

Reform Judaism in Israel: Great Strides, Great Challenges

Shabbat Matot-Mas'ei 5779

Three weeks ago – on Friday night, July 12 – I had the great privilege of worshiping and sharing Shabbat dinner with friends at Congregation Bavat Ayin in Rosh HaAyin, Israel and in the home of Rabbi Ayala and Avi Miron.

Several of our congregants worshiped at Bavat Ayin, and enjoyed home hospitality for Shabbat dinner, during our congregation's Israel trip in the fall of 2016. We have continued our relationship in a program called *Domim*, which means, “similar,” a pairing of Reform congregations in Israel and North America. In the fall of 2017, on the first anniversary of our visit, donors from our congregation sponsored Bavat Ayin's Selichot program, in honor of Rich Lewis, now of blessed memory. In the coming spring, I plan to make a grant from my discretionary fund to sponsor the congregation's Jerusalem Day celebration, featuring the art of Michal Memit Vorka, who “immigrated to Israel at the tender age of two through Operation Moses.” On Jerusalem Day at Bavat Ayin, “She will introduce her art as well as her story, relate to her Jewish-Ethiopian traditions and discuss the challenges that Ethiopian-Jews are meeting in their encounter with Israeli society. Since 2004[,] Jerusalem Day has also been recognized as a Memorial Day for around 4,000 Ethiopian Jews who tragically perished on their way to Israel, while striving to fulfill their decades long dream to reach [Jerusalem].”ⁱ

I share these details because we in North America can get the impression that Reform Judaism in Israel consumes all of its energy fighting for its rights in the face of ultra-Orthodox, government-supported discrimination. Those struggles are important, and I'll discuss them tonight. However, the truth about our Israeli Reform partners is much more complex and inspiring. Despite all the challenges they face, the Israel Movement for Progressive and Reform Judaism has been growing by leaps and bounds. Just as important, my Israeli colleagues and their partners in lay leadership are laser-focused on creativity and deep meaning. For example, this year, I was privileged to worship from a pilot edition of our Israel Movement's next prayer book, edited by Professor Dalia Marx of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. This prayer book is informed by the deep spirituality of our Movement in Israel and even by some of the stylistic innovations of our own American Reform prayer books.

While many people will tell you that Israeli Jews are either “religious,” meaning Orthodox, or “secular,” the reality is that “between 7 and 8% of Israeli Jews, equivalent to around 500,000 people, define themselves as Reform or

Conservative... an increase of 50%...[since] 1999.”ⁱⁱ Perhaps more importantly, “In 2013 36% of Israeli Jews, or nearly 2 million individuals, reported that they had participated in one or more Reform or Conservative events.”ⁱⁱⁱ While our Movement hoped to establish fifty congregations in Israel by 2020, its leader, Rabbi Gilad Gariv, celebrates that the goal was accomplished several years earlier.”^{iv} Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion has ordained more than 100 rabbis at its Jerusalem campus, by far the largest number of non-Orthodox Jewish clergy in the Jewish State.

Laurence Miller, who has studied the Reform Movement in Israel, has described participation in ways that will sound familiar to us: “While average attendance for Shabbat evening services is usually modest, ... attendance for holidays...is high, as secular [sic] Jews seek more meaningful spiritual experiences. For example, in 2013 over 1000 people participated in Yom Kippur services at Yotzma in Modi’in, [a Jerusalem suburb,] many of them standing outside the small synagogue and participating in the service through loudspeakers in an expansive meadow.”^v

While we most often hear about the struggle for egalitarian worship at Jerusalem’s Western Wall, which is important, marriage is a more significant flash-point for Israelis. Miller writes, “Young people are increasingly resisting marriage ceremonies led by Orthodox rabbis. A 2015 survey found that 49% of all Jews (and 80% of secular [sic] Jews) did not want Orthodox marriage...17% [wanted] a Reform or Conservative marriage.”^{vi} Despite the fact that Israeli law does not recognize the weddings they officiate, Reform rabbis were already officiating at more than 1000 weddings per year in Israel by 2013.^{vii}

Funerals in military cemeteries were also at issue until a recent development. Imagine a grieving family, not at all Orthodox, being told that only an Orthodox rabbi may officiate at their loved one’s funeral. Often, these rabbis will not permit women and men to stand together at the funeral as families, allow women to offer a eulogy or even to say Kaddish for an immediate family member. And remember, we’re talking about military funerals, often for young people who have given their lives in the service of the country. Only last month did the Israel Defense Force relent and announce that Reform rabbis may officiate at funerals in Israel’s military cemeteries, a change precipitated by pressure from Israel’s High Court of Justice, thanks to *Hiddush*, an organization that agitates for religious liberty in the Jewish state.^{viii}

As I reflect on the tremendous strides taken by our Israeli Reform Movement, and the great challenges it still faces, I turned to our Torah portion. Last week, we read that – under limited circumstances, but for the first time in

history – women could inherit their fathers’ property.^{ix} This week, we read about a step backwards: Inheriting limits the women’s marriage rights.^x

Similarly, as the Israeli Reform Movement’s reach and popularity have grown, its detractors have become more threatened by it. The Orthodox establishment is working harder than ever to curtail our Movement’s rights. The greatest damage would be done by diminishing the authority of Israel’s Supreme Court, as proposed by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his prospective coalition partners, including the ultra-Orthodox parties.

American Jews can make a difference. The representatives of our largest American Jewish organizations – Jewish Federations of North America, the Union for Reform Judaism, and AIPAC – can, often do, and must continue to insist on equal rights for all Israelis. This winter, you will be hearing about World Zionist Organization elections, in which each and every adult Jew worldwide has the right to vote. Justice Annabelle Imber Tuck will lead our congregation’s effort in a project that is vital to the continued vibrancy of our religious movement.

Let us celebrate that we are *domim*, similar, and partners of Congregation Bavat Ayin – like us, an isolated, middle-sized Reform congregation – and continue to contribute to that partnership. We can, and we must, remain strong, strengthening one another, across oceans, but very close to our hearts.

Amen.

ⁱ Kehillat Bavat Ayin, “Recreating Torah: A Program for Jewish-cultural study,” undated document transmitted from Rabbi Ayala Miron to Rabbi Barry Block via email, July 15, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Laurence Miller, “The Reform Movement in Israel: Past Present and Future,” The Joseph and Alma Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies, University of Maryland, July 6, 2015, p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Rabbi Gilad Kariv, speaking at CCAR-MARAM *Yom Iyyun*, July 8, 2019.

^v Miller, p. 5.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Anna Ahronheim and Ilanit Chernick, “IDF to Allow Reform Rabbis to Officiate at Military Funerals,” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 2019.

^{ix} Numbers 27:1-11.

^x Numbers 36:1-12.