

# REBUILDING JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

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*Jewish unity has been fractured both by the rise of a triumphalist Orthodoxy and the increased radicalization of the liberal movements. Jewish peoplehood can be rebuilt by strengthening modern Orthodoxy, cooling the inflammatory rhetoric, recognizing that assimilation is the common problem affecting all Jews, and coming together to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Israel.*

The aftermath of the Rabin assassination sent tremors throughout the Jewish world. In an attempt to underscore common ties of blood, kinship, and fate—if not of faith and ideology—the American Jewish Committee (*Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood*, 1996) invited over 30 intellectuals and communal leaders to reflect on the implications of the assassination for the future of Jewish peoplehood.

Some derided these efforts as unrealistic—instead urging the American Jewish Committee (AJC) to acknowledge the reality of two distinct Jewish peoples. Others felt that Jewish unity was at most a meaningless slogan. An Israeli delegation pointedly informed us that the real challenge is for Orthodoxy to clean its house and only then to discuss rejoining the Jewish people. Prominent columnists in both Israel and the United States proudly proclaimed their disinterest in unity, challenging their readers instead to choose up sides. One writer went so far as to advocate seriously the repartition of Israel into a humanistic Israel and a theocratic Judah (Chafets, 1996).

With more finger-pointing than shared grief, the Israeli and American Jewish Left rejected any responsibility for inflaming the climate between Jews in the weeks and months prior to the assassination. A spokesman for Americans for Peace Now unequivocally denied that the Left bore any responsibility for violent rhetoric (Rubin, 1995). Seemingly

forgotten had been the no less polarizing rhetoric of the Left during the Lebanon War: “Arik Sharon is a murderer!” At one AJC public meeting in the late 1980s, a prominent member of the Knesset and subsequently a cabinet minister castigated Lubavitch as the “Nazis of our time.” Many of these tensions erupted into full public focus at the *Nightline* “town hall” meeting shortly after the assassination at which a prominent Labor politician violated democratic norms of minority rights by proclaiming of his opponents that “we will crush them.”

There has been equally inflammatory rhetoric from the Right. Particularly galling have been statements by Israel’s chief rabbis referring to Reform Jews as “terrorists” who should be “vomited” out of the Jewish State. Perhaps the saddest part of the unfortunate statement of the once-prestigious but now inconsequential Union of Orthodox Rabbis that Reform and Conservative Judaism were simply “not Judaism at all” was that privately many Orthodox Jews and their rabbis may well have agreed with it. Indeed, only the violently anti-Reform and Conservative animus may explain the refusal to accept any form of validation for the non-Orthodox religious streams. Thus, for example, the professional head of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU), a centrist Orthodox organization, found it necessary to disassociate himself from the widely acclaimed “Turn Friday night into Shabbat” program for it amounted to encouraging Jews to attend a Friday night service in a Reform temple (Bayme, 1997).

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The backlash against Orthodoxy, and in some respects even against Israel itself, has, of course, widened the breach. For some, the advocacy of religious pluralism in Israel became a code word for Orthodox bashing. Others, notably Rabbis Eric Yoffe and Ismar Schorsch, called for dismantling the Chief Rabbinate and for redirecting American Jewish philanthropic funds away from Orthodox institutions. Rabbi Sheldon Zimmermann, president of the Hebrew Union College, warned that Knesset members could expect only hostility from Reform congregations should legislation be passed preserving the Orthodox monopoly on conversion. His colleague, Rabbi Simeon Maslin, in a presidential address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, offered his own rejection of pluralism: "Let me make it clear that when I say we, as 'we are the authentic Jews' I refer to the two great non-Orthodox synagogue movements of America, Reform and Conservative. My we includes both Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, but it does not include those who act and think today as the Sadducees acted and thought 20 centuries ago." Although perhaps couched with greater eloquence, Rabbi Maslin's statement was no less exclusionary than that of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis. In fact, if not in spirit, his statement excluded both Reconstructionist and Orthodox Judaism. Lastly, some went so far as to advocate a new Jewish unity of all committed to pluralism against the anti-pluralists. Needless to say, such a scenario would both fracture what little is left of Jewish unity and deprive the entire Jewish people of genuine Orthodox contributions to strengthening Jewish life.

#### **CAUSES OF POLARIZATION**

The root causes of this polarization lie both in the rise of a triumphalist Orthodoxy and in the increased radicalization of the liberal movements. Orthodox triumphalism signals the well-known attitude of dismissal of the non-Orthodox movements. Orthodoxy of the 1950s perceived itself as on the defensive—having to refute the standard wisdom predict-

ing its imminent demise. By contrast, Orthodoxy in the 1990s radiates an almost smug self-confidence about its future, especially in the context of widespread assimilation and Orthodox successes in securing continuity in comparison with the non-Orthodox movements. Aggravating this cultural attitude of "we will survive—you will disappear" has been the political extremism of Meir Kahane and its offshoots in the Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir affairs. The ugly racism and cult of violence of Kahane all too often permeated religious Zionist circles. In his last years Kahane remained a respected speaker at Orthodox synagogues and educational institutions long after he had been ostracized by the organized Jewish community in America and by the Knesset in Israel.

More moderate than Kahane, but in some ways no less problematic, has been the growth of messianic activism among the Lubavitch and settlers on the West Bank and their American supporters. All too often the dangerous roles that messianic movements have played throughout Jewish history have been ignored in favor of millenarian sentiment of an imminent end to history and the ushering in of a final redemption. Predominant opinion within rabbinic Judaism generally discouraged messianic frenzy as futile at best and dangerous at worst. Ironically, in recent years, some of the foremost apostles of rabbinic Judaism have become the purveyors of precisely that messianic frenzy. Some deride these activities as a waste of energy and resources. Other question whether messianism inflames the climate between Jews, spilling over into extremist politics and even violence.

The effects upon Jewish unity and peoplehood have been considerable. Confronted with the image of Orthodoxy as obscurantist, politically reactionary, and triumphalist toward non-Orthodox Jews, liberal Jews react with disdain and even disgust. The Orthodox, of course, respond by reminding their critics of the threats of assimilation and claim that non-Orthodox hostility is really only a reflection of resentment at Ortho-

dox successes in transmitting Jewish identity and preventing mixed marriages.

The collapse of the Synagogue Council of America and Orthodoxy's reaction to its demise is a case in point. Where Orthodoxy had been among the creators of the Synagogue Council in the 1950s and Orthodox leaders had been among its most senior officers, by the 1990s the Synagogue Council was at best tolerated within Orthodox circles. With its demise, a senior official of the leading Orthodox congregational body commented, "I always felt dirtied by it," and proceeded to pronounce a blessing rejoicing in its collapse.

For non-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox triumphalism and intransigence have fractured Jewish unity. The most common formulation of the problem is that "it's the Orthodox versus the rest of the community." Modern Orthodox Jews, anxious to build bridges between different portions of the community, are dismissed as inconsequential or as "exception Orthodox." As one woman put it recently to an Orthodox speaker, "I don't mean you, but the other Orthodox are fanatics!"

Less heralded but no less significant as a root cause of the communal fissure has been the radicalization of the liberal movements. Acceptance of patrilineal descent and same-sex marriages within the Reform and Reconstructionist movements has broadened the breach not only with Orthodoxy but also with Conservative Judaism. Within Israel, even many of the strongest proponents of Judaism acknowledge that the adoption of these measures has undermined the credibility of Reform Judaism in the eyes of many secular Israelis. One indication of this radicalization in the United States has been shifting perceptions of Reform rabbis who officiate at mixed marriages. Where, in the 1970s, less than 10 percent of Reform rabbis officiated at mixed marriages, and these were widely considered to be marginal to the Reform movement, by the 1990s the percentage has increased to almost 40 percent, and the prevailing attitude among rabbis who refuse to perform mixed marriages was that "I do not

perform them, but I respect the right of my colleagues to do so."

In short, the tensions expressed in the past year over who is a Jew, conversion to Judaism, and the legitimacy of the non-Orthodox movements in Israel only reflect a much larger battle within the Jewish people on how we relate to one another and how we preserve any semblance of common peoplehood.

#### **NE'EMAN COMMISSION**

The Ne'emán Commission recognized the urgency of this situation and developed recommendations to avert a split in our common fabric of peoplehood. Its final proposals called for a joint conversion institute including faculty drawn from the three major religious streams. Graduates of this institute would then undergo a conversion process administered by representatives of the Chief Rabbinate.

This recommendation fulfilled two major objectives within the conversion debate: it provided recognition and legitimacy for the non-Orthodox streams and ensured a uniform conversion procedure acceptable to the entire Jewish people. And like most compromises, it failed to satisfy any group completely. However, it did offer the Reform and Conservative movements a "place at the table" without asking Orthodox rabbis for compromise on Jewish law itself.

No sooner was the report released, however, than it became apparent that the Chief Rabbinate was unlikely to approve it. Consequently, Avram Burg, chairman of the Jewish Agency, engineered an alternate solution, known as the "technical solution." This proposal maintained the existing requirement that all Israeli Jews carry identity cards signaling their nationality as Jewish. However, the new aspect of this proposal is to follow the date after the identification as Jewish. For those born as Jews, the date would be that of birth. For those converted to Judaism, the date would be that of the conversion. The effect of this proposal would be to signal to any religious authority that for purposes of citizenship the individual is recog-

nized as a Jew but not necessarily for purposes of religious practice. The Burg proposal gained the support of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel as well as that of the Sephardi Chief Rabbinate. To be sure, the next battle will most likely occur over the rights of non-Orthodox converts to marry within Israel.

Reaction in the American Jewish community has been decidedly mixed. Some reacted with rage to the prospect of an identity card containing different categories of Jews. Others maintained that the Burg proposal was premature, effectively giving the Chief Rabbinate cause to reject the Ne'eman Commission even before its consideration and debate. Still others were disappointed that a true compromise had been shelved in favor of a very limited and technical solution that only delays the battle to another day.

Yet the Burg proposal also garnered significant support. The leadership of ARZA, the Reform movement's Zionist wing, followed the lead of Rabbi Uri Regev, a key figure in Israel, in support of Burg's recommendation. Doing so, it was felt, would avert a crisis in Israel-Diaspora relations, establish the principle that no decision had been made without consultation with North American Jewry, and identify Reform and Conservative spokesmen as the statesmen in this dispute, to the obvious detriment of the Chief Rabbinate. Conversely, in this view, the Ne'eman proposals were doomed in any case.

Within the Conservative rabbinate, there was widespread disappointment that the Burg proposals effectively preempted the Ne'eman Commission Report. Some Conservative rabbis were never entirely happy with being on record in favor of Reform conversion in any case. As Conservative rabbis committed to Jewish law, they felt they were duty-bound to reject non-halachic conversion. However, they maintained that the State of Israel, as representative of the entire Jewish people, should *not* delegitimize non-Orthodox conversion. The Burg solution, in this view, recognizes all conversions for purposes of Jewish identification in Israel, although not for purposes of religious functions, such as

marriage and burial. This solution, whereby rabbis of different streams may or may not accept one another's conversions de facto operates in the United States as well. Lastly, there was some concern, as well as division, within the Conservative rabbinate that the Burg solution signals a separation between synagogue and state by recognizing a division between religious functions and citizenship functions.

Orthodox leadership is also by no means monolithic. The coalition of Am Echad effectively lobbied the Chief Rabbinate against the Ne'eman Commission. The Modern Orthodox rabbinate wished to see the Ne'eman Commission proceed but were effectively undercut by the Am Echad coalition.

## **PROPOSALS TO REBUILD A JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD**

### **Strengthen Modern Orthodoxy**

Once considered the wave of the future and a bridge to the non-Orthodox movements, no sector is as beleaguered today as are the modern Orthodox. As the influence of Roshei Yeshiva—one of whom went so far as to equate the modern Orthodox of today with Amalek (*The Forward*, 1997)—has increased, moderate voices within Orthodoxy have receded. Yet modern Orthodox day schools continue to be widely admired models of Jewish education. The conferences in 1997 and 1998 on feminism and modern Orthodoxy were historic both in the number of participants and in signaling a shift of authority in the community from the voices of ultra-Orthodoxy. These currents merit the support and encouragement of the entire Jewish people.

### **Cool the Rhetoric**

Extreme statements on all sides only polarize the climate further. Statements equating the State of Israel with Third World regimes that deny freedom of religious practice and expression only defame the Jewish State. Statements contemptuous of the non-Orthodox movements and their followers only divide

Jew from Jew. Similarly, it does no good to engage in panic hysteria. Public advertisement to the effect that "the last time we were so divided we lost ten tribes" only escalate communal angst. If anything, disunity has been the norm of Jewish history. Periods of actual unity have, unfortunately, been all too often exceptional.

**Recognize the Reality of the "Who is a Jew" Problem, Rather Than Reduce It to the Triviality of "Who is a Rabbi"**

Conservative rabbis by no means automatically accept Reform conversions and even some Reform rabbis acknowledge that some conversions performed by their colleagues are pro forma. The acceptance of patrilineal descent by Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism fractured a historical consensus over Jewish identification. Currently, in America, there are at least 50,000 to 55,000 self-proclaimed converts to Judaism who have done so without the benefit of any rabbi at all.

In short, the questions of personal status cannot be simplified to a slogan of "who is a rabbi?" Heated rhetoric of who recognizes whom will not solve the very real problem within the Jewish people of who is a Jew. Conflicting criteria of Jewish status signal a very real problem of marriage eligibility between Jews. Power politics is no road to conflict resolution. However, the complexity and scope of these problems are far greater than simplistic suggestions of Orthodox intransigence might imply.

**Recognize that Assimilation is the Common Problem Affecting Jews**

The common problem facing Jews lies far more in assimilation and religious indifference than in religious pluralism. On the contrary, the availability of diverse models of religious expression act as a corrective to assimilation. However, this entails a definition of what constitutes a true pluralism in pronounced contrast to religious relativism.

A true pluralism contains four specific components:

1. No group possesses a monopoly on religious truth. We all need to learn from one another, or, in the words of the Talmud, "Who is a sage, one who learns from all humanity."
2. Different Jews will require different avenues to connect with their Judaic heritage. No single formulation of Jewish expression will work for all Jews. Rather, we need multiple entry points and pathways to Jewish identification.
3. Pluralism should not be invoked to validate whatever Jews do. Religious relativism, indeed, mandates an "I'm okay you're okay" attitude in which religious truth and conviction lose all meaning. As Dr. Norman Lamm (1996, p. 56), president of Yeshiva University has put it eloquently, "If everything is kosher, then nothing is kosher." Rather, pluralism does mean the freedom to criticize one another, but in an atmosphere of respect and cooperation rather than of delegitimation.
4. Pluralism connotes a clarion call to combat religious indifference. Its essential message means increased religiosity, rather than freedom from religion. One of the greatest ironies of the current controversy over pluralism in Israel has been the common cause that advocates of religious pluralism have made with atheists and agnostics in their struggle against the Chief Rabbinate.

Short-term political gains may be realized through such alliances. But defining pluralism as opposition to the Chief Rabbinate or as complete separation of synagogue from state will hardly guarantee the future Jewishness of the Jewish State.

**Celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of Israel**

Lastly, the fiftieth anniversary of Israel provides occasion for celebration of that which unites all Jews. No event in modern Jewish history has been so dramatically positive as the return of the Jews to homeland and sovereignty. Israel represents the success story of modern Jewish history. Disagreements over

particular manifestations of Israeli policy or resentment about the status of religion within Israel should never overshadow our definition of Israel as a Jewish State for the entire Jewish people and as a connecting theme binding Jews together.

Yossi Beilin, former deputy foreign minister in Israel, was widely criticized for his speeches urging American Jews to focus on Jewish identity needs in America rather than upon domestic Israeli needs. Most of his critics claimed that his rhetoric had harmed the United Jewish Appeal campaign and, indirectly, endangered U.S. foreign aid to Israel. The potential harm, indeed, was serious. Underlying Beilin's remarks, however, lay a cogent analysis of the problem of Israel-Diaspora relations. For fifty years the unity of the Jewish people had been constructed on external threats to Jews. But reliance upon potential foes to bind us together constitutes an insufficient basis on which to construct future Jewish unity. Rather our challenge lies in rebuilding our common Jewishness on the joys of leading a Jewish life and on celebration of the opportunity to build a Jewish State, on ties to common heritage and culture, and on the mutual interdependence between

Jews—wherever they reside.

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