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JEWISH
IDENTITY
IN ISRAEL

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

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JEWISH IDENTITY IN ISRAEL

The concept of Jewish identity in Israel would seem to be as self-evident as European identity in Belgium. Modern Israel was conceived as a beacon for the world's Jews, inspired by Jewish philosophy and informed by a desire to chart the next stage in Jewish consciousness. One would expect Jewishness to be its lifeblood.

Things turned out differently. In fact, it was partly the desire to forge a "New Jew" that left Jewish identity in a sort of limbo in the nascent state. The negation of the Diaspora, central to classical Zionist thought, allowed little room for an identity perceived as antiquated and destined for disappearance. In the religious sphere, the ceding of authority to an ultra-Orthodox rabbinate fostered negative attitudes towards the religion among Israel's non-Orthodox majority, as well as an assumption that one cannot express Jewish religious identity outside of Orthodox strictures.

To be sure, a new Jewish cultural archetype has emerged in Israel. But it is Israeli first and foremost. For most Israelis, it has not embodied uniquely Jewish forms of expressions and religious possibility. Many Israelis feel ambivalent to this day about the Jewish aspects of their national identity — their relationship to Jewish wisdom, history, tradition and philosophy.

Recently, there have been promising signs of change. New generations have begun to explore expressions of Jewish identity that reject the longstanding religious-secular divide. They are discovering different ways of being Jewish — in some cases inspired by global Jewish communal trends, and in others informed by uniquely Israeli sensibilities. The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore these new vistas of Jewish identity in Israel. Taken together, they paint a picture of an evolving spiritual, intellectual and cultural landscape that is giving new energy to Jewish life in Israel and beyond.

Eli Valley
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THE NEW ISRAELI JEWS

by RABBI DONNIEL HARTMAN

The conventional wisdom about Jewish identity in Israel has it dichotomized between two sectors, religious and secular, with religious analogous to Orthodox and secular often replaceable with non-religious. This depiction places Jewish identity in Israel in stark contrast to Jewish life in North America, with its multiplicity of denominations and nuances of Jewish expression.

The conventional wisdom is now wrong.

First and foremost, the dichotomous perception was established by the Ashkenazi elite who founded Israel and who saw the religious identity of Sephardim as culturally primitive and destined to be rectified by the passage of time and by the national secular public-school system, to which the Sephardim had to send their children. This cultural “enlightenment” never occurred, and the Jewish identity of one-third of Israeli society has not fit into such overly simplified categories since the 1950s.

Starting with the rise of Menachem Begin in the mid-1970s on the back of the Sephardi vote, this overlooked segment of Israeli society has steadily risen in power and influence to become in many ways the mainstream, if not dominant, dimension of Israeli cultural life. Today, the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide is largely meaningless, with nary a family that is not blended. As a result, Sephardic Judaism has penetrated into the heart of the erstwhile secular camp.

The disintegration of the dichotomy was buttressed from the outside by a massive influx of funds from North America, which led to the creation of educational organizations and programs geared towards chang-

ing and enriching the Jewish identity of secular Israelis.

Over the last decade, we have witnessed a dramatic transformation within Israeli society which requires new and more nuanced categories to understand the complexity of Israeli Jewish identity. The non-religious segment of Israeli Jewish society, which today accounts for 80 percent of Israel's Jewish population, is most accurately subdivided into five distinct approaches to Judaism and Jewish identity: traditional religious, traditional non-religious, Jewish secular, Israeli secular and Jewish non-Jews.

The traditional religious and non-religious, 30-35 percent of the Israeli Jewish

If Israel is to be
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expressions of Jewishness.

population, define authentic Judaism in Orthodox terms and perform ritual acts under Orthodox guidelines and leadership. However, they do not live in accordance with these guidelines on a daily basis, with the distinction between the two groups being the extent to which they stray. For example, while most will eat only kosher food in Israel, most will not when outside of Israel. Their synagogues are exclusively Orthodox, but they vary significantly regarding attendance. While lacking a conceptual framework to guide what they choose to observe, as is offered by North America's liberal Jewish denominations, there is a commonsensical if not folk wisdom which guides them as they build a rich Jewish life around Jewish holidays

and lifecycle events. Shabbat and holidays are distinguished by festive meals, ritual and, depending on observance, some synagogue attendance, where they generally feel both comfortable and competent. These two denominations believe in God, do not want Israel to be a secular state, and together with the Orthodox create a majority within Israeli society comfortable with the control of Orthodoxy over the religious establishment.

The Jewish secular, who also constitute 30-35 percent of Israeli society, generally believe in God and mark to varying degrees most Jewish holidays and lifecycle events. Their primary distinction lies in the fact that worship of God and Jewish ritual, particularly prayer — and specifically prayer which is mediated by synagogues and the religious establishment — is alien to them. They do not want to be Orthodox, nor do they ascribe to the primacy of Orthodoxy. As a result of their assimilation into Sephardic culture, however, and their exposure to the plethora of Jewish educational programs and media messages, their alienation from Orthodoxy no longer leads to alienation from Judaism. They see themselves as Israeli Jews and no longer subscribe to the notion that they are Israeli and not Jewish. While their level of traditional ritual performance and skills is less than that of traditional Jews, they view their Jewish identity as anchored in culture, which includes Jewish calendar and values, language, living in Israel and commitment to the Jewish people — in particular, those who live in Israel and those at risk around the world.

The Israeli secular, a dramatically declining segment of Israeli society, today constitutes less than 10 percent of Israel's Jewish population. For them, Israeli national identity either defines or has essentially replaced their Jewish identity. If they see themselves as Jewish, and most do, it is because they live in Israel. Jewish tradition, including most of its calendar, is

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seen as a vestige of Diaspora Judaism, which to them is no longer necessary or meaningful. At the same time, they observe many Jewish lifecycle events, albeit with some measure of cynicism and alienation.

Last, the Jewish non-Jews (5 percent) are constituted by immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are Jewish under Israel's Law of Return but not as defined by the Israeli Rabbinate, and who, while initially having only a marginally Jewish identity, have become increasingly Judaized by living in Israel. But their Jewish identity is still in transformation and their future is dependent upon the conversion policies of the government and their acceptance within the Jewish secular camp.

This diverse and complex spectrum of Jewish identities in Israel creates new challenges for the future. The first and most significant one is to strengthen the spectrum and to prevent slippage back into the either/or categories of the past. The increased power of the ultra-Orthodox, coupled with as-yet insufficient Jewish educational experiences attuned to the ideolog-

ical predispositions of each non-Orthodox group, threatens the longevity of multiple manifestations of Jewish identity. A lack of knowledge of why I am, who I am and what I stand for Jewishly, together with an increased alienation and fear of the ultra-Orthodox, could easily generate a renaissance of the rejection of Judaism prevalent in the early Zionist movement.

The second challenge is to guide the renewed interest and engagement with Judaism towards a modern Judaism founded on Jewish values, religious pluralism and commitment to democracy. There is a lot of *Yiddishkeit* within Israeli society today, but much of it is limited to cultural expression and is meant to support nationalist ideologies. While Israelis are now more comfortable within their Jewish skins, renewed efforts must be encouraged to shape this Judaism as a source of value and good and to increase education so that people subscribe to the notion that "these and these are the words of the living God," regardless of one's religious commitments, and that all human beings are created in God's image.

Third, the plurality of Jewishness prevalent in the privacy of peoples' homes needs to be brought into the public sphere. If Israel is to be Jewish and democratic, its religious establishment must be open to multiple expressions of Jewishness. To this day, most non-Orthodox Israelis are passive when it comes to the Jewishness of the public space and have yet to translate their Jewish particularity into a force for social transformation.

The disappearance of a dichotomous sense of Jewish identity can lead to new opportunities for relationships and understanding between Israel and World Jewry. We are more similar today Jewishly than ever before, and we no longer need a crisis du jour to create the foundation of shared peoplehood. The transformation of Jewish identity in Israeli society has created new challenges and opportunities. Our responsibility is to create innovative programs that will respond to these challenges and take full advantage of the opportunities so that Israel fulfills its promise as a beacon for all types of Jewish identification and life. ■

The Be'eri Program of Shalom Hartman Institute

by RUTH SALZMAN

In 2005, the Russell Berrie Foundation approached the Shalom Hartman Institute to ask what the most transformational approach might be to an increasingly critical problem on the Israeli scene: too many kids were growing up with minimal or no knowledge of their Jewish heritage and history and they had a diminishing connection to the origins of the State and to Israel's connection to the Jewish world at large. In some cases, this was manifested in alienation toward Jewish culture and less participation in the future of Israeli society, even declining to serve in the army.

The Hartman Institute proposed a program that would focus on students in the *mamlachti* secular high-school system. As it was envisioned, the program would be fully pluralistic and would not teach kids what to think or whether or how to observe. It would be built around an understanding that Jewish sources have contemporary value and relevance that can inform the real-life experiences and choices facing young adults.

Seven years later, much has changed and much has been accomplished. With the help of an incredibly talented leadership team, the program, Be'eri (Hebrew for "my well"), has moved from an initial handful of schools to 95 *mamlachti* high schools in every part of the country, impacting more than 75,000 Israeli high-school students a year. The Ministry of Education has endorsed the importance of pluralistic Jewish learning and established the *Tarbut Yisrael* (Jewish culture and heritage) program, providing classroom hours and curricular parameters for

Grades 5, 6, 7 and 8 — with further grades expected. Be'eri textbooks for the 7th and 8th Grades have been approved by the Ministry and are in use both within and beyond the Be'eri footprint of schools (more than 40,000 copies sold this year). Plans for designing a 9th Grade curriculum are underway. At the local level, Be'eri has formed municipal partnerships with cities and towns that seek to evolve a holistic approach where communal life is infused with an appreciation of Jewish heritage and values.

Be'eri has always considered passionate, well-trained teachers as its linchpin. In 2010, the Be'eri School for Teacher Education (STE) was launched as a premier training program for Jewish-studies educators, master teachers and principals. These professionals make a major time commitment to come to STE not only for professional development, but also for an opportunity to participate in a vibrant and cutting-edge community of learning.

Be'eri is an excellent example of how an expanding community of philanthropic partners has contributed a vision along with financial resources. For example, STE was made possible by Keren Karev. The six Be'eri municipal partnerships are made possible by Keren Daniel and other foundations and Federations. The Ministry of Education has also provided financial support and collaboration. With their help, Be'eri is becoming a platform available to an ever-widening Israeli audience exploring its own identity and values and coming to appreciate how much our shared Jewish heritage has to offer. ■

Ruth Salzman is the CEO of The Russell Berrie Foundation, a private foundation based in New Jersey. Before coming to the Berrie Foundation, she was a senior banker at JPMorgan Chase focusing on community development. Ms. Salzman earned an MBA at The Wharton School and holds a BA from Brooklyn College.

THE FORMULATION OF CONTEMPORARY TRADITION: JEWISH RENEWAL IN ISRAEL'S SECULAR SECTOR

by NAAMA AZULAY and EPHRAIM TABORY

A recent weekend for university students in northern Israel devoted to dialogue between religious and nonreligious Jews concluded with a study session led by Bini Talmi, Dean of Oranim and the head of Kehilat Nigun HaLev, a nonreligious Jewish prayer house. Bini, who is one of the leaders of the Jewish Renewal Movement in Israel, explained that the Bible belonged to him, a nonreligious Jew, as much as it belonged to any traditional Orthodox Biblical commentator. He described that week's Torah portion, *Tazria-Metzora* (Leviticus 12-15) — blood-drenched tales of death and destruction — as “dead Torah portions” that have no meaning for him. He did, however, note that the Torah portion often falls between Holocaust Memorial Day and the observance, one week later, of Israel's Memorial Day and Independence Day. He described this period as “between the straits,” alluding to the period of mourning that traditional Jews observe between the Fast of *Tammuz* and *Tisha B'Av*, which commemorate the destruction of the Temple. When he spoke, some of the people in the audience moved uncomfortably in their chairs. It was a reminder that some Orthodox (and also non-Orthodox) Jews react critically to modern Biblical commentary — reactions based more on the identity of the innovator than on the innovations themselves. There continues to be a religious hegemony in Israel that engenders a perception that only the Orthodox establishment should offer religious interpretations and determine religious ritual.

The nature of today's Jewish-Israeli religiosity has been shaped by a dichotomy that emerged long ago between Israel's religious and nonreligious populations. The polar identities of secular and religious Jews created a discourse with distinctive social terms — for example, rational vs. irrational, or progressive/modern vs. traditional. The increased strength of Israeli Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox political parties over the years, and the attempts made by these parties to assert their forms of Judaism in control over state practices, further intensified the

binary nature of these categories. In this milieu, those seeking to establish religious identities not based on Orthodox Judaism were often viewed as deviants.

Over the years, confrontation with the Orthodox establishment has made many Israelis antagonistic towards any activity or practice related to traditional Judaism. This situation is being challenged by the Jewish Renewal Movement in Israel's secular sector.

Leaders and members of this movement challenge the dichotomous view that one has to be either religious or secular — and, more specifically, that only religious Jews can be the proprietors of traditional Jewish texts and Jewish culture. The movement's members are attempting to change the discourse around which secular Judaism is perceived as an inherent contradiction by those who define Judaism exclusively in religious terms, or, alternatively, by those who view Israel as a post-secular society. They are trying to bring Judaism back to the masses by creating a multifaceted Jewish identity for secular society that is based on Israeli culture as well as on traditional Jewish sources, and to do it in a positive and unapologetic manner. The hope is that this will help nonreligious Israeli Jews become more engaged with their Jewish heritage.

Jewish Renewal in Israel encompasses two processes. One is the renewal of the connection between secular Jews and their Jewish heritage, tradition, culture and sources. The second is an ongoing process of renewal in which innovation and tradition are combined in order to produce a meaningful Jewish life for Israeli Jews who live in a modern, egalitarian and democratic society.

Participants in the movement feel that their approach to Jewish texts, symbols and values as an integral part of their cultural heritage does not contradict their identification with the Israeli secular sector. Indeed, there are now increasing numbers of secular Jews who regularly study Talmud and other Jewish sources in secular frameworks. They analyze Jewish canonical texts by reading traditional commentaries but then examine the texts from personal perspectives to explore what they mean to them. There is also a small but growing number of secular Jews who congregate regularly in what are commonly called secular prayer communities or who perform Jewish life rituals and ceremonies.

All these activities include conscious

attempts to incorporate traditional elements with modern Israeli cultural sources and symbols. They enable the movement to manifest an identity that imbues Jewish tradition with an Israeli character. For Jewish activists, these two realms become bound up in a single sphere. Tradition is not discarded; rather, it is used as a platform upon which a flexible construction of Jewish expressions and involvement can be built. The integration and merging of Jewish and Israeli cultures helps facilitate acceptance of practices that might otherwise be rejected out of hand. Contemporary sources give new meaning to tradition and make it relevant for those who have had little personal involvement with Judaism. The importance participants place on these practices becomes even more resonant when they engage in rituals not formally recognized by the state (such as wedding ceremonies).

The movement's confrontation with Israel's Orthodox hegemony aims to change the rules of the game in the religious arena. In order to succeed in this struggle, leaders of the movement have sought allies from among other heterodox actors within the arena of Jewish identity — mainly the moderate Orthodox and the Liberal movements. At the same time, the Israeli Jewish Renewal Movement has tried to establish a degree of inner solidarity by differentiating itself from any other agents of Jewish renewal. This situation has led to an unresolved conflict in which the various groups and organizations are seeking to cooperate in a common movement with shared goals and aspirations while also retaining their independence from one another.

The strength of the new discourse offered by the Jewish Renewal Movement in Israel derives from the alternative it offers to Israeli polarity on issues of religion and secularization. Even though its impact is still limited, the movement offers an existential home for communities viewed in the past as illegitimate and inauthentic. The movement carries the seeds for the growth of a multi-dimensional society that would incorporate a multicultural approach to the complexity of contemporary existence in the Jewish state. While the Orthodox establishment will continue to negate alternative forms of Judaism, the Jewish Renewal Movement in Israel can assist nonreligious Jews alienated from Israel's Orthodox hegemony in giving a positive meaning to what it means for them to be Jewish. ■

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FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY: REGAINING A HOLD ON MEANING IN JUDAISM

by ZOHAR RAVIV

Its numerous achievements notwithstanding, the American Jewish community is still shaped by two forces that continue to inform its identity formation processes and overall Jewish life: the enclosure and reduction of Judaism within the domain of religion and, by extension, the problematic triumph of religious ritual over meaning. These forces sustain the philosophies, structures and pedagogies of Jewish educational institutions in America, creating a serious dichotomy between the so-called religious and secular landscapes of Jewish life. For many, Judaism has become much like a holy relic: acknowledged through ritual at pre-designated spaces and times, yet bereft of much relevance or meaning in the daily lives of its beholders.

The Israeli Jewish community faces chal-

lenges of no lesser gravity, for despite the great changes that have continuously shaped Israeli society since its establishment, it arguably remains a conservative culture in its approach and an orthodox one in its social discourse and rhetoric. The axis upon which it negotiates its identity as a Jewish and democratic state is largely informed by religious Orthodoxy versus a no-less-vehement secular orthodoxy. Meanwhile, intermediary factions still search for a true voice and legitimacy around the dialogue table.

In America and Israel, the desire to regain Jewish meaning — and its precedence over repetitive and stupefying ritual — should not go unheard among communal leaders.

In both religious and secular communities, however, these respective realities have not gone unchallenged. The past few decades have witnessed a growing desire by both adult and young-adult Jews to question the trajectory of a Judaism that is based on such myopic and rigid foundations. In both America and Israel, people have begun seeking educa-

tional opportunities that might expand the canvas of their Jewish appreciation beyond religious terminologies, institutions and rituals. In America, programs such as Limmud, the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School and scores of others (from communal to national and even international in scale) offer a renewed sense of ownership over the search for Jewish meaning and relevance. They also provide encounters with a vibrant Jewish bookshelf that includes contemporary voices from both sexes as part of the ongoing, healthy and necessary evolution of Jewish life.

In Israel, projects such as Limmud and numerous non-religious *Batei Midrash* (Houses of Study) such as Alma, Elul, Pardes and Binah target the “orthodox secularists” (although they’re open to all) and offer renewed encounters with Jewish concepts and values in safe and pluralistic environments. In America and Israel, the desire to regain Jewish meaning — and its precedence over repetitive and stupefying ritual — should not go unheard among communal leaders.

Among younger generations, both American and Israeli Jews seem to withdraw to varying degrees from the rhetoric of crisis that seems to have governed every corner of Jewish and Israeli life for as long as we can remember. Such narratives that command attention and commitment due to past or imminent threats, whether external or internal, seem to be losing their allure as appealing recipes for a healthy Jewish diet. Young Jewish Americans find such a mindset not only depressing but also obsolete, as it has almost nothing to do with their real life experiences; and young Israeli Jews — when they do find a threat — regard it as a threat to their Israeli-ness rather than to their Jewishness. In both communities, our youth profess a desire (if at all) to view Jewish life, much like other elements in their lives, through a lens of opportunity, meaning and joy.

None of the above suggests that the reli-

gious aspects of Judaism (from literature to practice) should not be regarded as vital in both American and Israeli Jewish communities. They should, however, be presented within the greater context of the perpetual quest for individual meaning and the communal/social responsibilities that stem from such a quest — which, arguably, have been the backbone of Jewish life since its origins in antiquity. As long as religion remains a synonym for Judaism and revolves around the perpetual and meaningless rehearsal of ritualistic formalities passed from one (bored) generation to the next in the pretext of rite of passage, our youth will continue to vote with their feet. The landscapes wherein Jewish life can be explored and appreciated must undergo continuous change in order to meet the needs of our present and future generations. Our educational and communal institutions — and those who lead them — need to seriously broaden their definition of Jewish in order to reclaim their leadership mandate.

The past few decades have proven time and again that one of the most conducive landscapes for both American and Israeli young Jews to explore their identity and affiliation with the Jewish People is what is known as the Israel Experience. Without delving into the exhaustive research on the subject, it is safe to say that educational journeys in Israel — when offered to American and Israeli young adults together — offer a unique experience with notable effectiveness (albeit not devoid of challenges). If executed properly, they allow both sides to brush their perspectives on a myriad of issues against those of their peers and against a country that becomes a corresponding environment for such dialogue. They offer a safe space to push participants beyond their Jewish comfort zones by presenting the great complexity of Jewish life. Finally, they offer a prism of Jewish life that extends far beyond the religious sphere.

No matter how different the American and the Israeli Jewish communities might be, they need to listen to each other and, ultimately, they need to listen to their youth to change the rhetoric of crisis into one of opportunity and to offer a far broader canvas of Jewish appreciation and meaning — one which treats both Judaism and our youth with the respect they deserve. ■

Zohar Raviv, Ph.D., serves as the International Vice President of Education for Taglit-Birthright Israel. Prior to assuming his current position, Raviv served as Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies at Oberlin College and held numerous senior positions in informal Jewish educational settings in North America, Australia, Europe and South Africa.

SOUL BUILDING AND STRATEGY SEARCHING

by LEE PERLMAN

North American Jewish federations and philanthropic foundations are engaged in a growing number of social-service, social-change and social-policy areas in Israel. Aside from the environmental field, I know of no other area in which these groups have played such a decisive and singularly dominant role than in the field of Jewish identity. They have seeded, sustained and continue to nurture a diverse and ever professionalizing social sub-sector, which in the last decade has prompted a palpable growth of soul-searching and soul-building among Jewish Israelis. The Israelis are not only exploring the ways in which the Jewish identity of their families, communities and state is meaningful for them, but they are also doing quite a bit about it.

The primary focus of the federations and foundations has been to stimulate positive Jewish modes of activity — in other words, to find ways to empower Jewish Israelis to consciously and intentionally choose how to celebrate and embrace Judaism, while not being restricted or defined by the vagaries of the ongoing political, material and practical battles in Israeli society.

WIN-WIN

The reasons for North American Jewish philanthropic involvement are quite evident. It provides meaning and relevance for the relationship forged by North American Jews with Israel and Israelis. Philanthropies are motivated to connect North American Jewry to Israel in a positive way and to preserve this connection. From a social investment standpoint, they have witnessed impressive outcomes: a measurable impact on individuals, communities and institutions through localized educational, cultural and community engagement and training programs and models they support in Israel, as well as a discernible shift in Jewish Israeli cultural trends they seeded — for instance, in music, theater, film and television. Moreover, through the support of various networks and coalitions, they have helped facilitate the emergence of what my colleague, Na'ama Azulay, calls a Jewish Renewal social movement. The philanthropic institutions have been afforded the opportunity to apply their extensive knowledge in addressing challenges of building and sustaining Jewish community, learning along the way the distinct and subtle differences between North America and Israel and between a large Diaspora community and a sovereign political entity. To quote David Bowie, “This is not America.”

These groups have evolved into a cohesive and collegial community of funders, with a significant degree of strategic cooperation and synergy — an accomplishment in and of itself. Perhaps most significantly, involvement in this

field provides them with a tangible way to make an impact on Israel's future and the sustainability of its civil society in light of their justified concern about the Jewish and democratic character of the state.

DO NOT DECLARE VICTORY

So, what's the catch? Despite these palpable achievements and sources of pride, I would strongly suggest to colleagues, practitioners and funders not to declare victory just yet. There are two interconnected areas which merit our shared concern and interest: the sustainability and the strategic goals of the field.

Building on the pioneering work of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the field has undergone a professionalization and economic growth spurt in the last fifteen years with regard to the role of management, resource development, the identity of its practitioners and elements such as specialization, standards, evaluations and best practices. Beyond the passion of its leaders, practitioners and funders, the ongoing quality and depth of the work is key to its efficacy and ultimate sustainability. Certain areas, for example formal and informal education, are particularly challenging in this regard.

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME

The acute dependence on North American Jewish dollars is neither healthy nor practical.

There is a growing awareness among funders that their “sunsetting,” either as funding bodies or in their support of a specific area, bears a tremendous amount of responsibility. In this regard, we need to get past the stage when funding bodies can flippantly use the classic break-up line, “It's not you, it's me.” Important efforts have been undertaken to engage new philanthropic involvement in both North America and Israel, and there are initial achievements through persistent and hard-fought attempts to access local and national government funding for pluralistic Jewish educational and community services, such as the recent Israeli government decision to pay the salaries of Reform and Conservative rabbis. The diverse motivations and strategies of funders need not get in the way of their seeing the bigger picture and continuing to forge cooperation. There have been many frames through which to understand and impact upon the Jewish identity challenges in Israel: Jewish Renaissance, Jewish Renewal, Jewish Peoplehood, Jewish Pluralism, Social Cohesion, Democracy and Jewish Diversity (the latter is my personal favorite, as it encapsulates and fuses all the others). While some might view these terms as buzzwords that come and go, reflecting organizational needs more than actually describing the reality, they reflect differing ideological sensibilities which need to be understood and negotiated.

IT'S THE POLICY, STUPID

The lion's share of the organizations and programs in Israel pursue one or more of the following four goals among Jewish Israelis:

Encouraging Identity Development

Deepening and Expanding Jewish Cultural Literacy

Fostering Ideological Commitment Towards One or More Approaches to Jewish Identity and Building and Enhancing Jewish Communities.

There is a fifth goal: **Enabling Access to and Promoting Broader Legitimacy** of diverse Jewish living and learning options for all Jewish Israelis, so they can have the ability to celebrate and interpret their Jewish identities in both the private and public realms. The pursuit of this goal challenges the Israeli ultra-Orthodox religious-political power structure.

The political, material and practical battles around achieving this fifth goal are not sideshows to the first four goals; rather, they are inextricably linked to one another. More and more funders have discerned this, albeit with hesitation among many about intervening in internal Israeli political affairs. However, their dilemma in supporting work that will help achieve the fifth goal is not just philosophical or organizational.

Leaders in the field in Israel understand and passionately believe in this fifth goal, with understandable differences in strategy and tactics on how to change public policy and whether to try to forge different rules of the game for Israel as a body politic and society. More so, the facts on the ground in Israel are perhaps stronger than any strategic plan or organizational imperative. Israel is changing dramatically — politically, demographically and culturally. Worrisome anti-democratic trends, growing racism and ever-expanding socio-economic gaps threaten the Jewish character of the state no less than ignorance of Jewish sources.

Jewish identity organizations are positioned to impact on future directions in these realms. In the last year, they were at the center of much of the 2011 summer social protests and follow-up activities, forging a union of social justice, social action and Jewish renewal. They were at the center of recent protests regarding the exclusion of women in public areas, violent religious extremism (including against Israel's Arab citizens), Israel's democratic character and other related concerns.

Continuing to stimulate positive Jewish modes of activity and ensuring a sustainable field are worthy and formidable goals. How the funding bodies connect to the challenges presented in the public policy and public opinion realms regarding the fifth goal is of crucial importance to all of us. ■

Lee Perlman is Managing Director, Israel and Overseas for The Jewish Federations of North America.



Why is Sifriyat Pijama, Israel's largest family Jewish education program, different from all other Jewish identity programs in Israel? Because it creates a continuous link between children, teachers and parents, using shared books to create a new common language about Jewish values.

Uniquely for a Jewish identity program, it focuses on the very young. At its core lies the Jewish concept of *girsa d'yankuta*, Aramaic for learning with one's mother's milk. It assumes that we develop a lifelong attachment to the stories, narratives, rituals and concepts in which we are immersed as children.

Sifriyat Pijama is the Israeli version of the PJ Library, created by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Like its North American counterpart, Sifriyat Pijama gifts high-quality children's books with Jewish content every month to youngsters and their families to enjoy in the privacy of their homes. Both programs are built on the premise that when parents and children snuggle together to read Jewish stories at bedtime, positive cultural identity begins to form on a profound emotional level.

Unlike in North America, the books in Israel are distributed through the state's preschool network. The teacher introduces the book of the month to the class and usually discusses concepts in the book or creates art projects or theater productions based on the month's story. Then, each child gets a copy to take home and keep. Parents tell us the children delight in bringing home a book in which they are already experts, able to "read" it to their parents or siblings because they already know it from class. The books include guides explaining the story's Jewish values and suggesting activities or discussion points to parents. The teachers also receive monthly e-newsletters that amplify the Jewish learning aspects of the books.

The program has benefited from operating within a Jewish state — and a highly centralized one at that. While the North American PJ Library program has been forced by the nature of the American Jewish community to grow community by community over seven years to reach an impressive 100,000 children in 175 communities, Sifriyat Pijama was able to leverage Israeli government resources to scale up quickly to a national level, making a major impact in a short time. Begun as a pilot in the 2009-10 school year with 3,500 children, Sifriyat Pijama has grown, through a partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education, to reach 120,000 Israeli children and their families in just three years, with preference given to poorer communities. It plans to expand to about 190,000 children in the 2012-13 school year to include more affluent areas and reach about 70

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SIFRIYAT PIJAMA: SNUGGLING UP WITH JEWISH IDENTITY

by GALINA VROMEN and
JOANNA S. BALLANTINE

percent of Jewish communities in Israel. Ultimately, the goal is to reach 100 percent of children in government preschools.

We are often asked how we forged such a fruitful relationship with the Ministry of Education, which covers 48 percent of the cost of the books and their distribution (the remainder coming from philanthropy, with the Harold Grinspoon Foundation as the lead funder). The answer is that the program addressed two broad educational challenges: Israel's increasingly dismal scores on international academic achievement tests and the need to instill in the next generation a sense of common national identity and purpose. Sifriyat Pijama provided the answer to both challenges. First, exposure to books from a young age has been identified as a key to later academic success. Second, the Ministry embraced the idea that forging a common heritage means sending the same materials to secular and religious children.

Initially, the program was intended primarily for secular Jews. Our premise was that although secular Israeli Jews are familiar with Jewish holidays, they often know little else about Judaism and the richness of their Jewish heritage. At the same time, we decided to provide the same books and parental guides to both religious and secular schools — a unique approach in the national Israeli education system. We were warned by many experts that secular Israelis would resent the program, so we braced for a backlash that never came. It turns out that if you give parents wonderful books to read with their children, provide them with information on Jewish perspectives and encourage them to pass on their own beliefs and values, they're actually glad to learn about their Jewish heritage.

But that wasn't the only surprise. We learned that religious Jews often don't know much about their Jewish heritage either, and some know very little about general Israeli culture. Through survey and evaluation, we found that most teachers — whether traditional, religious or secular — were personally enhancing their Jew-

ish education from the material provided by the program.

Moreover, we realized that Sifriyat Pijama was introducing religious families to the wealth of wonderful secular Israeli books which many would never have otherwise introduced into their homes. Our lineup includes books such as *The Tractor in the Sandbox* by Meir Shalev and *Uri's Special Language* by David Grossman. Popular among secular Jews, these books are unfamiliar to many religious families. "I never buy secular books for my children. Where did you find this?" one mother in Rishon LeZion asked, referring to the Meir Shalev book. The story about an aging tractor and his aging driver stimulated a conversation — started at school and continued at home — about how to treat aging things and aging people. Sifriyat Pijama has helped create a common cultural ground between secular and religious families where it has been sorely lacking.

The key is good books. Our evaluations indicate that we have been getting it right: 90 percent of teachers and 95 percent of parents rated the books as excellent or good, with very little divergence between different populations.

To say we want books that will be embraced by both secular and religious families is one thing. To find such books on the Israeli market is quite another. Our book committee, comprising experts in Jewish education, child development and children's literature, looked high and low. Sifriyat Pijama soon found itself in the book creation business, working with publishers to bring out books they did not know the public wanted. This year saw the publication of *The Patience of Hillel* by Israel Prize-winning author Dvora Omer. Initially an un-illustrated story in an out-of-print anthology, the publisher agreed at our request to re-issue it as a stand-alone picture book. In addition to a customized edition for Sifriyat Pijama, the book was also published in a retail version. The publisher, Modan Publishing House, was shocked when the first printing of 2,000 copies sold out in two months, and it ordered a second printing. Modan is now considering a series of Jewish books. A similar fate awaited *One Little Chicken*, a rendition of a story about Rabbi Chanina Ben Dosa by American author Elka Weber, which has also pleasantly surprised its Israeli publisher. In total this year, Sifriyat Pijama has encouraged the creation or re-illustration/re-issue of five Jewish-content books and we intend to work with publishers on seven new books next year. Slowly, we are changing the Israeli book industry as publishers discover a popular need.

We hope Sifriyat Pijama will ultimately help create a generation that loves to read, has an awareness of Jewish perspectives on universal values and behaves like *menschen*. Ambitious, yes. Will we achieve that? We believe we are on the right path. Our teacher and parent evaluations show the books are stimulating vibrant discussions on Jewish values at home and at school. For now, *dayenu*. That is enough. ■

JEWISH RENEWAL IN ISRAEL. PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by HAGIT HACOEN WOLF

A common premise in the Jewish world, at times implied by spiritual and political leaders and at times stated overtly, is that when it comes to Jewish identity, the main challenge concerns Diaspora Jews, and much less, if at all, Jews in Israel.

Without detracting from the profound challenge of Jewish identity in the Diaspora, public leaders, educators and scholars have come to agree on the existence of an identity and values crisis within Israeli society as well.

This crisis stems from a number of processes and transformations Israeli society has undergone since the founding of the State: transition from a collectivist, ideological society to a materialistic, individualistic one; increasing socioeconomic rifts; a growing sense of an unequal or unbalanced distribution of economic, defense and social burdens among different parts of society; and the return to public debate of supposedly entrenched and unquestioned values, such as recruitment into the army. The state founders'

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vision of a melting pot and the creation of a "new Jew" were replaced by a multicultural trend that aspired to give as full an expression as possible to the variety of cultures comprising Israeli society.

At the same time, attempts to reach consensus on the core values common to all Israeli citizens — such as democratic principles, individual rights and human rights — have been only partially successful. Certain sectors of Jewish-Israeli society (such as the ultra-Orthodox, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and others) act in relation to their narrow interests and distance themselves from the national ethos by which the State is the source of identity and the cohesive element for all. These trends have led to a sense that the general fortitude of Israeli society is not as strong as it was in former times.

Furthermore, the classic secular Zionist position, based to a large extent on a revolt against tradition, has helped shape a society in which many Israeli Jews do not perceive themselves as partners and owners of Jewish culture. In parallel, the Orthodox sector has seized power over the country's Jewish aspects, leaning on political and social arrangements that have granted them legitimacy and validity.

As result of these trends, a breach emerged between the younger generation — the second and third generations after the state's founders — and Jewish

sources. This breach was not ideological, but rather the upshot of poor Jewish education that resulted in ignorance. Moreover, the political situation, the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, and the continuing control of a Jewish majority over an Arab minority have often been perceived as a clash between Jewish values and the values of democracy and equality. The constant secular-religious conflict over issues of church and state has polarized Jewish discourse and prevented pluralistic positions from gaining any general acceptance in society. Consequently, a secular-religious dichotomy was formed within Jewish-Israeli society. This dichotomy is expressed, for example, in the structure of the Jewish educational system, which is split into streams representing the national, national-religious and ultra-Orthodox sectors.

Thus, paradoxically, Jewish identity, which from the outset constituted the basis for the establishment and existence of the Jewish state, has become the cause of a schism within Jewish-Israeli society. The prevalent approach among Israeli Jews, which springs from this dichotomy, is that Judaism, with all the richness and depth it imparts, belongs to the religious and is irrelevant for those who do not define themselves as such.

Accordingly, when preschoolers are asked to draw a picture of a Jew, they produce a prototypical ultra-Orthodox figure.



Both youth and adults perceive a split between religious behavior, closely associated with Jewish life (such as prayer in the synagogue, separating meat and dairy), and social behavior, less associated with Jewish life (such as visiting the sick, protecting the environment).

Against this crisis backdrop, in recent years a Jewish renewal phenomenon has emerged in Israel, energized by those who wish to retrieve a lost sense of ownership over Jewish culture and tradition for the enrichment of their actual lives. This sense has been the driving force for hundreds of initiatives that express developments in thought, mood and feeling concerning Israeli Jewish identity. In this context, Jewish renewal is defined as dealing with Judaism in the secular sphere among a public unaccustomed to Jewish studies and active preoccupation with Jewish identity. Among the main achievements of the Jewish renewal movement are the establishment and development of dozens of organizations and hundreds of programs and projects that share a pluralistic, Jewish-Israeli worldview. These initiatives are currently active both in the formal educational system as well as in a variety of informal educational frameworks. They serve varied target populations in terms of age, culture and level of religiosity. To name a few: places of Torah study (such as Elul, Bina, Kolot and Alma), educational programs for students (such as Tali, Morasha, Maarag

and Shorshei Israel-Ort), pre-army institutions, campus Hillel houses, spiritual communities, publishing houses, and art and music shows centered on and inspired by Jewish culture.

The main goal of these groups is to grant Jews in Israel opportunities to express their Judaism in a variety of ways and to strengthen their commitment to the revival of Jewish life on both a personal and a collective level. In 2009, the Ministry of Education embarked on the development and implementation of a new field of study, Jewish Heritage and Culture, as a mandatory subject for all students in the national stream between Grades 4 and 9. In so doing, the Ministry validated the programs which, for many years, had run on a voluntary basis in parts of the formal educational system by invitation of individual school principals. It gave them formal status and a comprehensive educational vision guided by the Ministry. This achievement is outstanding mostly in light of the severely limited government resources invested in pluralistic Jewish education in Israel. Until now, Jewish renewal activities have been supported mainly by philanthropic bodies from North America.

The leaders of the Jewish renewal world in Israel face diverse and numerous challenges: to expand the circles and penetrate hitherto unengaged populations; influence legislation on issues of

church and state; increase government support; imbue social and communal (in addition to religious) significance within perceptions of Judaism; develop and implement programs to instill and disseminate new, pluralistic forms of Judaism; identify specific needs for each sector along the continuum of Jewish identity in Israel (ultra-Orthodox, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, traditional, secular); reduce the rift between school education and familial and communal life; train agents of change, educated and skilled in pluralistic Jewish education; and deepen the cooperation between organizations.

One should note that the sought-after change in the nature of Israeli society related to Jewish renewal can be defined according to theories of change pertaining to very long-term, broad, complex and systemic social issues known as “invisible meta-problems,” or “messes.” In order to provide a suitable response to these values and identity crises, several levels of action have to be simultaneously addressed at the constitutional level, at the cultural-values level, and at educational, communal, familial and personal levels. Such issues cannot be resolved in a short time span and require the cooperation of many parties. It will take time and a great deal of effort for the Jewish renewal movement to become a lasting part of Israeli Jewish identity. ■

JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD: THE ISRAELI CHALLENGE

BY SHLOMI RAVID

The challenge of Jewish Peoplehood finds a unique manifestation in the case of Israel. This may be related to the fact that early Zionists aspired to reunite the People and the Land, eliminating the tension between national identity and Peoplehood through the creation of a Jewish nation state. Had they succeeded, Jewish Peoplehood and Israeli nationalism would have become one. History, however, evolved differently than the Zionist dream envisioned, and the reality of a people split between the State of Israel

Israeli society needs to go back and offer a fresh interpretation of Zionism which recognizes, respects and accepts the fact that Israel is part of a global people.

and the rest of the world has become the prevailing Jewish paradigm. It is not clear that Israelis have made the required ideological adjustments to that reality.

Even before getting into ideological issues, one needs to recognize the difference in context. For world Jews, belonging to a unique group, whether religious or ethnic, is hard to escape. For Israelis, the natural collective identity is Israeli, and being part of a national majority in the Jewish State is not conducive to a Jewish Peoplehood conversation. It's not that Israelis are unaware of the existence of Jews throughout the world or of the concept of the Jewish People. On the contrary, they acknowledge a sense of joint responsibility in the face of danger. But the issue does not register as a sig-

nificant component of their identity. To put it bluntly, Jewish Peoplehood is not really on the radar of most Israelis.

Most Israelis lack genuine interest in the challenges faced by Jewish communities around the world and in configuring a common agenda. Even when the issue relates directly to them, such as when the question of *who is a Jew* is discussed in the Israeli political system, there is no place at the table for world Jewry. In a sense, one can say that rather than seeing Israel as the State of the Jewish People, Israelis view it as the State of Israelis

who also have distant relatives abroad. Or, put differently, most Israelis do not see Israel as an instrument of the Jewish People but rather as a State that has a people.

What does Israel stand to lose if this trend continues? First and foremost, a significant part of Israel's core mission was to build the sovereign entity of the Jewish People.

Basing their vision on the Jewish ethos developed in three millennia of history, early Zionists aspired to build a State that would be more just and considerate of the weak than other states. Some even went so far as expecting Israel to be "a light among the nations." The decline in the commitment to that ethos reflects a weakening of its ties with world Jewry. Israel feels accountable to its own citizens and not to the rest of the world's Jews, and indeed fails to invite world Jewry into the conversation on Israel's future. This leaves out a potential

partnership that could help in strengthening Israel's moral ethos. It goes directly to the core of the essence of the Jewish State and its vision for itself and the role it is to play in the world.

No less important is Israel's potential role vis-à-vis the Jewish People and the writing of the next chapter in the development of Jewish civilization. Ahad Ha'am and many other forefathers of Zionism envisioned the future Israel as the engine of Jewish renaissance in modern times. They were accurate in the creativity seen in the revival of the Hebrew language, Hebrew literature and the arts. However, most of this is perceived as an Israeli rather than a Jewish creation, and very little of it is brought about through conversation and collaboration with world Jewry.

Needless to say, the lack of serious dialogue between Israeli and world Jews influences the overall state of Jewish Peoplehood. Israel is no small partner in the Jewish collective. If its Jewish community is mostly indifferent to the challenges of world Jewry, it is hard to expect an enhancement or a rejuvenation of Jewish Peoplehood. Where will the initiative come from, and who will provide it with the required creativity and leadership? We are facing the increasing possibility of further disintegration of the Jewish People into individual communities that may survive religiously and spiritually but lose sight of their collective enterprise.

What can be done to change the trend? Israeli society needs to acclimate to the Peoplehood ethos that has provided nothing less than the justification for its very existence. It's actually a historical irony that the Prime Minister of Israel demands from the Palestinians a

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recognition of Israel as the State of the Jewish People — yet he does not really discuss the same issue with Israelis. Israeli society needs to go back and offer a fresh interpretation of Zionism which recognizes, respects and accepts the fact that Israel is part of a global people and which reconfigures the nature of the Jewish global partnership accordingly. It needs to introduce Jewish Peoplehood into the Israeli educational system, where even the new Hebrew word for Peoplehood — *Amiut* — is unfamiliar, and initiate programs such as Birthright for Israelis that explore Jewish life abroad.

If done with enough resolve, we can change the tide. Deep down, Israelis still connect to the vision behind Israel as the State of the Jewish People. They may have neglected to educate in that spirit, but the basic idea will still resonate with Israelis, and it can provide the educational foundation to build on. The fruits of the effort can be transformative. They can potentially contribute to the rejuvenation of the Zionist conversation while making possible a serious new global Jewish dialogue. They can enrich and strengthen the State of Israel as well as Jewish communities around the world, and they can contribute to global efforts at *tikkun olam*, which will help give Jews as a collective the opportunity to help others in need. All of the above will help re-galvanize the Jews as a People with a mission and a collective destiny. ■





JEWISH IDENTITY IN ISRAEL: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

by RABBI LEVI WEIMAN-KELMAN

In the summer of 1989, when my son Benji was five years old, I took him to register for a day camp operated by the Jerusalem municipality. The registration clerk asked, “*Dati o Chiloni?*” These two terms were meant to present the primary choices of religious identity for Israelis. (Not offered was *Haredi* — ultra-Orthodox, anti- or non-Zionist — since *Haredi* Israelis would never send their kids to a municipal program.) *Dati* is usually translated as religious, but is understood to mean primarily Orthodox. *Chiloni* means secular and is understood to mean primarily non-observant atheist. Benji gave me a panicked look and burst into tears. Neither term was appropriate for him. Where did he fit into Israeli society as a practicing, committed five-year-old Reform Jew? I tried to comfort him as I attempted to explain *dati reformi* to the befuddled bureaucrat.

Almost 25 years later, these two terms have become useless in a discussion about Jewish identity in Israel today or in the future. The range of Jewish religious identity in Israel contains many more grada-

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tions than *dati* or *chiloni*. While many factors were involved, the increasingly diverse forms of identification have been one of the great accomplishments of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel. We have not been able to attract huge numbers of Israelis to officially join our Reform congregations, but we have helped to recast and expand notions of Israeli Jewish religious identity.

AN EXPANDING SPECTRUM OF IDENTIFICATION

The rite of passage of post-army-service travel abroad has been a major influence on Israeli religious identity. Many young Israelis (*dati* and *chiloni*) spend time in India. There they are exposed to a religious sensibility different from what they know in Israel. This has had a huge impact, especially in the *dati* world. *Dati* used to imply a commitment to fulfilling the commandments without much focus on an inner spiritual life. These Orthodox young people return home from India demanding that worship be about more than reciting the prescribed words of prayer.

The influence of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach is keenly felt. Although Rabbi Carlebach was a pariah in the Orthodox world while he was alive, today there is an explosion in the number of Carlebach-style Orthodox *minyanim* in Israel. Rather than simply fulfilling the obligation to pray, these services are marked by the chanting of *niggunim*, wordless melodies, designed to create an intense personal and communal experience. This is part of a larger trend in the Israeli Orthodox world called *Habakuk* (no, not the Biblical prophet). It is an acronym for **HaBaD**, **Bratzlav**, **Kook** and **Carlebach**. HaBaD and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav are Hasidic influences on modern Orthodox Zionism. Rav Kook, our first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, was a passionate nationalist whose Zionism was deeply mystical. The *Habakuk* trend represents a desire for a meaningful inner spiritual life beyond that of fulfilling the letter of Jewish law.

This has given birth to a new religious identity called *chardal* (*charedi leumi*) — or nationalist ultra-Orthodox. These Jews dress and act like *Haredim*, but their political ideology is right-wing Israeli nationalism. Note the blurring of the boundary between *dati* and *Haredi*.

Another religious identity in Israel is the *datlash* — *dati leh-sheh-avar* — or formerly Orthodox. This is not the same

as *chiloni*. Perhaps the term is a reaction to the phrase *baal teshuvah*, which refers to a formerly *chiloni* person who has become Orthodox. Both imply a choice and a change in behavior. Many *datlash* parents express an interest in my congregation's nursery school. (Often a *datlash* will be married to a *chiloni*.) They ironically lament that since they won't be raising their children as *dati*, their children will not share their religious identity as a *datlash*. A *chiloni* environment would deprive the children of a religious education, but a *dati* framework is not open to families who are no longer Orthodox. A Reform community is a logical compromise.

MIZRACHI, MASORTI, AND MULTIPLE MINYANIM

In addition to its other areas of oversimplification, the *dati-chiloni* divide ignored the religious identity of *mizrachi* Israelis — those who are not Ashkenazi or of European origin. Many *mizrachi* Israelis identify as *masorti'im*, or traditional. The classic characterization of a *masorti* is someone who goes to synagogue on Shab-

grassroots independent praying communities, or *batei tefillah*. They usually offer *Kabbalat Shabbat* services strong on music (very influenced by B'nai Jeshurun in New York), modern Hebrew poetry and a few traditional prayers. Most participants identify themselves as *chiloni*, but the existence of these prayer groups is shattering the *dati/chiloni* divide. The flagship community emerged from Midreshet Oranim, a study center that was founded around 1995 by *kibbutzniks* and *ex-kibbutzniks*. Their grandparents were *chalutzim*, or pioneers, who founded their *kibbutzim*. The Midreshet Oranim people, third generation *kibbutzniks*, rejected the secularism of their parents and grandparents and looked towards traditional Jewish texts as a source of inspiration. Over the past ten years, they discovered that studying texts wasn't enough, and that led to the founding of some of these alternative *chiloni* prayer groups.

These *batei tefillah* are loathe to affiliate with any of the established liberal movements. However, some of their lead-

The **Habakuk** trend represents a desire for a meaningful inner spiritual life beyond that of fulfilling the letter of Jewish law.

bat morning and to a soccer game on Shabbat afternoon. The liberal movements have put great hope in attracting the *masorti'im*, without much success. This has been a failure mostly because of the egalitarian issue. For all their flexibility in religious life, the *mizrachi'im* are conservative when it comes to gender roles. People have run out of my synagogue outraged at seeing a woman in a *tallit*.

Today, the *mizrachi* identity is asserting itself with great force. There are many grassroots groups that focus on learning *piyutim* — the religious poetry and songs of the *mizrachi* community. This is both a cultural and a religious phenomenon, attracting *mizrachi'im* who identify as *chiloni*, *masorti*, *dati* or none of the above. Some *piyut* groups include *mizrachi*, *Ashkenazi*, *dati* and *chiloni* participants. These gatherings are prayer experiences outside the bounds of synagogues.

One more exciting religious phenomenon in Israel today is the emergence of

ers are graduates of or are currently studying for rabbinic ordination at the Israeli Reform movement's rabbinic program at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. My congregation, Kol HaNeshama, now celebrating more than 25 years in Jerusalem, is proud to incubate a Renewal prayer group that meets once a month in our youth center.

Today's average Israeli may not like the idea of Reform or Conservative Judaism, but he or she is at least aware that these movements exist. The best news is that the dichotomies have become fluid as Israelis move more freely than ever between many options.

I couldn't resist asking Benji, who is now studying neuroscience at Tel Aviv University, how he identifies religiously. He immediately recalled that trauma moment of his youth, almost 25 years ago. He then said he hates the question because he is still working it out, and answering it takes so long. ■

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“The disappearance of a dichotomous sense of Jewish identity can lead to new opportunities for relationships and understanding between Israel and World Jewry. We are more similar today Jewishly than ever before, and we no longer need a crisis du jour to create the foundation of shared peoplehood.”

— RABBI DONNIEL HARTMAN