

SURVEY OF DEVELOPMENTS ON THE ISRAELI SCENE

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REVIEW OF ISRAELI INTELLECTUAL LIFE

BRIDGING THE GAP

Introduction

The term *baal teshuvah* (penitent or returnee) has reentered the Jewish lexicon during the last decade. Its reentry indicates the success of the *teshuvah* movement and the growing attraction of Orthodox Judaism to persons—males and females, students and young (and not so young) adults—with little or no Jewish background. What about Israel? Is a *teshuvah* movement taking root among Israelis, or is this phenomenon confined to Western Jews—Americans, South Africans, Europeans, Australians?

There is a *teshuvah* movement in Israel, and its growth and vitality are remarkable. Nothing short of a full-length study could encompass all of the *teshuvah* efforts now taking place among Israelis. This selection is a critical report on some of the representative types of efforts made by Israelis to bridge the gap between Orthodox and nonreligious Israelis. Excluded from this study, however, are informal efforts made by institutions and Orthodox schools to educate their nonreligious students and participants. Nor are judgments rendered on those participating in the *teshuvah* movement. A full-length study is necessary before a critical evaluation can be made.

My purpose here is threefold: to examine the movement's historical determinants (I), its nature (II), and its strengths, weaknesses, and prospects (III).

I

Most of the present *teshuvah* efforts constitute a response to certain developments in Israel in the past 7 years. The movement owes much to the 1973 Israeli-Arab war, during which Israel pride—some would say *hubris*—suffered a debilitating blow. Notwithstanding Israel's formidable military prowess in that war, her self-image was fractured and her self-confidence plummeted. The initial, unnecessary deaths caused by the disorganization in the Israeli Army, the inability to detect the surprise attack, the initial Arab gains, and the destruction of the illusion that the post-Six-Day War borders would be altered only on Israel's terms generated much personal soul searching and questioning of the meaning and relevance of Jewish nationalism.

In Israel's post-1973 atmosphere, a number of Israelis pondered: Is there an individual, not just a national, purpose to Jewish life? Is there a national purpose other than that set forth by secular Zionists? Do Jews have a right to *Eretz Yisrael*? Is there more to life than the pursuit of material gain? Where can one discuss these issues? Are others asking the same questions? These questions were stimulated not only by the post-1973 *malaise* but also by the rapid reinvigoration of a right-wing Jewish nationalism centered around the preponderant Orthodox Gush Emunim.

If the post-1973 atmosphere predisposed Israelis to a more favorable attitude toward spiritual realities and halakhic observance, a number of parallel developments within the Israeli religious community predisposed it to a more subtle understanding of both its own abilities and the sensibilities of the nonreligious. Among these developments was the immigration to Israel of Western Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Israelis learned from them that it was possible to encounter nonreligious Jews without endangering their own commitment. In addition, the demographic growth of the religious community in Israeli impelled the consideration of a broader spectrum of vocational choice. Not everyone could become businessmen, professionals, clerks, soldiers, panhandlers, and *Luftmenschen*. Many, by virtue of their educational advantages and disadvantages, their strong religious education and concomitant weak or nonexistent secular education, began to consider *hinnukh*, religious education, a respectable profession. Finally, the success of the *teshuvah* efforts with Westerners was an impetus to similar work with Israelis. Indeed, a few of the Israeli *teshuvah* institutions are outgrowths of the older institutions established to work with non-Israelis.

After 1973, then, a certain unprecedented openness among the

nonreligious Israelis toward Judaism dovetailed with a certain unprecedented openness among the Orthodox to work with the nonreligious. Out of this convergence there arose the Israeli *teshuvah* movement. (Some of these developments have also stimulated a distinct growth of Conservative and Reform Judaism in Israel. At present, just as Orthodoxy is stronger than Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel so, too, the Orthodox efforts with the nonreligious are more comprehensive than those of the Reform or Conservative.)

No doubt certain constituent elements of this movement are known outside Israel. But it is doubtful that the breadth, variety, seriousness, and elan of the movement are fully grasped. For that reason it is important to list some representative names, methods, institutions, curricula, and biases of the *teshuvah* movement, to learn that some of its efforts transpire within schools and others without, some within Ashkenazi circles and others within oriental circles, some within a direct *teshuvah* framework and others within an indirect framework, some with high school students and others with older people, some with the elite and the intellectuals and others with the delinquents and the disadvantaged.

II

Rabbi Reuven Elbaz, 34, born in Morocco, wears a Jimmy Carter smile, visits discotheques, drug addicts, and street corners. He lectures 400 teenagers every Thursday night and another 1600 Friday and Saturday nights in Jerusalem in addition to teaching regularly at Yeshivat Or Hachayim, which he founded in 1975 after having been appointed *rav ha-shekhunah* (neighborhood rabbi) in Bet Yisrael, Jerusalem. By now, he has his own cadre of *baalei teshuvah*, many of whom have police records. Rabbi Elbaz and his assistants not only teach but rehabilitate. Police now bring young criminals whom they have had no success in rehabilitating to Yeshivat Or Hachayim. One police lieutenant confirmed Rabbi Elbaz's success at breaking the habit of hardened drug addicts and called his results "bordering on the miraculous." One hundred students learn fulltime in the yeshiva: a parallel branch of the school exists for females. An additional 200 attend classes one to five nights weekly. About 400 males have been rehabilitated, taught Torah and observance, and guided into various kinds of skilled and unskilled labor. Thirty of Rabbi Elbaz's more talented followers have become teachers and counselors. Once a

week they travel to a town or village outside Jerusalem, enter a night club or pool hall, play music, and talk about Judaism and observance. Rabbi Elbaz delivers homilies; his students offer personal testimony about the difficulties, initial resistance, and motivations entailed in returning to Judaism.

Rabbi Elbaz works almost exclusively with oriental Jews. He is nonelitist; not only the gifted interest him. His appeal is nonintellectual and emotional; his Orthodoxy is not modern: no television, no secular learning, no informal mixing of the sexes.

Rabbi Chaim Lifshitz, 41, founder of Sadnat Enosh specializes in counselling individuals trying to make psychological sense out of the distressing imbalances sometimes engendered by becoming Orthodox or by the social and institutional trappings usually encountered when becoming Orthodox. It was founded by a trained clinical psychologist and former *mashgiah* at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh. Rabbi Lifshitz counsels, without charge, about 100 people monthly, among them *baalei teshuvah*. Rabbi Lifshitz has an antiinstitutional bias. He attracts the "sensitive, individualistic, more intellectual types" who, he says, cannot work their way into Orthodoxy through the present *teshuvah* institutions and also preserve their individuality and psychic harmony. His approach is both elitist and pluralistic. He is interested primarily in the gifted and the individualists, but (or perhaps therefore) is unconcerned about their place in the Orthodox spectrum. (He is one of the very few people in Israel who is temperamentally comfortable with and agreeable to the whole range of Orthodox elements, from teachers in the Meah Shearim *hadarim*, for whom he conducts a seminar in teaching methods, to confirmed modern Orthodox Jews, whom he counsels.) Rabbi Lifshitz has a cadre of followers; some have opened a yeshiva in Jerusalem for *baalei teshuvah*; others provide his brand of psychological/religious guidance in communities throughout Israel. He wants to open a village for gifted teenagers, to be adopted by religious families who will be the village's residents.

Rabbi Moshe Rachelson, 32, is director of the Naaseh Venishmah program of Yeshivat Or Someach. Naaseh Venishmah has been eminently successful in persuading young adults who are fully integrated into secular Israeli life to forsake that life for Torah study and Orthodox observance. Naaseh Venishmah's approach is largely elitist; it aims to attract movie stars, army officers, intellectuals, and leaders. The revolution in life-style among its most committed recruits is pronounced. One of its brochures shows Naaseh Venishmah students side by side in "then and now" pictures:

longhairs on one side, short haircuts and *tsitsit* (ritual fringes) on the other. Naaseh Venishmah's program is twofold, fulltime and part-time. A fulltime yeshiva with 100 students is located in Jerusalem. The learning is intense and on a high level. A smaller fulltime program exists in Haifa. Parttime programs exist in Rehovot, Rishon Letzion, Petach Tikva, Tel Aviv, and on an unnamed Israel Air Force base. These programs consist of informal discussions and nightly formal classes in subjects such as practical halakhah, *Shemoneh Perakim*, *Pirkei Avot*, *Kuzari*, and the weekly Torah portion.

Shalom Ber Friedman, 59, electrician, is a veteran of years in a Soviet prison. He is executive director of Shamir (*SHomrei Mitzvot Yotzei Russiyah*, Association of Jewish Religious Professionals from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe). He supervises the translation of traditional Jewish texts into Russian, the publication of a journal of Jewish thought in Russian, the organization of lectures and classes for new Russian immigrants, and the provision of religious ceremonies and paraphernalia such as circumcision, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot*. Shamir was founded in 1972 at the behest of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. With 800 members, Shamir has translated and distributed over 10,000 copies of Herman Wouk's *This Is My God*. Shamir is presently working on a new translation of the Bible into idiomatic Russian with similarly translated portions of Rashi, Ramban and the like, as well as a translation of Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari*. A popular pamphlet is the story of Professor Herman Branover's return to Judaism. Branover, raised in postrevolutionary Russia as an atheist, now teaches theoretical physics at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. He is Shamir's most popular lecturer.

Shamir concentrates on publications and lectures rather than on serious, fulltime study because the Russian Jew, unlike his Israeli or Western counterpart, often has literally no knowledge of Jewish history, law, and customs. Shamir, however, does succeed in enrolling a few students in the fulltime Torah study program conducted in Russian at Yeshivat Dvar Yerushalayim in Jerusalem. Shamir's job, according to Friedman, is to teach Judaism in general and Habad Hasidut in particular to those "whom life has shown that Marxism is something which can be written about, talked about, analyzed, but, somehow, not realized."

Dr. William L. Elefant, 52, lecturer in education at Bar Ilan University, is a scientific reading specialist with extensive experience in training professionals to understand the published research in other disciplines. Dr. Elefant has now turned to devising methods

that enable high school and college students of whatever background to understand traditional texts, such as Talmud and Codes. Dr. Elefant's method, based on student construction of models and tables, permits the student to organize, conceptualize, and retain complex material of a kind that he may never have seen and whose technical vocabulary or symbols he may never have learned. Dr. Elefant has successfully applied these methods in teaching traditional Jewish texts in religious and nonreligious primary and secondary schools, teacher training seminaries, universities, *yeshivot*, adult education seminars, music conservatories, the National Police Academy, and seminars for senior educational personnel. At Yeshivat Mevaseret Yerushalayim near Jerusalem, he is supervising a program for *kolel* students who are applying his method in the systematic preparation of Codes, beginning with *Hilkhot Niddah*, and of Talmud, beginning with tractate *Shabbat*, for use in building religious communities in largely nonreligious development towns such as Kiryat Shemonah.

Yaakov Cohen (a pseudonym) is acting executive director of *Gesher* (Bridge), founded in 1970 to bridge the gap between religious and nonreligious teenagers. Yaakov, one of the original financiers of *Gesher*, is a volunteer. He sees *Gesher's* role as laying the groundwork—creating the atmosphere—for intensive *teshuvah* efforts. *Gesher's* approach is to deal with many people nonintensively instead of with few people very intensively. It promotes what it calls *teshuvat ha-kelal* (communal repentance) and not *teshuvat ha-perat* (individual repentance). In Safed, *Gesher* sponsors weekly seminars where two classes, one from a religious (*dati*) and the other from a nonreligious (*mamlakhti*) high school, mutually explore the meaning of Judaism and questions of religion and state. There is no attempt by the seminar's Orthodox leaders to persuade the nonreligious students to become Orthodox. Were there such an attempt, reports Mr. Cohen, the principals of the nonreligious high schools would refuse to participate.

Gesher has succeeded in cooling hostilities toward Orthodoxy. By increasing the secularist's understanding of Orthodox Judaism, *Gesher* has built bridges but has not asked that they be crossed, although some nonreligious do cross them and become Orthodox. At the same time, religious students' commitment is strengthened when they realize how much they know and how much they have to give. Seminars are co-educational and, as a result, nonmodern Orthodox high schools refuse to participate. Seminar participants may volunteer for follow-up seminars in Ramat Gan. *Gesher* plans to initiate seminars for hand-picked student leaders and for the disadvan-

taged. About 50,000 people have passed through the Gesher seminars. It has 20 full-time paid staff besides a pool of volunteer seminar leaders.

Dr. Daniel Tropper, 37, a *musmakh* of Yeshiva University, founder of Gesher, is now a supervisor in Israel's Ministry of Education for Jewish education in Israel's nonreligious (*mamlakhti*) schools. With Likud's ascent to power and the National Religious Party's Zevulun Hammer's appointment as Minister of Education, all improvements in the Jewish content of Israel's nonreligious primary and secondary schools—if there are to be any—will be made through Dr. Tropper's office. Because of pragmatic and philosophical reasons, he is moving cautiously. Philosophically, he believes in the "softsell." He wants to move the whole community one step closer to Judaism instead of a few individuals many steps closer. "Ultimately this is most important." Pragmatically, Dr. Tropper realizes that the nonreligious schools will not respond positively to having Judaism forced on them. Yet, Dr. Tropper feels, partly because of Gesher and partly because of other changes in Israel, that the nonreligious school systems are far more open to curricula on Judaism—its ideas, values, and customs—than they were 5 years ago. He reports a positive response among nonreligious students and teachers to a new course in Judaism taught by the secular teachers themselves. One year ago (1977-1978), 80 classes instituted the course; last year 500 classes did. The course deals with issues pertinent to adolescence and requires the students to think carefully about, rather than subscribe to, Jewish sources on the issues. The course is designed differently from most of Israeli curricula, which are based on memorization and regurgitation. These courses in Judaism, Dr. Tropper hopes, will become the most exciting part of the curricula, such that study of Judaism will set the standards of educational excellence in the system.

Rabbi David Hartman, 46, former Canadian Orthodox rabbi and now senior lecturer in Jewish philosophy at Hebrew University, is head of the Shalom Hartman Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies. Rabbi Hartman is dynamic, concerned, forthright—and clearly ambiguous about just what he wants the institute ultimately to represent. The institute is co-educational and its students are not necessarily Orthodox. No pressure is exerted to become religious other than the pressure generated through the uninhibited exchange of ideas.

Rabbi Hartman sees the institute as the vanguard of a revolution among the best and the brightest of Israel's youth. Exactly what the substance of that revolution is to be is not yet clear. The form of the

revolution, however, is clear; the institute is training elite intellectual leaders who are studying the relation between Talmud and modern philosophy and values. These leaders will devise new curricula and programs and then teach them ardently throughout Israel. What will the curriculum reflect? Will it emphasize ritual observance or Jewish ethical values; will it develop nonapologetic presentation of texts presently unassimilable in the Israeli secular climate of opinion, or will it remain on the superficial, assimilable levels of traditional literature? Or a combination of both? According to Rabbi Hartman, the institute's members are "struggling with the major problems confronting the Jewish people," but exactly how those problems are to be defined and what the solutions will be are still passionately and forthrightly debated at the institute, where easy answers are unacceptable. One thing is clear, "Orthodox Judaism as it is now constituted in Israel, the Judaism of [Jerusalem Chief Rabbi] Zolti and of [Israel Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi] Goren—these are symbols—[is] not our Judaism, for it entails no encounter with Western culture."

Moshe Noy, 29, product of Bene Berak's Bet Meir Yeshiva, founded *Mercaz Arakhim Lanoar* (Center of Values for Youth) in 1974. The center works exclusively with young, disadvantaged teenagers in small, isolated villages generally neglected by educational and social agencies of the government and of the established Orthodox institutions. The center conducts classes and counseling on an intensive basis in 7 villages, plus weekly lectures in 19 additional villages. Its methods are suited to its clientele. A meeting is arranged at a local community center, club, or poolroom. A movie is shown in order to attract attention. Then comes a discussion: Are you Jewish? What is the difference between being Jewish and being Israeli? Why wear *tefillin* daily? Why study Torah? The center has directed 40 teenagers to academic *yeshivot* and 2000 more to vocational *yeshivot*, to the centers classes, or to skilled and unskilled jobs. The center's workers are volunteer yeshiva students trained partly by Rabbi Chaim Lifshitz of Sadnat Enosh.

Rabbi Dov Bigon, 40, himself a *baal teshuvah*, assisted scores of soldiers and students who entered Yeshiva *Mercaz Harav Kuk* after the 1973 war in search of guidance. Rabbi Bigon invited them to his home, which soon filled, and then, with others, founded *Makhon Meir*, named after a *Mercaz* student killed during the war in order to symbolize the *Makhon's* state-oriented conception of Orthodoxy.

Makhon Meir houses the largest of the *teshuvah* efforts. It has three full-time *yeshivot*, two for females (one in Jerusalem and one in Kiryat Arba) and one for males (in Jerusalem), with a total of 230

students. It has 14 branches throughout Israel (from Eilat to the Golan Heights), where 3500 people attend classes weekly and another 6500 attend intermittently. Classes are taught only in Hebrew. Army service is encouraged. No one is asked to commit himself to the beliefs or practices of Orthodoxy except for the full-time students. They must adhere to the observance of the Sabbath, dietary laws, and dress restrictions. Many who are taught Torah "come to observance by themselves," according to Rabbi Bigon, Of the many people who have become Orthodox through Makhon Meir, several hundred have married and begun to raise families. To live in Israel and to establish Jewish settlements throughout *Erets Yisrael* is stressed as an integral, indispensable part of Orthodox Judaism.

Dr. David Epstein, 32, a *musmakh* of Yeshiva University, is a supervisor in the Department of Torah Education in the Ministry of Education. He organizes 3-day retreats, generally over a *shabbat*, for interested parties of any age in conjunction with six institutes throughout Israel. Eight thousand people attend these retreats yearly. The groups are essentially homogenous. Although the program at each of the institutes is colored by the nature of the local staff (e.g., the staff in Kiryat Arba, has a strong nationalist orientation), all of the institutes attempt to stimulate commitment to, not just understanding of, Orthodoxy. At the same time, the approach is low key; Dr. Epstein considers the inculcation of an essential respect for Orthodoxy a positive outcome. Films, guided readings, discussions, lectures, simulated games (plane crashes; 20 survivors; one lifeboat for 10 people), singing, praying (optional), and role playing are some of the techniques used.

III

With few exceptions, each *teshuvah* effort believes that it has *the* answer to strengthening Judaism in Israel. Modesty is rare. That has its advantages. The inability to see many sides of the question, the confidence and the drive to pursue one's own vision, has undoubtedly been an important factor in the remarkable growth of *teshuvah* programs since the 1973 war. However, a comprehensive view reveals a multilevel Israeli society that will not respond to a single type of *teshuvah* effort but that quite clearly is responding to the diversity of efforts presently being mounted. If there is any indication of the depth of crisis in secular Zionism, of the potential for massive and

serious rethinking of the antireligious bias of much of secular Zionist thought, it is the very diversity of the successful programs now under way. The prospects of the movement, then, are good. But matters must be kept in proportion. If one's measuring stick is rotated backward in time, the growth of *teshuvah* efforts contrasts sharply with the unwillingness of Israeli society to tolerate such attempts even a few years ago. But if one's measuring stick is rotated forward, it is clear that the number of people reached is very small in relation to the number yet to be reached. It is no comfort that many of those being reached are the "elite" (a word one hears quite frequently). While it is true that the elite, or some other minority, in one generation can become a majority in the next generation, certain factors in contemporary Israel militate against this rule.

Israel is volatile, in many ways adolescent in its social and individual makeup. Israelis individually and collectively are given to sudden and dramatic shifts of opinion and mood, to an inability to postpone gratification, and to an oscillation between self-righteousness and defensiveness. It is common for an intermittent visitor to Israel to be told that "it's a completely different country" than when he last visited. If the current receptivity to Orthodoxy is not to be wasted, it is necessary to strike while the iron is hot. It is necessary to work directly not just with the elite and the intellectuals but also with the masses. The attempts to reach the intellectuals, to build ideational bridges, to capture the imagination of prestigious army generals and movie stars—this is important, but not more important than the attempts to reach the undistinguished, to rehabilitate the criminals, and to train the disadvantaged. The opportunity may not come again. As Rabbi Israel Salanter said, piety is measured not by exalted achievement but by the degree of effort toward exalted achievement. The uneducated young person who has struggled to acknowledge his Creator, wear his *tefillin* and, say, practice his carpentry is no less precious to God than the educated Jew who, while also acknowledging his Creator and observing *mitsvot*, pours over a page of Talmud and ponders the difficulties of a work like Maimonides' *Moreh Nevukhim*.

With a genuinely pluralistic sympathy for the diversity of the present efforts, one can offer certain observations on the claims and the methods of the programs detailed here. It is true that becoming an Orthodox Jew sometimes entails psychic disturbance, but the claim that this inevitably occurs to the most gifted and individualistic people within the framework of the present institutions is untenable. Psychic disturbance cannot be correlated with either a person's

abilities or the degree of simplicity in the Orthodox ideology that he adopts. So-called "hard-sell" institutions are full of normal, individualistic, and creative students. It must be remembered that simplicity of ideology is often a result not of personality imbalance but of certain ideological factors in Israeli and Palestinian history. With the uneven but distinct persistence of a Marxist atmosphere, which fosters a commitment to philosophic materialism and a total renunciation of spiritual reality, certain committed secularists who become Orthodox can do so—as the Novorodock school of the Musar movement learned in Marxist Russia 70 years ago—only through a total renunciation of their background, a wholesale rejection of all values that they once held dear, in favor of a blind embrace of Orthodox Judaism. A poem written by one of the students in Naaseh Venishmah reflects concurrently an undifferentiated Orthodox ideology, a total rejection of the past, and a distinct creativity.

Submission

At the center of my great lusts
My galloping horses
My roaming dogs
My dark desires
I stand before You my Master my God
And seek and beg for my life.

You Who have placed within me urge and desire
Healthy lust, wisdom and light
And I who have explored them for the bad
Who has transformed a pure soul
Into lewdness
Forgive the abomination.

At the end of all of the pathways
At the end of all of the struggles—
The great submission.

I tie my hand to my heart and submit
I lower eyes to the ground and submit
I stand in Your world bowed and submissive
All my being before You in shame and disgrace.

And in my great submission to my God
Behold I find
My great conquest of life.

The claim that working with large groups of Jews unintensively is ultimately more important than working with small groups very intensively is open to question. This is not because much work on a low-key basis with large groups of people is unimportant, but because this approach is more attuned to the hostility of the early 1970s than to the openness present today. Now Israel is more tolerant of forthright claims as to the legitimacy and the redemptive quality of Orthodoxy. These claims still need to be tempered when dealing with non-Orthodox masses on an unintensive basis—tempered, yes; studiously avoided, no.

The use of Judaism as a tool to solve social and psychological problems is a double-edged sword. Orthodox Judaism, of course, speaks to all levels of life. I can think of few applications of Orthodoxy more redemptive than the weaning of a seemingly unreconstructible drug addict from his habit. At the same time, it must be made clear that Orthodoxy is not merely a tool of social or psychological redemption, but a truth system in its own right, a supplier of ultimate values and definitive behavior patterns.

In practice, this is a thin line to preserve. My observation reveals that it is carefully guarded by those working with the delinquents and the disadvantaged. But if the impact and the efficacy of Orthodoxy continues to grow geometrically among the neglected elements of Israel's population, it will be necessary, consciously and conscientiously, to insure that Orthodoxy is not merely used. For if it is, the bubble will burst; the flight from it will be as rapid as the present flight to it.