

CURRENT JEWISH PERIODICALS

The April 13, 1990 issue of *Sh'ma* presents the views of three liberal Jewish American thinkers on the Zionist enterprise in our time. The first respondent, Balfour Brickner, rabbi of the Stephen Wise Synagogue in Manhattan, is disturbed that Israel does not conform to his political and ideological platform. Brickner is "tired" of defending Israeli policies that are messy, parochial, and inconsistent with his world view. He contends

that we are not joined at the hip. The scalpel of religious authoritarianism and political intransigence has separated us. We live independently. Can Israel have any future meaning for us?"

Brickner tells the readers of *Sh'ma* that

Israeli Orthodoxy is not Judaism. It is, in too great a part, an ugly right wing, fundamentalist nationalism, plastered over with sexist, discriminatory pietism rejected by over 80% of the Israeli populace and most of Diaspora Jewry. (p. 91)

Brickner concedes that his vision reads "like some American liberal agenda." The evolving Israeli culture is uncomfortably distant and removed from Brickner's ideals.

The second respondent, Arnold Eisen, is a professor of religion at Stanford. Although not as strident as Brickner, Eisen's response to the relationship between Israeli culture and American Jewry is similar. He notes that America's Jews are adapting to American culture at the expense of ethnic as well as theological Jewish loyalties, leaving American Jews increasingly distanced from a Jewish State whose culture is remote and foreign:

The days are long past when, the product of a single culture and shaped by a common history, we could find ready agreement and easy understanding. . . . Israel will not matter

deeply to American Jews before too long, even to those most committed to Judaism, without enormous effort on both sides.

Eisen only asks that an "honest conversation" begin between Israeli and diaspora Jewry.

The third respondent, Leonard Fein, is a leading spokesman for liberal Jewish ideology. Noting that Jewish life followed the Weberian model of moving from charisma to bureaucratization, Fein is impatient with Jewry's compulsion to create committees and to respond by reacting, without any definition of purpose. The Brickners, Eisens and Feins all sense a dissonance between themselves and the Jewish State. All three respondents are also dissatisfied with Israeli Zionism because it is foreign to their American consciousness, but they are, with the apparent exception of Brickner, similarly uncomfortable with the shallowness of Jewish life and leadership in the North American Diaspora.

Sh'ma, April 27, 1990, surveys Hillel directors and their observations on Jewish life on campus. Charles L. Arian, of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, finds that his students are from Conservative and Reform backgrounds, with "almost no Orthodox students" (p. 97) in attendance. These students show little interest in overcoming what they take to be denominationally parochial positions, as understood by Arian. He recognizes that the community of Jews who seek his services are "self-selecting," and he ruefully realizes that his program is underfunded. He understands that "the majority of Jewish students will likely never set foot in Hillel" (p. 97).

While Arian focuses upon Jewish life in his campus community, James Diamond, a Conservative rabbi at Washington University in St. Louis, takes a more global

perspective. He pleads that Hillel cannot be held responsible for Judaizing those Jewish students who come to the campus "with virtually no Jewish baggage." Diamond has also discovered that the active Jewish students on campus identify in different religious, ethnic, and political ways. He also suggests that there is a population of Jews who are conscious of their Jewish identity, albeit with discomfiting ambivalence.

Diamond takes issue with the Federation perspective on *the* Jewish identity of today's Jewish college students, because he does not find any uniform Jewish identity common to today's Jewish undergraduates. In point of fact, "there are a *multiplicity* of Jewish identities, each one requiring its own particular kind of response, strategy, and nurturing" (p. 99). The Jewishness of the secular university campus which Diamond describes is a microcosm of American Jewish life. Israel no longer earns the loyalty of young Jews as it did after the 1967 war, Shabbat services are sparsely attended, with the exception of "the large Orthodox student communities at such East Coast campuses as Columbia, Penn, Princeton, Brandeis, and Harvard." Diamond notes the emergence of a feminist Jewish women's constituency, but even though Diamond looks with favor upon this phenomenon, he recognizes that it is a marginal force on the campus. He also recognizes that campus courses in Judaic studies have not nurtured learned Jewish models.

The third respondent, Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, ordained at Yeshiva University, who is now an exponent of feminist ideology, notes that his charges at UCLA are becoming too parochial for his tastes, because they are asking for less "social action" and more activities "promoting Jewish self-interest." He notes with unhappiness that the black community looks with disdain upon Jews who absent themselves from the workplace for parochial holidays, and he is hurt, chagrined and frustrated that

many Jewish students . . . see Afro-Americans as 'invaders,' interlopers who have entered the halls of academe without proper qualifications, and who, because of affirmative action,

are occupying places that belong to their Jewish friends and relative(s).

Seidler-Feller is also disturbed that his committed Jewish students are overly concerned with anti-Semitism. He feels that they have "made anti-Semitism the focal point and a stimulant for their Jewish identity," and "have fallen back on the traditional Jewish status of victim" (p. 101). Seidler-Feller is most disturbed with the fact that many Jewish men refuse to marry Jewish women because the women who are available in [the non-observant] Jewish world are threatening. A student contemplating marriage with an Asian woman claimed that he was more comfortable with this non-Jew than with "those lawyers" [read: tough Jewish women] that I've dated" (p. 102). Ironically, assimilated Jewish men still find the traditional mother to be a marriage model, and the abdication of this role by marriageable Jewish women make Gentile women with traditional tastes and expectations more attractive.

In *Reconstructionist* (May-June, 1990), Arthur Green and Deborah Brin offer two essays that reflect the pulse of the current Reconstructionist leadership. A phenomenologist of religion and president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Green applies (without attribution) the metaphor of Mircea Eliade which explicates the social phenomenon of religion by measuring the "shape" of its sacred space and time. In his attempt to "renew," or "reconstruct" the traditional halakhic Shabbat for those for whom Torah theology and discipline are unacceptable, Green offers practical suggestions for his spiritual charges. But before he makes these suggestions, he reminds his readers that he is a modern/secular scholar, because he argues that the Talmudic report of thirty-nine forbidden labors [*melachot*] "was originally disputed, but later widely accepted by the tradition." Connecting this theme to the Torah, he notes that the phrase, *Va-yekhal Mosheh et ha-melakhah* ('Moses completed the work'), echoes in its language 'On the seventh day God completed the work' [in the Biblical creation account]. This insight is taken, again without attribution, from

Nahum Sarna's *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1987), pp. 213–214. But unlike Sarna, Green makes a point of assigning this parallel between creation and the tabernacle to a “redactor,” thereby “confessing” his non-belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim*. The non-belief in this dogma is a core dogma in Reconstructionist ideology.

Green's prescriptions for a “reconstructed” Shabbat include staying at home, celebrating the day with others at home and the synagogue, studying or reading “something edifying,” and performing the rituals of candle-lighting, *kiddush*, and *havdalah*. He also suggests that one should not engage in one's “work life,” which includes spending money, doing business, long distance traveling, or using “commercial or canned video entertainment.” Green's program for a reconstructed Shabbat appropriates, albeit with selectivity, the life-style of Orthodox Jews, but without Torah theology or discipline. He finds rituals whose *functions* he considers to be utilitarian, but he does not invest these actions with the force of divine command, because his reading of his “proof texts” precludes the presence of the divine Commander.

In her “Standing in Korah's Shoes” Deborah Brin, a leading spokesperson in the Reconstructionist rabbinate, rereads the Torah's Korah narrative from a Reconstructionist perspective. Brin correctly observes that the rabbis viewed Korah with disfavor because “he is the prototype of those who oppose Torah and rabbinic authority.” But as a Reconstructionist, Brin

does not recognize the God portrayed in this Torah portion, one who intervenes in human history and is vengeful, controlling, and lethal. Our challenge as Reconstructionists is to refine and recast our leadership models so that we do not follow the biblical example, destroying those who mount challenges to the established order.

Brin suggests that Korah is the model egalitarian, whose community “is democratic, egalitarian, without hierarchy.” Her Korah made suggestions to Moshe, who in anger “felt threatened and defensive.” Her Korah would have convinced Moshe to

organize the community differently and more effectively. It must be noted that Brin's theology leaves no place for a Divine lawgiver to legislate a human social order, and it is assumed that Moshe represented only himself. For Brin, Korah is not an “archenemy,” but an “architect.”

Reform Judaism magazine offers *hizzuq*, lay and scholarly definitions of Reform Judaism, and a candid portrayal of the range of opinion within the Reform community. Alexander Schindler, the President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, expresses his vision of his spiritual mission in *Reform Judaism* (Spring 1990). While he approves of Operation Exodus, the resettlement of Soviet Jews, he “does not want the new Israelis to be demographic pawns in an ideological/political debate. In his “A Time to Reach Out,” Schindler is pleased that Reform movement is growing nicely, given the yardstick of membership billing units, but he also notes that the ranks of the unaffiliated are growing even more sharply. In an attempt to reach out and integrate those who still do not need the services of bar mitzva education and its required synagogue membership, Schindler suggests that Reform college students be granted free membership while they are still in school. He would even open synagogue schools to non-members, and he contends that it is a “grievous wrong” to stigmatize “gays and lesbians.” Left unclear is Schindler's attitude concerning gay and lesbian behavior.

His Reform Jewish community is

a home: a place where loneliness and suffering and exile ends . . . a place where we can search, together, through the written Torah . . . and the Torah of life, to find those affirmations for which we yearn.

Schindler's Jewish spirituality is universal and existential. The distinctly Jewish metaphor is reformulated in a comforting but non-commanding idiom. Jewish rituals are mechanical instruments which create proper feelings and liberal attitudes.

Amos Oz's lead essay, “Make Peace, Not Love,” reflects the world view of the secular element of the Israeli Peace Now Movement. Oz derides the doctrine of a

National [Israeli] consensus, which he regards as an

abstract and elusive phenomenon, [which] tends to behave like a physical substance: when stretched it gets thinner, when over-stretched it tears and breaks. (p. 7)

However, Oz is willing to live with a “bi-national State” or partition. He recognizes that his influence as a writer is limited, and that the Arab Israeli conflict is in the large, a

question of Jewish identity and what the Jewish State is all about. . . . If the purpose of Zionism is to create a modern open society—democratic, egalitarian, humanitarian—then there is an equally clear answer to the question of what we should do with the territories. (p. 47)

This reviewer finds *no Jewish component* in Oz’s Zionist ideal. While Oz finds Israeli Sefardim “less fanatic” than Israeli Ashkenazim, he is nonetheless uncomfortable with their hawkish views. Oz seems uncomfortable with a moderate Orthodoxy as well. Left unstated is the role of democracy in an Israel where the new moderate religious Sefardim advocate programs that are not compatible with Oz’s socialist, humanistic vision.

In his “Beyond the Cat Stand,” Lawrence A. Hoffman, a professor of Liturgy at the Hebrew Union College, and one of Reform Judaism’s most thoughtful minds, notes that there is a “distinctly American North American sound” to the content of the new Reform Judaism. Echoing the metaphor of Wise’s *Minhag America*, recognizing the place of women in the Reform rabbinate, the civil religion of Holocaust and Israel, and the breakdown in distance between clergy and laity, Hoffman calls for an adult spirituality and a selective

rediscovery of tradition. Unwilling to return to the Orthodox tradition, Hoffman wants to preserve an aesthetic fusion of autonomous, modern impulses with those elements of the tradition that might accommodate those impulses.

In an unsigned column, “Myths & Facts of Reform Judaism,” which is intended for a popular audience, the reader is informed that Reform Judaism is not “a lazy person’s Judaism,” that although the 39 prohibited labors

are not binding upon Reform Jews, the Sabbath is observed in Reform households by blessing candles, saying the kiddush, enjoying a special meal, and attending Friday night and/or Saturday services.

Special animosity is reserved for Orthodoxy, because it is argued

that many people assume that the Orthodox own the word “Jewish.” The Orthodox may claim that their Judaism is Torah-true Judaism—but actually there is no such thing. No form of Judaism today follows precisely as set forth in the Torah. The Orthodox interpret Judaism in one way; Reform amplifies the Torah tradition another way. Unfortunately, many Reform Jews have allowed themselves to be defined by more traditional Jews. In the process, they have developed an inferiority complex and a defensive posture. Reform Jews are full partners in the development and growth of Judaism.

Left unstated in this polemic is the Judaic content of this alternative Judaism, as well as an objective criterion which might distinguish between alternative interpretations of tradition and different levels of authentic belief, commitment, and intensity. This issue has not yet been addressed in non-Orthodox ideologies.