300,000 annually. He was succeeded for a two-year period, with some reluctance, by aging Seminary vice chancellor Simon Greenberg. For the two years 1984-86, the Foundation raised the sums of \$700,000 and then \$800,000 respectively.

When Professor Ismar Schorsch became chancellor in 1986, it was clear that Foundation fund-raising was inadequate for the continued development and growth of the Masorti movement. By this time, a new Conservative "player" had arrived on the Israeli scene. In 1984, the Seminary of Judaic Studies (Bet Midrash, since 1998 the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies) was established through the urging of Schorsch's predecessor, Gerson Cohen. It was to operate as a graduate school to train Masorti rabbis and educators to serve Israeli society.

Schorsch asserted that a strong Masorti movement was important both for Israeli society and for revitalizing the Conservative movement in North America. He concluded that either the Foundation should be closed (and its campaign integrated into the Seminary campaign) or the Foundation should be provided another opportunity to demonstrate its fiscal viability by recruiting stronger lay and professional leadership.

Rabbi Lee Levine's willingness to step into the breach in 1986 prevented the Foundation from being eliminated. Levine, a Seminary graduate and student of Gerson Cohen's, had carved out a career at the Hebrew University as an archaeologist and professor of ancient Jewish history. His ardent belief in the need to foster a synthesis in Israel's school system between Judaism, Zionism, and modernity propelled him several years earlier to initiate the establishment of the TALJ school system (discussed below).

While on sabbatical leave in Boston, Levine raised almost \$1.3 million, some of which was used to set up a Masorti overnight camp for Israeli youth identified with Noam (the Masorti youth movement) and to strengthen the operation of the TALJ Education Fund. Levine's travels in the States also enabled him to spot potential lay leaders whom he recruited to the board of the Seminary with an understanding that they would focus their energies on support of the Foundation.

With the strong backing of Rabbi Ronald Kronish, a Reform rabbi on sabbatical leave from the Melitz Center in Jerusalem, Levine managed to get money from the Jewish Agency for Israel. Kronish was interim director of the Baltimore office of Jerold C. Hoffberger, the two-term chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency. Hoffberger, a committed Reform Jew, was moved by pleas from Reform and Masorti quarters in Israel and the Diaspora that non-Orthodox institutions were ineligible for Agency funding. Hoffberger set out to help rectify the situation, knowing full well that both Reform and Conservative Jews were the primary benefactors of the Jewish Agency, via moneys raise from UJA campaigns in America.

Lobbying behind the scenes on both sides of the ocean and capitalizing on Hoffberger's political clout, Kronish and Levine reached an agreement with the Agency. While it would continue its policy of refusing to directly fund Orthodox, Reform, or Conservative "streams," it would allocate moneys to them for designated projects. The agreement also carried the tacit understanding that the Orthodox stream in Israel would receive proportionately less consideration from the Agency because of Orthodoxy's access to government money in Israel. The final result was a substantial victory for non-Orthodox religious interests: the Conservative and Reform movements were each allocated \$1.2 million annually, a sum that has remained steady to the present. The Levine-Kronish agreement also showed the mutual benefits that could accrue when Conservative and Reform bodies cooperated.

Levine was succeeded in August 1987 by Rabbi Michael Monson, who directed the Foundation for

slightly more than two years. He raised annual totals of \$1.1 million (1987-88) and almost \$1.5 million (1988-89). During his tenure, however, the Foundation infrastructure began to unravel. Monson sensed that the Seminary's fund-raisers viewed the Foundation as a potential threat and competitor, and their ambivalence was matched by the Conservative rabbinate's reluctance to channel their charity dollars to the Masorti movement.

Ismar Schorsch noted the irony of the situation. Conservative Jews were devoted to the ideal of *klal yisrael* (Jewish solidarity), and this made them the least sectarian or parochial members of the community. It rendered them the ideal donors to federation campaigns, since they would support unstintingly every worthy Jewish cause. A focus on Israel was, of course, a logical extension of such commitment. Yet their deep passion for *klal yisrael* often prompted Conservative Jews to see their support for Israel through a wide-angle lens. Concerns for the welfare of the whole induced them to compromise, if not at times actually abandon, the particular cause of Masorti Judaism in Israel.

The Bet Midrash and the Masorti Movement

In 1990 the Foundation's floundering campaign brought it under the direction of the Seminary's development department. For fiscal years 1990-91 and 1991-92, the Seminary allocated \$900,000, and then \$675,000, to the Masorti movement and the Bet Midrash. By the spring of 1992, however, it was clear that the campaign merger had increased neither designated revenues for Israel nor total revenues for the joint campaign.

To further complicate matters, this was a time of great financial strain for the Seminary. The only institution spared the accountant's scalpel was the Seminary's affiliate in Israel, the recently established Seminary of Judaic Studies (Bet Midrash). The Seminary administration became increasingly frustrated as the Bet Midrash continued to expand its activities-varied academic and leadership programs, along with educational and advisory support of the TALM education system-but did not receive a proportionate increase in moneys from the Foundation leadership, headed by Herschel Blumberg of Washington.

Underlying this was a broader ideological question: What was the most effective way to build and strengthen Masorti Judaism in Israel? During the years that the Foundation was fully operative and raised its own funds, it also set policy. It reviewed the budgets of both the Bet Midrash and the Masorti movement and determined the funding of each. Now, however, the Seminary believed that, since it had become the primary funding source and was deeply involved in the activities of the Bet Midrash and the Masorti movement, it should shape policy.

Schorsch and many in his administration were convinced that the future of Masorti Judaism would be determined primarily by the Bet Midrash. The publication of his views inflamed already heightened tensions. Many members of the movement in Israel, rabbis and laymen, disagreed with his assessment. In June 1992 the Seminary severed its ties to the Foundation.

Henceforth, the Foundation raised funds specifically for the Masorti movement, excluding the Bet Midrash. Though constantly in quest of the next donor dollar, the movement made a modest recovery. While never raising anything approaching the \$900,000 it received from its merged campaign with the Seminary in 1990-91, the reconstituted Foundation succeeded in raising \$500,000-700,000 annually. These sums, along with moneys allocated by the Jewish Agency (approximately \$300,000) and other Diaspora-based foundations (\$350,000), constituted more than 90 percent of the movement's total budget.

It is crucial to understand the Seminary's sentiments toward the movement and the Bet Midrash. Chancellor Schorsch argued that Jewish identity in Israel was vastly different from that in America. In Israel, Jewish identity was a function of nationality and citizenship. It was given through birth or

immigration and was secular in character. American Jewish identity, however, was essentially religious in character and had to be created actively. If it were not fashioned, it simply would not exist.

The creation of Jewish identity in America was a heroic venture that called for sustained work. This was why the synagogue was so vital, as the most effective vehicle for shaping and transmitting Jewish identity outside a Jewish polity. In Israel, the synagogue was insignificant because it contributed nothing to Jewish identity. Even worse, Schorsch argued, it was actively avoided and abhorred by most Israelis because of the negative baggage that Judaism as a religion carried for Israel's overwhelmingly secular population. The vast majority of Israelis had been stripped of their Judaism by two factors absent in America: the state was founded in rebellion against the Judaism of Eastern Europe, and the resurgence of ultra-Orthodoxy had reinvigorated an antireligious animus among the secular population.

Both these factors fashioned secularism into an ideology. Schorsch was convinced that, in America, Jewish secularism was a sociological phenomenon, a state of mind at best, no more. In Israel, however, secular Israelis were alienated from the synagogue, from Jewish studies at the university, and from Judaism itself because all these national legacies were seen as belonging to "them," the ultra-Orthodox. What worked for Jewish continuity in America would not work in Israel.

The urgent question was how to address this calamity for the well-being of individual Israelis, for the welfare of Israeli-Diaspora relations, and for the long-term survival of Jewishness in Israel itself. Schorsch held that the Jewish people could not survive over time without the protective garment of Judaism, even in the State of Israel. The saga of Jewish endurance needed a transcendent justification for the community as well as for the individual. The alienation of Israelis from Judaism was so deep that even when they chose to work their way back to the sources of the tradition, they were wholly incapable of taking the next step, which was the observance of the mitzvot.

Although Schorsch acknowledged the Masorti movement's sincerity in seeking to build community and Jewish identity around the synagogue, he believed the effort was doomed to failure at this particular juncture in Zionist history. Unlike American synagogues, synagogues in Israel were not on the "cutting edge" of society. The synagogue framework was simply incapable of attracting the critical mass of Israelis who had long ceased to observe the rites and rituals of traditional Judaism. Consequently, the movement's outlay of upward of 70 percent of its budget on synagogue-related activities-worship, learning, and youth activities-did not get the maximum "bang for the buck."

Only a radical game plan, in Schorsch's judgment, could aspire to alter the reality of a Jewish state in which Judaism was seen as the enemy. Schorsch pointed to the Bet Midrash as the key to the future of Masorti Judaism in Israel. For the foreseeable future, the best that could be achieved was to connect Israelis to the richness of the Jewish classical tradition, allowing them to gradually find their own comfort level. The goal was not to transform students into card-carrying Masorti Jews, but to challenge their ambivalence to Judaism via a national academy of enlightened yet passionate Torah study.

Unlike Jewish Diaspora life, which rarely brought political, economic, and social concerns into its religious consciousness, Israel as a modern nation was engaged in the colossal enterprise of fashioning a comprehensive social and political order. The reemergence of Jewish political independence posed complex challenges to the Israeli public that went far beyond the parameters of the synagogue. The goal, in Schorsch's view, was to inspire Israelis to relate the biblical and talmudic traditions to the problems of modernity, and to draw upon Jewish sources in building bridges of understanding between the different ideological and communal groups in the country.

The spirit of tolerance and pluralism of the Bet Midrash might mediate the values of Judaism to the uninitiated and disaffected. Diversity in the Jewish world was not an unfortunate fact but an admirable

quality. Only a spectrum of valid religious alternatives could stem the tide of alienation and disaffiliation, and counter the eventual exit from Judaism of untold numbers of secular-minded Israelis. It was against this historical and social backdrop that the Seminary granted unwavering support to the Bet Midrash. In 1998, the name of the Bet Midrash was formally changed to the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies.

TALI Education

Beginnings

The TALI school system, which developed in the mid-to-late 1970s, was the brainchild of Masorti Jews who came on aliyah in the decade following the Six-Day War. TALI, the acronym for *tigbur limudei yahadut* (enrichment of Jewish studies), represented a radical innovation within Israel's secular educational stream. It brought the intellectual and religious orientation of Masorti Judaism to the attention of a considerably broader Israeli constituency.³

The premise of TALI education was to balance a child's general education in the non-Orthodox stream with a serious grounding in Judaic content. Radical as it seemed, this approach was familiar to educators in prestate Palestine and in post-World War II America.

There has been an ongoing philosophical debate over the nature of Jewish identity within the Israeli public schools. Did the state's creation justify severing religious and cultural norms indigenous to Diaspora existence for 2000 years? Did Zionist ideology imply throwing off the yoke of a rabbinic Judaism conditioned to think in categories of powerlessness, vulnerability, and homelessness? Historically, educators tended to split into two broad camps: one reflecting the antireligious animus associated with Zionist writers like Joseph Hayim Brenner and Micha Josef Berdyczewski, the other reflecting the more deferential cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am.

Radical secularists claimed that Judaism was a petrified religion lacking spirituality and morality, and that the Diaspora mentality was awash with feelings of inferiority. A new model was needed, molded by a "religion of labor" and a new literary heritage chiseled out of the bedrock of the Hebrew language. Their unanimous judgment: to give Diaspora-created Judaism a decent burial. Ahad Ha'am opposed this platform. He was convinced that Judaism was a vibrant religious culture that could respond creatively to the dilemmas posed by Jewish settlement in the land.

Since Israel's founding, the educational establishment has tilted ever more steeply in the direction of radical secularism. This is less the result of conscious choice than of ignorance of Judaic traditions. With fewer teacher training colleges guided by Ahad Ha'am's philosophy, there has been a growing paucity of competent teachers able to fill the vacancies left by the prestate reservoir of immigrant teachers who had at least been exposed to Jewish learning and living in their native European settings.

The founding fathers of TALI appreciated the general contours of Ahad Ha'am's cultural Zionism. Early on, however, a debate erupted over the desirability of a two-track TALI system, one favoring a strictly cultural approach to Jewish tradition, the other stressing both the cultural and religious aspects of Jewish life. Eventually, the approach taken was that Judaism was an evolving religious civilization, in which the Jewish people would ultimately define the content of religious belief and practice in light of their own ongoing experiences. Like any living organism, Judaism exhibited flexibility, experimentation, and development.

In the two years following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, a core group of Conservative rabbis, recent olim, and a contingent of native Israelis met periodically to crystallize an alternative educational format that might bridge the growing rift between Israel's religious (Orthodox) population (25 percent) and the

secular majority of Israeli society.

The American immigrants, who lived in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem, were all employed as educators on the Israeli scene. They included Rabbis Raphael Arzt, Reuven Hammer, Lee Levine, Moshe Tutnauer, and Joseph Wernik. The native Israelis were Immanuel Etkes, Zvi Gal-On, Gershon Kravitz, Moshe Samet, and Yehezkel Wollman. Although there was no precedent in Israel of parents ever initiating a school, there was a law on the books permitting 75 percent of the parents of a particular class or school to determine up to 25 percent of the curriculum.

In their judgment, a clear barometer of the polarization in Israeli life was the unbridgeable chasm separating the Orthodox (*mamlachti-dati*) and secular (*mamlachti*) educational sectors. Openness and tolerance were absent from both streams, as was an integrative approach to Jewish studies and culture.

Jewish studies under Orthodox direction was narrowly defined, based almost exclusively on traditional commentaries, concepts, and educational approaches in vogue during earlier generations. An appreciation for comparative literature, a critical reading of Jewish history, and acknowledgment of the cultural interaction of Jews with the surrounding world was not tolerated.

Equally apparent were the shortcomings of the secular system, which dismissed as irrelevant any in-depth analysis of rabbinic texts or religious thought, while also negating any deep sense of identification with the richness of the Jewish experience as found in its history, traditions, customs, and values. At best, secular schools addressed selected Zionist-Israeli issues that were all too often bereft of any serious Jewish content.

The challenge tackled by the cadre of Masorti-minded educators was to combine the best of both options, offering a serious Jewish and general education while avoiding the deficiencies of each. With the active encouragement of Yosef Gadish, deputy mayor of Jerusalem under Teddy Kollek, the French Hill enthusiasts arrived at three critical decisions: to open a grassroots elementary school (not a high school) in their neighborhood; to do so within the public school framework; and to operate within the secular, non-Orthodox stream.

Initially, most parents remained apathetic to the innovative curriculum. But interest mounted when the proposed school came under vitriolic attack by a number of Orthodox rabbis, who claimed that it would poison the minds and hearts of children, transplanting the cancer of American assimilation and intermarriage to Israel's soil. The first TALI school opened in the fall of 1976 with thirty-three students registered in the first three grades.

Expansion

The years 1976-81 saw the consolidation and dramatic growth of the pioneering TALI school of French Hill under the principalship of Barbara Levin, and the launching of others in Kfar Saba-Hod Hasharon, Ramat Gan, and Beersheba. One of the outstanding characteristics of the TALI schools was extensive parental participation. From the outset, the French Hill school set a standard to be emulated by others schools.

The second stage of growth (1981-86) was marked by a mixture of great hopes and the question of long-term viability. Minister of Education Zevulun Hammer appreciated the value of TALI education, claiming it was most appropriate for the vast majority (60 percent, according to his calculations) of Israeli children. However, he also insisted that the schools not be publicly perceived as identified with the Masorti movement. His apprehension stemmed, in part, from pressure exerted by American Orthodox circles against introducing Conservative religious ideology into the Israeli school system.

Another obstacle facing TALI's proponents was that elements within both the religious and secular camps were intent on preserving the existing polarization of society. Many of the religious favored Jewish religious isolationism and xenophobia. Ardent secularists, on the other hand, balked at religious "indoctrination" in the secular school system. They equated modernity with universalism, and considered Judaism parochial and particularistic.

Despite these obstacles, this period also witnessed the definition of TALI's educational objectives:

To develop through Jewish studies an awareness among pupils and their parents of the tradition and origins of the Jewish people;

To broaden knowledge of Jewish heritage, Jewish history, Jewish thought, rabbinic literature, and prayer through personal experience;

To develop through Jewish values a pluralistic, democratic, and tolerant approach to all of the various movements in Judaism and in Israeli society, with the purpose of improving the relationship between secular and religious Jews in Israel;

To become familiar with the culture and heritage of various Jewish ethnic groups and to encourage mutual respect and coexistence among them;

To actively pursue joint parent-child school activities, promoting parent advocacy for their children's education and the integration between school and home values.

By the mid-1980s new TALI schools had opened in Haifa, Netanya, and the Gilo neighborhood of Jerusalem. (In 1995 this latter school won the Israel Prize in Education.) After much bureaucratic and political wrangling, TALI supporters succeeded in making TALI education inclusive from preschool through grade 12. A series of TALI kindergartens was started, as well as a combined junior and senior high school in Jerusalem (a previous attempt to introduce a TALI track within a larger high school had proved unworkable). By the mid-1990s it boasted some 600 pupils under Headmaster Avi Lavsky. In 1996 it moved from the Mahane Yehuda marketplace in the city's center to a spacious new campus in the East Talpiot section of Jerusalem.

The third stage in the development of TALI education, 1987-present, saw the establishment of a specialized foundation to procure independent funding for the TALI schools. This step was taken as a last resort in light of the indifference and even outright hostility displayed by Orthodox personnel within the Ministry of Education. A number of foundations abroad were approached by the Masorti movement, working in tandem with interested parents. The Bronfman Foundation responded positively, and money came from the Jewish Agency as well. These funds were earmarked for the TALI Education Fund (TEF). In subsequent years, the Jewish Agency continued to fund annually almost 50 percent of the TEF budget (\$530,000). For maximum effectiveness, a formal relationship was created between TEF and the Seminary of Judaic Studies. Under the auspices of the Bet Midrash, a close working relationship was finally effected between the Ministry of Education, parent groups, and school principals.

This period witnessed a dramatic expansion of schools with TALI tracks from Kiryat Shemona in the north to Beersheba in the south, with concentrations in the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv areas. In 1988, just under 2000 students encountered TALI concepts; by 1992 this number had jumped dramatically to 7500, and by 1995 there had been a further leap to more than 9500 pupils in thirty locations.

The quantum increase in TALI tracks and/or schools was the work of veteran educator Joseph Ben-

Rachamim, who opted to bypass the more arduous and long-term negotiating process of convincing parent bodies to start a TALI track or school. Instead, Ben-Rachamim began at the top of the educational pyramid, meeting directly with principals around the country, convincing them of the virtue of the TALI curriculum.

TEF published educational materials, including a Torah portion of the week study sheet for both elementary and secondary school students and their families. A syllabus for grades 1 to 9 was completed in 1994 by an academic-educational team headed by Avigdor Shinan, professor of Midrash and liturgy at the Hebrew University and the SJS. The syllabus, covering the fields of Bible, Midrash, Talmud, customs, and life cycle, was closely coordinated for grade level, with equal attention paid to a rational and logical progression in the development of skills and the level of knowledge from year to year.

TEF also sponsored extensive teacher training using pedagogic supervisors who visited TALI locations, combined with an extensive in-service seminar program at the local, regional, and national levels. In addition, TEF in conjunction with the SJS ran courses in informal Jewish education for TALI coordinators, enabling them to offer professional guidance to colleagues in their respective schools.

The Shenhar Report

In 1994, the Shenhar Report was issued. This was a government study commissioned three years earlier by the then-outgoing minister of education, Zevulun Hammer. The twenty-six commission members represented a broad cross section of religious beliefs and ideologies, and was chaired by Haifa University rector Aliza Shenhar. The report expressed dismay at the poor Jewish-identity quotient of the nearly 80 percent of the student population in the non-Orthodox stream. The Commission declared a state of emergency, and condemned Israeli society's pronounced indifference to the meaning and content of Jewish identity.

In calling for change, the Commission made several key recommendations to Minister of Education Amnon Rubenstein:

To strengthen Jewish studies through the teaching of Bible, rabbinic tradition, medieval Jewish history, the Holocaust, ethnography and folklore, and Jewish literature;

To remove instruction in Jewish studies from the monopoly of religious Orthodoxy;

To place teacher training outside of institutions associated with religious Orthodoxy;

To break the religious establishment's monopoly over defining what constitutes Judaism;

To emphasize the broader cultural dimensions inherent in Judaism, over and above the strictly religious components.

Implicit in the Shenhar Report was a realization that superficial rhythms of Jewish life (Shabbat as the day off, Pesach as a national holiday) were by themselves insufficient to stave off the threat of assimilation. Zionism was only a partial response to the issue of Jewish identity. The real existential challenge to Jewish survival in Israel no longer emanated from external enemies but from an inability to convince the next generation of Israeli children that Jewish learning and living were relevant options in their lives.

The Shenhar Commission's recommendations, which validated the claims of TEF, spawned a multiplicity of adult-centered pilot programs aimed at "conquering" Jewish knowledge and texts the way Zionist

pioneers once spoke of conquering the desert.

TALI's approach, however, remained unique in calling for the gradual creation of a healthy synthesis between learning and living; religion and culture were two sides of the same coin. TALI schools required not only the study of the prayer book but also the prayer experience itself. Special attention was given to enhancing the knowledge and appreciation of Sabbath and holiday celebrations as religious and cultural experiences.

TEF also emphasized family education. Joint workshops (three to five a year) involving parents and children concentrated on a variety of subjects: Shabbat, festivals, prayer and the prayer book, the Mishnah, and Jewish literature. Seminars geared to bar/bat mitzvah-age youth also reached 1500-2000 participants a year.

To be sure, TALI educators recognized that religious ritual was problematic for individuals coming from nonobservant backgrounds. The understanding was that each child, in deciding the nature and extent of his or her Jewish commitment, should do so not out of indifference, alienation, and apathy, but on the basis of knowledge, firsthand experience, and some measure of positive identification.

In a move reminiscent of the internal debate among TALI's founders over whether to develop a two-track system, the Ministry of Education also debated how much to invest in TALI's integrated diet of learning and living, and how much to invest in training secular teachers to be Jewishly literate. A preference grew for the latter approach, TEF receiving less funding from the Ministry in 1995 (60,000 NIS) than it had in 1994 (200,000 NIS). Recognizing this trend, TEF entered the race to upgrade the Jewish identity quotient outside the framework of TALI schools. On an ad hoc basis, it packaged seminars and in-service training on Judaism, totaling several hundred hours of annual teaching, to interested nonreligious teachers.

The Future

With the change in 1996 from a Labor to a Likud government, Education Minister Zevulun Hammer spoke glowingly to TEF of opening 300 TALI schools by the end of the century. This would almost certainly guarantee the outright demise of TEF or, at the very least, a substantial downsizing of its activities.

A future submersion of TEF into the larger reservoir of the Ministry of Education would constitute a blessing in disguise. After years of fighting uphill battles, of having to raise funds from abroad to cover teacher training, curriculum development, and parent/pupil involvement, TALI's founders would essentially win the war they would have preferred avoiding in the first place. In the Kulturkampf pitting secularism against religion, TALI's widespread penetration would signal victory for those forces-linked ideologically to Masorti Judaism-that long advocated the teaching of Jewish values and experiences within a tolerant, noncoercive atmosphere.

The Bet Midrash

Gerson Cohen, who supported the establishment of the Masorti movement, was also determined to promote an academic Jewish educational alternative in the State of Israel. In 1982 he set in motion a process that culminated two years later in the opening of the Seminary of Judaic Studies (the Bet Midrash).

As an historian of ancient and medieval Judaism, Cohen was captivated by an historical paradigm that, he argued, applied to modern Jewish history. Many events, he felt, could be refracted through a lens that had a "two-center" focus, the "Jerusalem-Babylonia" axis. At its best, it referred to a healthy rivalry between

equals and competition for hegemony by the political and spiritual leaders of both locales. At the same time, it testified to a fruitful interaction that enriched each side through the cross-fertilization of ideas.

Cohen saw this paradigm resurrected in the middle of the twentieth century. The State of Israel and American Jewry were, for all their differences, reincarnations of the Jerusalem-Babylonia axis. The trauma of the Holocaust and the destruction of Eastern European Jewry made it imperative for the Jewish people to appreciate how vital each center was for the viability of the other. Practically speaking, this meant that each needed to tap into the resources of the other.

Cohen believed it was crucial for Israeli society to perceive itself as an evolving religious civilization, with an appreciation for the Diaspora's accent on tolerance and pluralism. He lamented that the vast majority of Israelis had been religiously disfranchised, severed from their spiritual roots. To be sure, they were secular by choice, but also, in part, by lack of choice. Orthodoxy, he felt, stood guilty of denying some 80 percent of Israeli society even a modicum of religious vocabulary, study, and observance. At the same time, he recognized Israel's dominant role in the equation of Jewish survival. Israel represented the most potent force for unity in a secular age. Its existence helped to alleviate the anguish of the Holocaust, and its stunning accomplishments inspired Diaspora Jews with awe, pride, and ethnic commitment.

In planning the establishment of the Bet Midrash, Cohen took counsel in the spring of 1983 with lay leaders and several Israeli scholars and educators who had received rabbinical training at the Seminary—Professors Raphael Arzt, Moshe Davis, Seymour Fox, Moshe Greenberg, Reuven Hammer, Lee Levine—and a non-JTS alumnus, Eliezer Schweid.

The Bet Midrash was the joint creation of the Seminary (represented exclusively by its chancellor) and the Masorti movement. From the outset, the Bet Midrash relied on annual infusions from the Seminary's coffers. In its first year, the Seminary provided seed money of \$25,000 toward the total budget of \$125,000. Support continued apace as the institution expanded, peaking in the 1990s at \$375,000 annually out of total expenditures of more than \$3 million.

Seminary beneficence was also forthcoming in two other critical areas: (1) The physical plant of the Bet Midrash was on Seminary property, first at the landmark Schocken Library Building (1984-87), and then at the Seminary-owned dormitory, Neve Schechter, situated behind the Israel Museum (1990-present). (2) The Council of Higher Education in Israel recognized the right of the Bet Midrash (as an overseas branch of the Seminary) to confer an M.A. degree in Jewish studies.

Bet Midrash solvency depended on the largesse of Diaspora donors. By its second decade, fund-raising from private sources accounted for one-third of the institution's income. The establishment of an International Board of Governors in 1992 facilitated this effort, as did foundation grants and an annual allocation of \$500,000 from the Jewish Agency (representing Diaspora dollars).

Since its inception, three American-born, Seminary-trained, Conservative rabbis have headed the Bet Midrash: Rabbis Reuven Hammer (1984-87), Lee Levine (1987-94), and Benjamin Segal (1994-present). In keeping with the institution's pluralistic framework, students came from both religious and nonreligious backgrounds. Enrollment in the first decade climbed from fewer than ten students to over 200 in 1994, to more than 370 in 1996-97, with more than 125 course offerings taught by more than seventy faculty members. In recent years, as the Bet Midrash moved toward full accreditation as an Israeli university, it began to build a full-time faculty comprising younger scholars, thereby passing over the temptation to rely on "superstar" scholars so readily available in the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv environs.

Initially, students in both the rabbinical and educational streams were required to earn a master's degree at the Hebrew University. In 1989 the Council on Higher Education in Israel and the Board of Regents of

the New York Department of Higher Education granted permission to the Bet Midrash, as a branch of JTS, to offer its own master's degree. The Council based this shift on the decision of the Bet Midrash to integrate theoretical learning into a variety of workplace situations.

Over the next few years, the Bet Midrash designed specialized programs that directly applied to students' professional careers. By the mid-'90s, six specialized master's programs were offered:

Interdisciplinary-intended for teachers, supervisors, principals, and graduate students interested in acquiring a broad grasp of Jewish studies (Jewish history, philosophy, law, education, Talmud, Bible, and Midrash);

Teaching Jewish Studies-broadens the cultural and intellectual background of teachers in Israel's public schools by providing the analytical tools to compare contemporary values with those of traditional Jewish sources;

Informal and Social Education-broadens the Jewish knowledge of those who teach informal education by incorporating Jewish values and content within informal educational settings (field trips, current events);

Women's and Gender Studies-This first graduate program of its kind in Israel was created in response to the changing status of women and the advancement of women's studies in academia since the late 1960s. It explores, within a Jewish framework, new definitions of femininity and masculinity, and attitudes toward the human body, giving birth, and parenthood;

Land of Israel Studies-aimed at students wanting to expand their knowledge of the Land of Israel;

Family and Community Studies-designed for community center directors, coordinators, and teachers working with families in community settings. It teaches Jewish studies and integrates them into family/community education.

The Bet Midrash also inaugurated programs to upgrade the Jewish quotient of Diaspora Jewry. It provided one-year academic programs for rabbinical students from JTS in New York, the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, the Seminario Rabbinico in Buenos Aires, and for students from the Teachers' Seminary of Budapest. All were designed to prepare visiting students to be intelligent interpreters of contemporary Israeli society.

In addition, the Bet Midrash sponsored Midreshet Yerushalayim-Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Of the approximately 500,000 Jewish children living in the former Soviet Union, 12,000 were receiving some form of Jewish education in 1994. The Bet Midrash, through its Diaspora outreach department, was touching the lives of 1200 of these children (and their parents), or some 10 percent of all the children in Jewish schools. Activities focused on day schools and supplementary schools in Moscow and Ukraine, as well as three Ramah summer camps in Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa.

A final expression of solidarity was the support the Bet Midrash gave to teacher training and community education in Hungary. More than fifty students a year were trained to serve the Hungarian Jewish community as formal and informal educators. They spent up to a year of study in Jerusalem. The Budapest Teachers' Seminary, working in association with the Bet Midrash, was awarded the Shazar Prize in 1995 for outstanding achievements in the field of education.

Who Is a Jew?

Historical Overview

After the election of 1988, the issue of Orthodox control over Israeli Judaism became the subject of heated debate. Some Orthodox parties, intent on consolidating the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate, wished to amend the Law of Return by inserting the phrase “converted to Judaism in accordance with halakhah (Jewish law),” thereby invalidating, in their estimation, conversions performed by non-Orthodox rabbis abroad.

Other proposed measures would have given the authority to decide questions of conversion within Israel and all other matters of personal status exclusively to the rabbinical courts, without possible appeal to the secular courts.

These Orthodox efforts produced an unprecedented backlash, especially in the Diaspora. Twenty-seven American Jewish communal and non-Orthodox religious groups urged Israeli leaders not to change the status quo and to remove the “Who is a Jew?” issue from coalition bargaining. Leaders of the major American fund-raising institutions on behalf of Israel also warned against the divisive effect of the proposed legislation upon Jewish unity.

Pressure from Diaspora Jews and the protests of the Conservative and Reform streams in Israel ensured that the propositions were shelved.

Who Is a Jew 1996

This issue was resurrected after Benjamin Netanyahu’s election as prime minister in May 1996. As part of his coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox parties, he agreed to support a bill barring state recognition of any conversion performed in Israel under non-Orthodox auspices. A private bill to this effect was formally introduced in October 1996 by Knesset members from the Shas (Sephardic Orthodox) Party.

This controversy was actually sparked by two earlier petitions to Israel’s Supreme Court. One, sponsored in April 1995 by the Masorti movement and Na’amat, called upon the state to formally recognize the conversions of minors carried out under Masorti auspices. The petition asked the court to reject the standing Orthodox principle requiring adopting parents to raise their children according strict halakhah.

Another petition, this submitted by the Reform movement, called for recognition of conversions performed by Israeli Conservative and Reform rabbis on the same basis as those performed in the Diaspora. It was inspired by a 1989 Supreme Court decision declaring that a convert’s personal declaration, when accompanied by a conversion certificate, was sufficient to oblige the Interior Ministry to register the convert as Jewish. Acknowledging this precedent, the Supreme Court ruled in November 1995 that the religious criteria established by the Chief Rabbinate were insufficient to undermine the validity of Conservative and Reform conversions carried out in Israel.

In effect, the highest court of the land had declared that Israel’s Chief Rabbinate did not have a monopoly on conversions in the country. Furthermore, the posture of the court mirrored the view of former Supreme Court president Meir Shamgar that the right to convert was an integral aspect of freedom of religion and conscience. Nevertheless, the Court at this juncture chose to refrain from ordering the Interior Ministry to register Conservative and Reform converts as Jews.

Meanwhile, solutions were being found to resolve the dilemma of several of the minors who had undergone Masorti conversions. Treasury Minister Yaacov Ne’eman, himself an Orthodox Jew, succeeded in arranging for the “quick” conversion of one of the minors. The Masorti office arranged for two other minors to be issued conversion certificates bearing the imprimatur of a New Jersey-based

Conservative rabbinical court. These Diaspora-based certificates qualified the converts to be registered as Jews with the Interior Ministry.

On March 4, 1997, Supreme Court president Aharon Barak set a final date of April 30 for the state to show just cause for its refusal to register the minors in question as Jews. (By this time only three of the original cases were outstanding.) He set a date of May 13 to deliberate the matter. The Orthodox parties, working in cooperation with the minister of justice and Justice Ministry officials, moved quickly to enact legislation to protect the Orthodox monopoly.

The proposed conversion law of 1996 called for the enactment of two principles: (1) that all conversions be arranged under the rubric of “Torah law” (din Torah) and (2) that only authorized state-run rabbinic courts would have jurisdiction to ensure that conversions performed in Israel indeed conformed to “Torah law.” An attempt was also made at the time by the religious parties to add a rider to the pending legislation aimed at delegitimizing conversions performed abroad by non-Orthodox rabbis on behalf of residents/citizens of Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu vigorously rejected this move because it contravened the existing religious status quo in the Jewish world.

Conservative (Masorti) reaction was unequivocal on both sides of the Atlantic, sharply criticizing the government for agreeing, in principle, to sacrifice the legitimacy of non-Orthodox religious movements for short-term political gain. In a New York meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu in February 1997, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch (along with Reform rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) argued that Israel had a responsibility to Jews in the Diaspora, and not just to Jews of Orthodox persuasion: “If Israel is to remain the epicenter of the Jewish world, then its government must come to recognize the responsibilities that come with that sacred role,” Schorsch argued. “To allow debate and promote legislation that discredits the beliefs and practices of the vast majority of synagogue-affiliated Jews in America is to abdicate that responsibility.” Schorsch felt that in denying the authority of non-Orthodox rabbis and their right to accept people into the Jewish fold, the government of Israel was in effect declaring the inauthenticity of American synagogue life.

Status of Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union

Diaspora legitimacy aside, Masorti leadership in Israel and America pointed to the acute problem of conversions in Israel. The Chief Rabbinate’s strict rulings affected two major immigrant groups: olim from the former Soviet Union and parents of adopted children. Adopted children, unless converted before coming to Israel, were not being registered as Jews. The Chief Rabbinate rested its case on the fact that families refused to rear these children according to Orthodox standards of halakhic observance. In effect, this created a situation authorizing adoption exclusively by Orthodox couples.

Aliyah from the former Soviet Union posed an even greater challenge. Of the approximately 800,000 immigrants, an estimated 200,000-300,000 were not Jewish, even under the liberal definition of the Law of Return. Moreover, it was claimed that more than half this number wanted to convert to Judaism, but were unable to meet the strict criteria of the Chief Rabbinate.

Different numbers were bandied about as to actual conversions performed annually. According to Rabbi Yisrael Rozen, head of the Tsomet Institute, the official conversion institute begun in 1994, an estimated 500-600 candidates a year qualified for conversion. Rabbi Rafi Dayan, head of the rabbinical courts and an aide to Sephardi Chief Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, said that a total of 700-800 people were converted annually, out of some 1000-1200 who applied. (Other sources placed the number of candidates closer to 2500.) Masorti movement sources placed the number of actual converts at fewer than 350 a year.

Minister of Absorption Yuli Edelstein, a former Russian refusenik and himself an observant Jew, did not

know whether the paucity of converts from the Russian sector was a function of the strictness of the rabbinical courts or simply a display of apathy by the Russians about conversion. One thing, however, was clear: immigrants from the former Soviet Union had not allied themselves with the Conservative and Reform movements in the dispute over conversions.

Although Edelstein and his colleague, Natan Sharansky, minister of industry and trade, saw great importance in deepening the connection with Diaspora Jewry and between Jews of differing religious backgrounds, they went on record as opposing recognition of non-Orthodox conversions performed in Israel, while continuing to recognize those performed abroad. Edelstein justified his stance with the argument that “for the moment, Israeli society is not prepared to recognize Reform and Conservative conversions.”

In a move signaling a retreat from the fight to establish religious pluralism in the country, Edelstein and Sharansky’s Yisrael Ba’aliya Party adopted a narrowly focused strategy aimed at solving the specific dilemma facing their Russian constituency. They called for the organization of a network of conversion institutes around the country (as well as an expansion of the number of rabbinical courts dealing with conversion) to service the particular needs of the Russian population. They proposed that following the completion of a period of study (ten months, twelve hours a week), conversions would be granted on an almost pro forma basis by the Chief Rabbinate, with an absolute minimum of bureaucratic entanglement.

Rabbi Reuven Hammer, head of the rabbinic court for conversions of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel (the professional union of Masorti rabbis working under the umbrella of the Masorti movement), which converted more than 100 people each year, labeled this strategy naïve.

Masorti outreach programs to Russians stress kinship and peoplehood rather than religious practice. To be sure, Masorti rabbis sought to show how religious observance could add an aesthetic dimension to life but, in the final analysis, the factors of “people,” “memory,” “shared suffering,” and “history” were accepted by an overwhelming majority of the Masorti rabbinate as the essential values uniting the Jewish people, in the hope that this approach would, in due course, resonate among Russian olim.

By early 1997 Israel’s Chief Rabbinate had begun to heed the calls for a more charitable attitude toward potential Russian converts. It boosted its conversion study centers—each of which handled twenty students at a time—from a handful to sixty, and six rabbinical conversion courts were set up, including classes taught in Russian. However, the Chief Rabbinate continued to insist, at least officially, that potential converts lead Orthodox lives for at least two years before conversion.

Conservative Reaction to the Conversion Bill

Prior to the Knesset vote on the 1997 conversion bill, Ismar Schorsch sent a letter to his colleagues outlining a proposal to deal with the growing chasm between Israel and the American Jewish community. He argued that the Chief Rabbinate’s failure to solve the problem of Russian immigrants who were not halakhically Jewish marked a blatant indifference to a human tragedy of international proportions, and highlighted the growing anti-Zionist character of the Chief Rabbinate. Israel was founded to be Jewishly inclusive, but its official religious leadership seemed determined on sectarian exclusivity.

Determined to change the religious landscape of Israel, Schorsch proposed that the federations—whose contributors were mainly Conservative and Reform Jews— earmark the bulk of their Israeli appropriations to the institutions of the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel and sundry other outreach programs for unattached Israelis. He pointed to the presence of more than 300 matriculated Israeli graduate students at the Bet Midrash and the nearly fifty Masorti congregations across the country as indicators of the potential for non-Orthodox forms of religious expression.

While Schorsch's preference was to take \$100-150 million a year off the top at the national federation level, he was open to any arrangement that would level the playing field in Israel as quickly as possible. The move, he said, was imperative in light of the fact that Orthodox ministers in Netanyahu's government controlled 60 percent of the national budget.

Future of Masorti Judaism

Winning the War

In an examination of "Why Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel Don't Work" (Moment, October 1996), Professor Daniel Elazar claimed that the major obstacle facing the two movements is not government policy but public attitudes. Israelis view non-Orthodox models of Judaism as inauthentic versions of the "real" thing. They simply do not understand the pluralistic, egalitarian, and experimental character of American Judaism; nor do they appreciate why American Jews (and their Israeli counterparts) have so considerably altered traditional Judaism as Israelis know it.

Although treated to an avalanche of criticisms from Reform and Conservative spokesmen, Elazar's thesis stands confirmed. For most Israelis, what counts "is the perpetuation of the total religious edifice, regardless of individual practice." Even those who reject tradition in their own lives, or choose what to observe, nevertheless believe "the religious tradition itself is fixed." They buy the claim made by Orthodoxy that authentic Judaism stands "united in accepting a traditional understanding of Torah and halacha."

To make matters worse, most Israelis equate the two non-Orthodox movements. There have been occasions over the years when Israel's Reform leadership (the Movement for Progressive Judaism) tried to take advantage of this, urging the leaders of the Masorti movement and the Bet Midrash to combine forces with them in one non-Orthodox bloc. Though a willingness exists within Masorti ranks to work together with Reform on cooperative ventures (e.g., advocacy of religious rights), there is persistent Masorti resistance to amalgamation of the two movements.

The main stumbling block to religious union is Reform Judaism's rejection of Jewish law in favor of individual choice. The Masorti view, in contrast, is that both tradition and change are necessary for a living Judaism. Accordingly, Masorti holds itself bound by the Jewish legal tradition, while asserting the right of its rabbinical body (not individuals) to interpret and to apply Jewish law.

Moreover, the two movements operate very differently. Masorti's thrust is heavily weighted on the side of education, while Israeli Reform is active in the political and judicial arenas, striving to ensure the right to exercise alternative religious options.

To be sure, Israel's Rabbinical Assembly (the Masorti rabbinic leadership cadre) has consistently cooperated with Reform in challenging the hegemony of Israel's Orthodox Chief Rabbinate before the Supreme Court. This alliance is, to some extent, a tactical maneuver. Some Masorti rabbis reason: "Whether we like it or not, we are in the same boat with Reform Jews. We suffer from the same prejudice, the same discrimination.

Others stress the principle of freedom of religion: "Our entire struggle concerning the conversion law is a struggle for unity and pluralism—a struggle which is based on emphasizing unity of the Jewish people and what we have in common, and not an attempt to exclude those who do not agree with us." "We are not about to go our own way and abandon Reform. We disagree with them heartily, may even tell them we prefer that they do things differently, but we want them to have the same privileges in Israel that we

want.” Another colleague, a strict halakhist, argued that to peremptorily dismiss the Reform movement’s sentiments and postures was tantamount to facing the unthinkable prospect of losing a million and a half full Jews and “semi-Jews” from the ranks of the Jewish people.

Masorti Jews have shied away from forming their own political party. The subsequent lack of political clout translates into a struggle to survive outside the sphere of party patronage by relying on alternative reservoirs of money: either from Israeli agencies such as the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Education, or from Diaspora benefactors.

Though time-consuming, this process plays to what Masorti Judaism considers its strength: cogent argumentation and persuasion. This educational process stands pitted against (1) the power of religious coercion granted by the state to the Orthodox rabbinate and (2) the heavy political patronage awarded to the government’s coalition partners.

The Sephardic ultra-Orthodox party, Shas, has thrived by entering politics. It used the moneys from government coffers to effect major social and educational changes. Aside from its network of yeshivot and healthy student stipends, the party has extended a serious helping hand to the downtrodden, established schools, youth clubs, and extracurricular education, provided housing for large families, and reached out to those afflicted by drug addiction. Indeed, here lies the source of its highly successful penetration of significant sectors of Israeli society: its attentiveness to both the affective and cognitive concerns of its voters.

Among the Masorti rabbinate, there is a growing awareness that the Shas model is not only worthy of emulation but a necessary desideratum. Rabbi Matt Futterman, a veteran congregational rabbi in Ashkelon, stands in the forefront of those calling for “paradigm shift” in the movement. Adopting the pragmatic principles of Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), Futterman has mapped out a strategic plan predicated on meeting the Israeli public where it is by providing needed social services.

Futterman’s claim rests on pragmatism: improving the quality of life of the Israeli public necessarily precedes the teaching of Conservative ideology. Touching people’s lives existentially is a springboard for affecting the cerebral level. The successful implementation of community-based social programs builds trust and, consequently, a greater receptivity to the multifaceted tenets of Masorti ideology, namely, its diverse perceptions of God, Torah, and Israel, its halakhic commitment to “tradition and change,” its blending of traditional commentaries with the critical historical tools of modern scholarship, and its accent on pluralism and democracy.

Futterman’s analysis, in fact, mirrors the working premise of the American rabbinate. In the 1970s, Rabbi Stanley Rabinowitz, then president of the Rabbinical Assembly of America, said that it was precisely the rabbi’s willingness to service the pastoral needs of his congregants that made them receptive to his/her “prophetic” message: “We are paid for being priests. If we perform the role well, we will be allowed to be prophets.”

This “service” orientation is spreading among congregation-based Masorti rabbis. As an Israeli colleague put it: “Education in the ivory tower or the classroom leads only to museum Judaism.” Thus the operation of summer camps and outreach programs within the TALI schools has exposed families to the religious philosophy of Masorti Judaism. Families who never considered connecting with any synagogue, not to mention a mixed-seating worship service involving women’s participation, have sought out the services of Masorti congregations for bar/bat mitzvah celebrations and adult study.

Day care programs in Beersheba and Ashkelon have also been designed with this paradigm in mind.

Parents who need a place for their children until late afternoon involve themselves in Masorti programs.

Several similar programs have appeared on the drawing board:

A network of nurseries and day care centers operating in accord with the pedagogical philosophy of TALI to help shape the future of Jewish education in Israel, promote professionalism in the fields of early childhood and family education, and draw parents into the Masorti orbit;

An AIDS hospice;

A network of mental health counseling centers staffed by professionals, many of whom would themselves be positive Masorti role models;

Utilizing the expertise of Conservative-trained teachers who belong to Masorti congregations to tutor students preparing for matriculation examinations (especially Bible, history, rabbinics, and Jewish thought);

A permanent roster of Masorti volunteers to work in hospitals, senior citizens homes, and absorption centers;

An “urban corps” composed of Noam members fulfilling their army service and/or graduates of the Bet Midrash. Through their integration into the local landscape of a particular community, they will open doors to the Masorti experience.

To be sure, transforming the educational and social face of the country will require money. Two small though significant steps in this direction were set in motion in the summer/fall of 1997. First was the doubling of the annual Jewish Agency allocation to the Masorti movement from \$1 million to \$2 million. Equally important was a commitment by the United Jewish Appeal and the Council of Jewish Federations in the Diaspora to work with the Masorti and Reform movements to raise (supplemental to regular donor giving) an additional \$10 million for each movement.

There has been a significant about-face in Ismar Schorsch’s evaluation of the congregational arm of the Masorti movement. Some four years after he criticized the synagogue structure as irrelevant for Israel, the chancellor adopted a more conciliatory tone. While continuing to stress the primacy of education and the need to expose secular Israelis to the classical literary tradition, he expressed the hope that education would eventually encourage Israelis to try ritual observance and prayer, and get them to appreciate the synagogue as a key factor in perpetuating meaningful Jewish identity.

He took particular exception to the claim of the Guttman Report (1993) that Israeli society was considerably more observant of Jewish tradition than previously imagined. Schorsch challenged the report’s conclusion that “Israeli Jews are strongly committed to the continuing Jewish character of their society, even while they are selective in their observance.” To him it was patently obvious that so long as the range of these observances excluded synagogue practices and prayer, Israeli society was hardly as traditional or observant as it might seem. The chancellor contended that only the availability of religious options could boost Jewish identity among Israel’s predominantly secular community.

The Potential Role of Halakhah

Like most modern Jews, a majority of Israelis do not practice halakhah. To be sure, Israelis observe some aspects of Jewish tradition to a higher degree than Diaspora Jews (e.g., kashrut, seder participation, fasting on the Day of Atonement, lighting Hanukkah candles, recitation of Kiddush on Friday night,

keeping separate milk and meat dishes). Furthermore, they tend to obey rabbinic establishment rulings that affect personal status (e.g., marriage, divorce, burial). Yet these acts do not reflect a halakhic mindset, the notion of willingly surrendering autonomy before the “commanding” will of God.

Within this setting, Masorti Judaism stakes out its claim as a religious movement committed to the governance of Jewish life by the prescriptions of halakhah. It promotes the idea that the halakhic system embodies the will of God. Halakhah confirms the sacredness of rituals sanctified by centuries of usage while also legitimizing innovation, flexibility, and development.

To this end, its Va’ad Halakhah (halakhic committee), founded in 1985, has produced an array of responsa under the direction of its long-standing chairman, Rabbi David Golinkin, a professor at the Bet Midrash. This material is responsive to the modern ethos, and to Israeli society in particular. Topics covered include: requirements of conversion; eating legumes (kitniyot) on Passover; ascending the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; organ transplants; artificial insemination; extramarital relationships; a prohibition on smoking; conscription of women and yeshiva students into the army; and the ordination of women rabbis.

The Va’ad has gradually weaned itself from its initial subservience to its American counterpart, the New York-based Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly. Though tensions existed in the early years between the two committees, these disappeared recently.

Several reasons account for the de facto independence of the Israeli-based committee. The notion of geographical decentralization, and the need to respond to the particular characteristics of Israeli society, had already received legitimacy in 1984 with the establishment of the Bet Midrash by the Seminary. In fact, halakhic decentralization was normative through most of Jewish history. Also, logic dictated that the intricacies entailed in taking into account the complex needs of Israeli society would of necessity fall to Masorti rabbis familiar with the Israeli terrain. In addition, the responsa are written in Hebrew, in a classical style that sets them apart from American responsa composed in English. Finally, the biblical notion of “instruction going forth from Zion” denotes a conviction that Jerusalem has both the requisite talent and spiritual mandate to share its halakhic insights with the Diaspora.

Some argue that any hope of altering the religious status quo depends on mass aliyah by Conservative and Reform Jews. There is no expectation of this happening soon. The alternative adopted by Masorti Jews is long-term education. Each of the three principal institutions analyzed-TALI education, the Masorti movement, and the Seminary of Judaic Studies-offers solutions to the negative perception of Judaism that exists in many Israeli quarters.

The long-range impact of TALI education cannot be underestimated. Its educational equation of Judaism, Zionism, and modernity has begun to shape the thinking and behavior of thousands of Israeli children. However, this must be reinforced in the teenage years through a sustained expansion of TALI-style high schools around the country.

The presence of synagogue centers (kehillot), though certainly not widespread, fosters spiritual growth through community. One of the perils modern man faces, particularly in Israeli society, is a sense of anomie, of social isolation and disorientation. The synagogue centers provide an address for native-born Israelis searching for meaning in their lives. It remains to be seen whether Masorti synagogues will be able transform themselves from being, for the most part, Landsmannschaften into communities with broad-based appeal to native Israelis.

The framework of kehillah may provide Masorti Judaism in the years ahead with a platform to articulate the insight that the traumas of persecution and mourning cannot sustain Jewish identity. Hostility can

temporarily function as a cohesive force, but in the long run religion must satisfy deep existential needs. Religion encompasses a belief system, shared rituals, customs, and memories by which members share the joyous and the frightening moments of life. The message sponsored by kehillot is that Judaism is appropriated on the basis of love.

The politicization of religion has retarded and blocked legitimate debate on the nature of Jewish identity for Israelis. Since its inception, 170 Bet Midrash graduates have taken their places in all sectors of Israeli society. Its present student population, overwhelmingly sabra in composition, represents all walks of professional life. Together they form an educational elite committed to exploring the proposition that moral, cultural, and religious vitality are not the exclusive preserve of Orthodox Jews.

Endnotes

1. The United Synagogue of Israel (officially incorporated in 1975) constituted the Israel branch of the World Council of Synagogues, an organizational affiliate of Conservative Judaism headquartered in New York. The Council's mandate was to establish Conservative synagogues outside the boundaries of North America.
2. For an historical overview of TALI education, see Lee Levine, "The TALI Schools," *Studies in Jewish Education* 7 (1995).
3. Initially, the school was called "Masorti," i.e., "traditional." Responding to pressure from the then Orthodox-controlled Ministry of Education, the more neutral term TALI was selected after the first six years of operation. The Ministry was concerned lest these schools become associated in the public eye with the Conservative movement in Israel, which by 1979 had adopted the name "Masorti."