

Senior Project AJR
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Building Bridges between Pluralistic Jewish Learning Communities in Israel and the US

I. Motivation and Background for the Project

I have traveled to Israel 8 times, the first time in 1986 for my honeymoon. The early visits were typical tourist excursions, traversing the land from Eilat to Rosh Pina, experiencing Masada and Ein Gedi, staying in a Moshav and a Kibbutz, celebrating Erev Shabbat at the Kotel, being invited to a very traditional Hasidic home for Shabbat dinner and praying with the “Women of the Wall” up in the courtyard above the wall, getting to know the land from a historical, and religious perspective. Yet it was always through the eyes of a tourist. I have no family living in Ha’aretz

As I became more involved in Jewish life in my own community and Judaism became more central to my life I felt I needed a more intimate relationship with Israel. I began short trips to Israel, studying Hebrew and Jewish text at learning centers such as Pardes, Conservative Yeshiva, University of Haifa, and Hartman Institute. As I began to know my way around the cities of Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv, and as I began to have Israeli friends, I became invested in Israel. I no longer felt that I was a stranger in a strange land. The land became my land with all the joys, and extreme worries connected with the nation and the people.

I began to consider myself a legitimate sojourner in the land yet I mostly directed my *davening* to quasi- Israeli quasi-“anglo”¹ Kehillot such as Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, not only because I could not feel quite comfortable in a totally Hebrew speaking environment, but also because woman were not totally circumscribed there; they had a role, somewhat limited, but actually quite expansive from a traditional perspective. The *mechitzah* was down the middle, women led the Preliminary Service and could even offer a drash sometimes. There were a few other similar communities as well when I visited about 7 years ago, before I began my rabbinic studies.

¹ The term used by Israelis for Americans and Brits who reside or visit the land.

Since then I have kept my eyes on the emergence of alternative learning and prayer centers in Israel. In June of 2009 there appeared an article in *The Jerusalem Report*² about how the recent emergence of secular grass- roots learning and prayer groups challenges the Orthodox monopoly in Israel and I knew that we had reached the point where this was a phenomenon that was growing and here to stay. I learned that the Jewish Federation of New York had begun supporting these communities with financial and other resources through its Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal.^{3 4}

In August of 2009, while I was taking a Hebrew ulpan at the University of Haifa, I decided to travel around and check out some of the more prominent emerging “secular”⁵ Yeshivot and prayer groups. Having already studied at a number of religious learning communities, I was interested in seeing how “secular” learning groups, and especially prayer groups, handled traditional texts and how they conceived of davening. I explored some of these communities to get a broad sense of what spiritual and educational needs were being filled by these emerging communities and how they were taking ownership of the heritage that belongs to them. I visited several non-religious yeshivot and a number of secular prayer groups for Kabbalat Shabbat services. I also met with several people in Israel who were either studying this “phenomenon” or actively participating in the programs.

² Prince-Gibson, Eetta, “They’re Doing it Their Way,” *The Jerusalem Report*, June 22, 2009 p. 6

³ Interview with Ora Weinstein, April 28, 2010 of the New York Federation’s Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal (COJIR), and email correspondence with Eli Gur in Israel, it’s Chair. The Commission’s task is not a religious one, but rather it hopes to support communities where there is a communal Jewish context for their gathering, whatever that might be. The activities that it supports are described in an abstract of the COJIR decision for funding, written and provided to me by Eli Gur.

⁴ Having mentioned the support of the New York Federation, I would be remiss not to mention also the Avi Chai Foundation. Avi Chai is a private foundation endowed by Zalman C. Bernstein that is committed to the perpetuation of the Jewish people, Judaism, and the centrality of the State of Israel to the Jewish people. It directs its funding in Israel toward encouraging mutual understanding between Jews of different commitments to Jewish traditions; a new Jewish leadership, with deep knowledge and respect for others, who will guide and influence the various communities in which they participate; and Jewish study and literacy among secular Israelis so that they can become more active and knowledgeable partners in shaping Jewish life in Israel. (taken from their web site) Many, if not most, of the individuals featured in this paper have been recipients of both grants and personal awards for their work toward these goals.

⁵ The term “secular” is primarily self-identified, that is, many of these communities consider themselves “secular” in that their study, though it involves traditional Jewish texts, is not governed by *halachic* principles, there is no expectation of any particular type of observance on the part of participants inside or outside the learning/prayer center and discussion of text is not necessarily in keeping with traditional commentators. This is not meant to be exclusionary of religious individuals either as students or as teachers in most places, however, traditional religious teaching does not dominate the agenda.

What has been happening in Israel has been of interest to me because we are a people “few in number” and, whatever our differences, we are one people and Jews must be responsible for, and connected to, one another. What happens in the Israeli Jewish Community in the coming decades, in terms of Jewish learning and practice, is of tremendous significance to the richness and continuity of Jewish life and tradition. Judaism depends upon significant learning both from our sacred texts and in terms of Jewish experiences, in order to pass the tradition on to the next generations. “Secular” Jews comprise a significant portion of Israeli Jews, perhaps as many as half Israelis,⁶ though estimates vary because the boundaries are not so clear. Whether and how they choose to embrace Jewish learning and practice will be a major determinant of the shape of Judaism in decades to come.

The continuity of the tradition is not as implicit as it once was; in the modern world the choice to practice any religion or no religion at all are viable options. Those of us who believe that the Jewish tradition provides for us the best way to live a life of meaning, though not the only way, cannot help but have a strong desire to see the teachings and practices of that tradition thrive. Fostering that tradition is an implicit goal in becoming a rabbi.

As I explored the learning and prayer that was taking place in Israel in these newly formed communities I began to notice commonalities in the challenges faced in both Israel and the US, as Jewish leaders strive to enrich the Jewish learning experiences and strengthen Jewish identity. Many Jews in both Israel and the US have become alienated from rigid Jewish practices that don’t speak to them,⁷ and are having trouble finding a place for them selves within the Jewish tradition and finding the spiritual and communal nourishment that all people need, and that is fundamental to a healthy society. In a broad sense many of the “emerging” prayer communities in Israel and grassroots, unaffiliated prayer communities in the US could be considered pluralistic, in the sense of welcoming a broad range of religious and non-religious perspectives, and being non-doctrinaire.⁸

⁶ <http://jewfaq.org/movement.htm>

⁷ In the US those rigid practices have been found not only in the Orthodox communities but in the liberal denominations as well, which have a history of attempting to stave off practices which are anathema to their range of acceptable beliefs within their communities. For example Reform congregations have often looked askance at demonstrations of too much observance of tradition, such as the wearing of kippot and tallitot, and Conservative Congregations, in their desire to deter interfaith marriages have been distinctly unwelcoming to such couples.

⁸ Pluralism has come to be understood in many different ways, some of which will be addressed in this paper.

AJR has been at the forefront of pluralistic thinking and practice as an early proponent of acknowledging the realities of modern Jewish life, and incorporating a broad range of Jewish thinking into its education of rabbis and cantors. In the spirit of our tradition this means embracing all Jews and choosing to learn through “open-hearted”⁹ discussion with Jews of all denominations and personal practices, but with Jews who are serious about their faith and commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people.

As I visited these learning and prayer communities in Israel I began to envision an opportunity to merge my study of these emerging Jewish secular and prayer communities in Israel with a particular need of rabbinic students at AJR.

Our preparation to become rabbis and cantors at AJR needs to include a strong familiarity with Israel from a historical, political and cultural perspective, as well as strength in understanding and speaking the language of Israel, Hebrew, not only for communications with other rabbis and modern Israelis, but also to enhance our understanding of the ancient texts that we study. Without minimizing the differences between modern and Biblical/Rabbinic Hebrew, from my observation, students coming to AJR having either lived in Israel and/or having studied Hebrew more extensively, are able to approach the text with both more ease and more depth.¹⁰ All three of the main liberal Jewish Seminaries include a year of study in Israel as part of their rabbinical programs, citing the benefits of Hebrew language emersion to help facilitate both text study and continuing Jewish communications; familiarity with the land, its history, culture, people and modern day workings; developing a spiritual connection with the land; and studying Jewish texts with Israeli teachers and students for a special perspective.¹¹

⁹ A term used by Rabbi David Greenstein in “By the Sweat of Your Brow- Approaching Kashrut from a Pluralistic Perspective,” a listening which requires one to critique another perspective, and respond to critiques, and internalize the positive elements of that critique, that is, to potentially be altered by the exchange.

¹⁰ Because students at AJR consist in large part of somewhat older students, which has the advantage of valuable life experience, but also, typically, more family and work commitments, a year abroad would not be feasible for many students.

¹¹ Found at the web sites of each of the seminaries. Interestingly, the Conservative and Reform Movements have established their own satellites seminaries in Israel, which seems consistent with a history of fostering their own denominational goals, while the Reconstructionist Rabbinical School allows students to select from a handful of existing programs, including those of other denominations, supplemented by their own modules. This may be because of a pluralistic conception, or perhaps the cost of a satellite seminary is prohibitive to the Reconstructionist movement at this time.

Since I have been here at AJR I have sought for myself, and for others, opportunities to immerse for a significant period of time in Israeli life, culture, politics, and language. My trip to investigate emerging communities led me to focus more on what we have in common with newly emerging learning and prayer communities in Israel and whether there might be advantages in shared learning. With support from the AJR administration, and out of exchanges that I continued to have with AJR leaders and communities in Israel, I began to pursue the goal of working to establish a learning exchange program between AJR and one (or possibly more) of the communities in Israel.

The form that such a program might take would be developed by the needs and visions of both the respective community/s in Israel and our needs and visions at AJR. All dimensions of such a program were open for exploration including the length of study and curriculum for students, whether they be AJR students studying in Israel or possibly Israeli students studying at AJR, and whether an exchange of teachers might also be involved. The first step was to find a suitable partner, and a likely candidate had already emerged from my visits. The process of identifying such a community is traced below.

II. Visits and Views

A. Secular Prayer Groups as Learning Centers- Three Distinctive Communities

During my August 2009 visit I first checked out prominent secular prayer groups in each of the three major cities of Israel, Nigun HaLev (Melodies of the Heart, established 2000) in the Haifa area, Beit Tefila (House of Prayer, established 2004) in Tel Aviv and Nava Tehila (Beautiful Praise, established 2004) in Jerusalem.¹² I hoped to get a sense of what brought

¹² I was drawn to these three communities out of conversations I had in Tel Aviv with Na'ama Azuley, who is the author, with Ephraim Tabory, of the study, "A House of Prayer for All Nations: Unorthodox Prayer Houses for Nonreligious Israeli Jews," from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. She surveyed non-religious prayer groups through observation, interviews, documents and questionnaires, concluding that they represent a new wave to the ideological religious struggle in Israel. The paper evolved out of her work on her dissertation at Bar-Ilan. Na'ama felt these three communities would be representative of the range of communities that have sprung up. I received a great deal of advice and assistance from her in the early part of my investigation. Na'ama works at Sha'ar Schools network.

participants to these open communities, and what they were searching for, and what brought the leaders to involve themselves in these new communities. What kind of backgrounds and Jewish learning did they have? Were they really secular? What were the spiritual orientations of the groups? What would *davening* look like in a secular world? Could a prayer community serve as a center of Jewish learning?

I attended a prayer service in each of these communities and had an opportunity in each case to talk with leaders and participants. Consistent themes that came across were that for many Jews, who grew up with little connection to Jewish texts and prayer in their home lives, the prayer community became, not only a place to pray and belong to a community, but their learning center for Torah and a Jewish Living tradition. Many, alienated from Orthodoxy in Israel for various political and spiritual reasons, found themselves bereft of the kind of spiritual support that is nourished by a communal focus on spirituality, ritual and the meaning of life.

Time and again the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin came up in conversation as a marking point for the attraction of some individuals to these communities.¹³ When Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated they had no spiritual community to turn to for comfort in the wake of this spiritually devastating event. Each of the three communities I visited were very different in their goals, ambience, and practice, influenced at least in part, by the nature of their larger communities and their leaders, but interestingly enough all, by the time I visited them, had established a *keva*, a relatively fixed practice to their services. This suggests that some amount of consistency is important within a Jewish spiritual context.

Nigun HaLev

Nigun HaLev was the first “emerging” prayer community¹⁴ I visited and the first one founded among the three (2000). It holds its *Kabbalat Shabbat* services in Moshav Nahalal, considered the first Moshav in Israel, founded in 1921. The Moshav has a very distinctive circular layout and is rich in history, with early photos, including aerial ones, all along the

¹³ The Secular Yeshiva Bina even makes reference to this in its Vision statement.

¹⁴ Having visited these communities the term “secular” no longer seems appropriate to me. When used, it signals that there are no preconditions about religious beliefs and observance, but I have found that “religious” individuals are almost uniformly welcomed into the group.

walls. I was very fortunate to have a contact person in Israel to help me make arrangements to attend and she accompanied me.¹⁵

The community sits in a horseshoe formation, with several leaders in the front. A guitar accompanies some of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* prayers. Service leaders are Shai Zarchi, Bini Talmi, and Chen Ben Or-Tsfoni. The *siddur* used is one of their own design¹⁶ however it resembles a conservative *siddur* and the service is similar to a service at a conservative *shul* in the US such as B'nei Jeshrun. It includes Israeli poetry and a focus on a prayer for the soldiers. Otherwise it includes a traditional "home service," the 6 Psalms, *Ana B'khoah* and *Lecha Dodi* and a fairly traditional *Ma'ariv* service. Some elements of the *Shacharit* service are inserted into the *Kabbalat Shabbat siddur* and it includes a *derash* on the *Parashat Ha Shavua*. It is clear that the development of this service has been highly influenced by folks at Congregation B'nei Jeshrun in New York, which is not surprising since one of Nigun HaLev's founders is Chen Ben Or-Tsfoni, an Israeli and recently ordained Reform Rabbi, who is a fellow at BJ in New York, and a prayer leader at Nigun HaLev, and there is a sister-congregation relationship between the two communities, yet there seems to be some disagreement among the leaders on whether to make changes, especially to include melodies that are more familiar to Israelis. There is some open discussion during the offering of a *D'var Torah* by one of the leaders.

Beit Tefila

My second visit was to Beit Tefila Yisraeli which meets outdoors at The Tel Aviv Port for its *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, which are meant to be a *Shabbat* experience grounded in nature and very, very popular to the point of making the Port completely packed with people. I was unable to attend a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service but I went to a Havdalah Service which featured a speaker, and the program was led by one of the founders, Esteban Gottfried, with whom I had made contact and who had invited me to attend.

¹⁵ Ma'ayan benzvi, a leader at HaMidrasha, a learning center which has a connection to Nigun HaLev, was suggested to me as a contact by Dr. Ora Horn Prouser and Rabbi Jill Hammer. A group from the Elga Stulman Women's Institute for Jewish Studies at HaMidrasha, including Ma'ayan, had visited AJR in 2009. She has been my contact person for Nigun HaLev and HaMidrasha ever since. I am very grateful for all her help.

¹⁶ See attachment

The meeting was held at Alma College¹⁷ on Yafe Street in Tel Aviv. The *ma'ariv/havdalah* service was brief and traditional and the speaker was Avigdor Shinan a professor of Hebrew Literature and Rabbinics at Hebrew University. Our meeting was held in a small library; thus we were surrounded by books, and the ambience mirrored the physical environment.

The attendees were intellectually oriented and many were learned in Jewish texts, judging by the questions and comments that they offered during the talk. Perhaps they had self-selected in attending in order to hear this renowned scholar offer some insights into his new book *Pirkei Avot, Perush Yisraeli Hadash*. This book, surprisingly to some, became a best seller, staying on the top of the non-fiction best seller book list for many weeks!

What Professor Shinan does remarkably well is to frame verses of *Pirkei Avot* in a very modern context, with reference to modern Israeli culture and landscapes that make it extremely accessible to the modern Israeli reader. He also engages in a dialogue with the text with an approach which is unfamiliarly open to many who have studied our sacred texts in Israel. I was very privileged to have the opportunity to attend this talk. I had opportunities to chat with Professor Shinan and with participants before and after the program, and riding back to the bus station with one of them. There were many Olim in the group that I chatted with, most of whom were originally from the US but have been in Israel for a very extended time, coming as early as 20 years ago. This contrasted with my experience in other prayer communities in Israel where there were fewer Olim.

Nava Tehila

The third prayer group I visited in August 2009 was Nava Tehila which holds its once-a-month Kabbalat Shabbat Services in the Spietzer Hall in the basement of the Kol Haneshama Synagogue in the Baka neighborhood in Jerusalem.¹⁸ It is a large undecorated social hall and the chairs are laid out in concentric circles. It is led by Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan, an Israeli descended from a line of rabbis, and who was ordained in the Renewal movement. On their web site the community characterizes itself with the statement, “We welcome people of

¹⁷ ALMA Home for Hebrew Culture in Tel Aviv is an adult Jewish cultural learning center described further on in this paper.

¹⁸ Kol Haneshama was founded as a Reform Synagogue and had a major struggle to be allowed to practice this form of Judaism. It no longer uses the term Reform in presenting itself, but rather Progressive.

diverse backgrounds who wish to experience various expressions of spiritual life with a Jewish flavor. This language is consistent with what I found in the Kabbalat Shabbat service.

The rabbi assumed what one might think of as a spiritual pose, her eyes remained closed throughout most of the service and her head was tilted upward, giving the impression that spiritually she was somewhere else. Others in the community also assumed this pose. The service featured an ensemble of talented musicians playing an assortment of instruments both modern and ancient. They had composed original and delightful music, including vocals, for the service, with which most participants seemed to be familiar.

The rabbi led us through the opening Psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat by choosing one very brief phrase with as little as 2 words, or a few more, and expounded on those words in different ways, sometimes in a kabbalistic manner and sometimes with prescriptions for everyday life. The community was totally immersed in this experience. However, about two thirds of the participants left when *Kabbalat Shabbat* closed and *ma'ariv* began. The *ma'ariv* service was led by a member of the group, rather than the rabbi, and appeared to be conciliation to those who wanted a little more than the “flavor.” Rabbi Kagan announced upcoming sessions which were to be held in her home, such as a *Rosh Hodesh* observance.

B. Secular Learning Centers- Four Institutions

Secular Learning Centers whose primary subject of study is Jewish tradition, with formal Jewish curricula and classroom instruction for adults, possibly leading to a degree or certificate of completion, are much rarer in Israel.¹⁹ Four such institutes which also span a range of approaches are Alma, Tmura, Bina, and HaMidrasha. Each of these programs reaches out with learning opportunities for non-Israelis as well. The focus of these programs and the communities that they serve are different, yet their objectives tend to be more similar than the language that they use to characterize themselves would suggest.

¹⁹ However, smaller, locally oriented, non-*halachic* centers of informal study do exist and are growing in number.

ALMA- Home of Hebrew Culture

Alma, located at 4 Bezalel Yafe in Tel Aviv, is one of the oldest of these secular adult learning centers focused on Jewish tradition. It was founded in 1996 by Ruth Calderon, who had been the co-founder and director of Elul, an egalitarian Bet Midrash for religious and secular men and women in Jerusalem. Its focus is, and has always been, on what Alma refers to in its literature as Hebrew culture.

The word “culture” plays such a large role in the college’s definition of itself that one might get the impression that Jewish religious text is not terribly relevant, but Ruth Calderon clarifies that the “Hebrew” here does not refer to language but to the integration of Judaism and modernity and she adds that we should re-define “secular” since many students are drawn into Judaism as scholarship and classic narrative culture, if not on the basis of *halacha*.²⁰ She herself is completing a doctorate in Talmud at Hebrew University, and the curriculum at Alma includes study of *Mishna*, *Kabbalah*, *Hassidism*, liturgy, philosophy and poetry.²¹ Modern forms of Biblical criticism are routinely employed, including feminist criticism. But the study also differs from academic study because it allows an intimate exchange with the text and encourages integration of the conclusions of the study with personal experience.²²

Calderon notes that overall there is a comfortable mix of religious and non-religious beliefs at the school, which enriches the discussions of theology and *halacha*. The treatment of texts as human creations is no longer a revolutionary innovation, over which battles must be fought.

The Academic Program of study at Alma is broad and includes 21 required courses which cover historical, philosophical, and methodological issues, Biblical and other Jewish texts, all taught in Hebrew with the exception of a new program of Israeli culture for English speakers, as indicated below.

²⁰ Arfa, Orit “Jewish Learning on the Rise in Tel Aviv,” Jerusalem Post, October 18, 2006. This article also provides a glimpse into how the landscape of the learning of Jewish texts has changed in Tel Aviv in the last decade. It describes a number of small *yeshivot*, some with an Orthodox orientation, but without political agenda or religious coercion, like the “Center for Self-Awareness,” whose classrooms are packed with 20-50 year olds in shorts, jeans, and tank tops, who come weekly to hear the Torah and Biblical Commentary and who join in the public observance of Sukkot and other holidays. Of particular symbolic and concrete significance is the fact that the city of Tel Aviv subsidizes its own Brodt Center for Jewish culture, a state-of-the-art building, where it conducts programs, activities, and courses for the unaffiliated Tel Avivians. Its goal is to connect Tel Aviv residents to their heritage and roots through contemporary Jewish culture, and the demand for such programs is great.

²¹ Calderon, Ruth “We Enter the Talmud Barefoot,” Center for Cultural Judaism-Articles.

<http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/articles/26> p. 1

²² *ibid* p. 2



About Alma

Vision Statement:

Hebrew Culture (the meeting point between Jewish culture, Israeli culture and general culture) will become a meaningful, living element of the identity of Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Mission Statement:

To operate an educational institution for adults in the field of Hebrew Culture, to train cultural change agents in this field, and to be a creative source for renewed and contemporary Hebrew Culture contents, working within major Jewish communities in Israel and around the world.

Statement of Values:

'Origins and Originality': awareness of the past as a basis for creativity in the present and the future

Quality and Innovation

'Here and Now': modernity and relevance to everyday life in Israeli society and in the Jewish world

'Respect': individual humane treatment of employees, teachers, students and the public

Openness and cooperation

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New at Alma: Hebrew Culture program in English

Alma invites non-*ivrit* speakers to gain a unique and meaningful taste of the Alma experience. Discover our fresh approach to engaging with Jewish sources, and to exploring the ideas and dilemmas affecting Israeli and Jewish identity today. Focusing on a specific cultural theme, each course offers a colourful mosaic of Jewish and Israeli perspectives and contexts, with every session shedding a different light on the theme at the heart of the course.

True to Alma's spirit, sessions will take the style of an informal Beit Midrash, breathing new life into this classic Jewish study method. Each course offers an opportunity to interact with a varied selection of Jewish and Israeli texts, both traditional and contemporary, guided by members of the Alma faculty. The course will feature:

KEY PARADIGMS OF JEWISH THOUGHT AND LIFE

- 1) The Evolving “One”: Ideas of God in Jewish Discourse
- 2) Decoding God’s Vernacular: The Role of Hebrew in Classical Judaism
- 3) Divine Authorship-Rabbinic Authority: From Biblical to Rabbinic Judaism
- 4) Jewish Pluralism, Jewish Diversity: The Multifaceted Evolution of Judaism
- 5) Between Judaism and Democracy: On the Possibility of Jewish Democracy in Israel

This current program runs for 5 weekly sessions.

Alma College is a sponsor of the grassroots prayer community Beit Tefillah, which I visited and which is described in this paper; services and meetings of that prayer community are held in its facility. I had met with Esteban Gottfried, the Director of Beit Tefillah during my visit to Alma to attend the *Havdalah* service, and I spoke to him about both of these organizations, but I did not have the opportunity to attend classes at Alma.

Tmura, The Institute for Training Secular Humanistic Rabbis and Jewish Leadership in Israel

The Institute for Training Secular Humanistic Rabbis is largely the vision and creation of Rabbi Sivan Maas. While serving as director of the Jerusalem branch of The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, she was ordained as a Humanistic Rabbi at its location in Detroit on October 24, 2003 by the International Institute, where she studied under the tutelage of Rabbi Sherwin Wine, who founded the society in 1969. She became the first Humanistic Rabbi in Israel. The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, the educational arm of the Secular Humanistic movement, began training rabbis and non-rabbinical clerical leaders in 1985, and has ordained 6 rabbis and 40 non-rabbinical clerical leaders. Secular rabbis are considered by the Institute as spiritual leaders and philosophic and cultural mentors for Secular Humanistic Jews.²³

She was poised only months after the ordination, January 2004, to open the rabbinical program in Jerusalem, where 10 students were admitted into the program. Though the rabbinical school professes that “A humanistic rabbi aims to guide the community along the paths of Judaism, but without the presence of God as an actor in history,” Maas concedes that “It’s not that there is no presence of God, but God is presented as something that influences our lives as a mythological literary character... Thus we do not erase God. For me, God exists even if He does not exist, but I am not willing to wipe him out.” It is notable that Rabbi Maas completed a Master’s Degree in Jewish Studies at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies and spent a year as a Fellow at The Hartman Institute, both of which are religious learning centers which consider themselves pluralistic.²⁴

Rabbi Maas’ father, Ya’acov Malkin, founder and academic director of Meitar, the College of Judaism as Culture and also a founder of the new rabbinical school, goes even further. He says that his version of Judaism “Does include God, of course, because God is one of the most important literary heroes in all the Jewish literature, in all literature.”²⁵ Hilary Krieger, the author of this article and interview writes, “In fact, the emphasis on the centrality, if not the divinity, of God is a chief distinction between Secular Humanism in Israel and in the United States, where approximately 40,000 Jews identify themselves as part of a movement that tends to strip God from the tradition.

This is clearly an interesting and important element to note about the nature of “secular” Judaism in Israel and it has surfaced in virtually all my exploration of the secular learning and prayer groups in Israel. In Israel, God may or may not exist but God is still a Presence.

I was not able to gain an interview with Rabbi Maas in my visits to Israel, but I did interview one of the first students to study in her rabbinical program, Rabbi Dov Haiyun, known as Rabbi Dubi. Rabbi Dubi is the Rabbi of Kehilat Moriah, which is now located in the Ahuza section of Haifa and is the first Conservative Congregation in Israel, established over 50 years ago, before the Masorti movement had begun. I had attended a Kabbalat Shabbat Service at the synagogue and met him, and arranged to meet with him for an interview the

²³ “Humanistic Rabbis Arrive in Israel, Representing a Major Milestone for Secular Humanistic Movement” Center for Cultural Judaism <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/media/13/>

²⁴ Israel News, Jewish Telegraphic Agency April 9, 2004

²⁵ Krieger, Hilary Leila, “The Humanist” April 1, 2004, <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/news/15/>

following week.²⁶

Rabbi Dubi spent 2 years in the program with Rabbi Sivan Maas but was one of the 3 original 10 rabbinical students who decided that the program was not for them, and dropped out of the program. Rabbi Dubi then went on to the Schechter Institute and completed his rabbinical ordination in December of 2009 in the Conservative Rabbinical Program there. Rabbi Dubi was brought up in an Orthodox home, but felt too constrained by that way of viewing the tradition, and was looking for something more liberal. However, the Humanistic Program overshot the mark for him. He attributes a great deal of interesting learning to his involvement in that program and he and Rabbi Maas continue to be on very good terms, but he has found a more appropriate home for himself in the Conservative movement. He is very dedicated to teaching at all levels and all ages, including the preschool program, and has an expansive offering of Hebrew language (for anglos) and text study programs going on all the time.

The Rabbinical Program at Tmura is small and not geared toward English speaking students and requires a commitment to the philosophy/theology and mission of the Humanistic movement; it would seem unlikely that many AJR students could take advantage of this program.

²⁶ Long time friends of mine from North Carolina, Rabbi Frank and Pat Fischer, spend half the year each year in Haifa and I never fail to be in Haifa without visiting them and attending this synagogue, though they were not there during the time of this visit.



The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism

President: Lynne Master

Initiator and former Provost: Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, Detroit, USA

Provost: Professor Yaakov Malkin, Jerusalem, Israel

Director and Dean: Rabbi Adam Chalom, North America

Director and Dean: Rabbi Sivan Maas, Tmura - Israel

“Tmura Israel”

The institute for training Secular Humanistic Rabbis & Jewish Leadership in Israel
The course for Secular Humanistic Rabbis - Post-graduate course

- **Goals:**

- The formation of an educational and community leadership for secular humanistic Judaism.
- To guide “Judaism as Culture” studies.
- To activate culture communities.
- To lead and perform Jewish holiday ceremonies and life cycle celebrations in secular Judaism.

Areas of study:

- **Theoretical Studies**

a) The history of “Judaism as Culture” starting from the present and going backwards into the past. Familiarization with the works of art and literature traditions, customs and religious and secular movements which represent the culture of the Jewish people in modern times, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, the Medieval and the Ancient times. Emphasis will be placed on the affinity of the cultures of the Jewish people to those of other nations.

b) Familiarization with methods of study in “Judaism as Culture”, including the “Ma Nishtana” system, in which emphasis is placed both on the changes which occur in the

present concerning the characteristics and contents of Jewish culture and on the changes which take place in viewing the culture of past.

c) The study of secular Judaism along side of that of religious Judaisms. Emphasis will be placed on studies of the new Israeli culture, which developed since the end of the 19th century in Hebrew.

d) Secularization and Humanism in the West and their influence on the Secular-Humanistic movements in secular Judaism.

e) The arts and life of the Jewish peoples: familiarization with contemporary Jewish art, and with the arts in Judaism in the last 3000 years.

f) Secular Jewish thought and its affinity to the beliefs and thought representing the trends and the spiritual life in Judaism in the past.

g) An historical map of Jewish culture.

h) The development of historiography in secular Judaism and its attitudes to past historiography.

i) Belief in God as a literary character and its affinity to beliefs expressed in “A guide to the Perplexed”, in Spinoza’s writing, in the Kabala, in the Rabbinical and Hellenistic Judaism and in the Bible and Apocrophilic texts.

- **Community Leadership Studies:**

a. Communication Abilities: studies in rhetoric and leadership of discussions; activation of community broadcasting; interviewing.

b. Volunteers: activation of volunteers, elected committees and the board of directors of the community; social activity outside the community; activities in a multicultural environment.

c. Schools: guiding teacher seminars in schools, introducing programs of Judaism as Culture as well as the Culture of Secular Judaism.

d. Learning in the Community: activation of youth and adult education programs in “Judaism as Culture” and its links to cultures of other nations.

e. *Amuta*²⁷: founding and leading an *Amuta* - budget management and legal and financial aspects of management.

f. Counseling: helping individuals and families who seek advice in various fields – both personal and inter-personal.

²⁷ A type of Israeli non-profit institution.

g. Cooperation: cooperation with other communities in Israel and in the Diaspora.

- **National Holidays:**

a. Studies in the "Ma Nishtana" method: what has recently changed in the significance and modes of celebration of Jewish national holidays?

b. The history of the holiday and the changes which occurred in the contents, the modes of celebration and the literature and art included in its celebrations.

c. Comparative studies of Jewish holidays and their parallels in the holidays of other nations.

d. Organization and preparation of celebrations of Shabbat and other holidays in secular Judaism – in families, communities and schools.

- **Life Cycle Events:**

a. Studies of what has changed in life cycle celebrations – significance, contents and modes – in religious and secular Judaism in modern times and in the past.

b. New modes of celebration of life cycle events in secular and religious Judaisms and their significance.

c. The legal status of alternative ceremonies (as opposed to Rabbinical ones); legal problems of couples married by non-Rabbinical authorities.

BINA- Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture (The Secular Yeshiva)

I became familiar with Bina through several AJR students who had participated in their Summer Program for Rabbinical Students and through Rabbi David Greenstein who had visited there to learn more about their program. This English language study/service program, like most Bina programs, focuses heavily on employing the texts and Hebrew language components of study toward the end of having participants engage in social action projects in the poorer neighborhoods of South Tel Aviv; Bina is located in that area, right across the street from the central bus station in Tel Aviv.

Although Bina means wisdom in Hebrew, it was also chosen as the name of this Center as an Acronym in Hebrew for “A Home for the Creation of the Nation’s Soul.” Bina has high aspirations for itself, quoting on its web site from the Former Education Minister, Yuli Tamir, that it represents “the future of Israel.” While she was Education Minister, Yuli Tamir promised to do all that she could to promote funding for Yeshivot that were not only for the Orthodox.²⁸ Bina has been on the forefront of emerging secular learning programs since it was founded in 1996 by Eran Baruch, though many of the programs offered today are relatively new.²⁹

Bina has programs of outreach to the public schools, adult education, and social action, and the English language rabbinic program, as well as a similar 5-10 month program open to English speakers 19-30 years old, but its flagship program is the Secular Yeshiva that opened in July of 2007, and which is a Text Study/Tikkun Olam program explicitly directed toward “young Israeli adults.”

Rabbi Greenstein arranged for a visit to AJR from a representative of Bina, Tova Birnbaum, for our students to learn about the Summer Seminar Program for Rabbinic students before the summer of 2009. At the time this was a new program, in its second year. I was interested in attending this program, however two students who had been there the previous summer

²⁸ The Ministry of Education has been strongly supportive of the work of all these programs throughout.

²⁹ The Secular Yeshiva has been so successful that an initiative for a Secular Yeshiva is emerging in Jerusalem. It began with a “Learning Party” with two scholastic sessions and a dance party DJed by a popular rock star, Barry Sakharof, on November 28, 2010 Mandel, Jonah, “Secular Yeshiva in Jerusalem Launched at Learning Party” Jerusalem Post, November 30, 2010.

conceded that, though the social action program was life changing, they hadn't quite gotten the text study and Hebrew component well organized and that was disappointing.

I did not attend that summer, but I did arrange to pay a visit to Bina on my January 2010 trip to Israel. I met with Mira Regev, Director of Bina's International Tikkun Olam Program. She elaborated on the History of Bina, its roots in a socialistic kibbutz, whose philosophy continues to exert influence on the program, and its focus on young adults. I chatted with some of the students who told stories of being inspired by this opportunity to study and do *tikkun olam*. The summer seminar for rabbinical students should continue to be of interest to AJR students, especially as Bina improves the text and Hebrew components, and the other programs may be of interest to our younger seminary students, especially those with good Hebrew skills, though, from our discussion, a formal learning exchange between Bina and AJR seems improbable.

Note that what is distinct is that even though these institutions do not conform to traditional Judaism in terms of *halacha*, neither are they, like the public schools, only a transmitter of a minimal amount of knowledge about Jewish holidays and history, but rather, in all cases they are a struggle and an affiliation with a Jewish identity which must be derived from learning about the tradition and engaging in that struggle.

HaMidrasha- Educational Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Israel

HaMidrasha is an independently operating Organization within Oranim Academic College of Education, one of the major schools of education in Israel. HaMidrasha was founded in 1989 by a group of Israeli educators with the goal of dealing more directly with Jewish identity issues, and is a multi-faceted and dedicatedly pluralistic program whose broad purview includes, the Elga Stulman Women's Institute for Jewish Studies, Leadership Training for Emerging Spiritual Communities, an Army Youth Leadership Program, Curriculum Development and Teacher Training in Public Schools that is sensitive to issues of immigrant Jewish identity, gender equality, Arab-Jewish Relations, religious-secular dialogue etc., all of which involve the study of traditional Jewish texts.³⁰ HaMidrasha is the largest of the communities included in this study and has the particular advantage of being part of an Education College with access to those resources and with the advantage of being viewed as both academically reputable and community oriented, and thus with high regard.

I had made contact with Ma'ayan benzvi³¹ during my stay at the University of Haifa in August 2009 while I was enrolled in the Ulpan there. At that time Ma'ayan introduced me to the prayer community Nigun HaLev and told me much about HaMidrasha, though I did not visit the center at that time, since August is a slow time for the program, and there was not much going on for me to view. But even then we began to plan for my return visit in January 2010.³² When I arrived at HaMidrasha in January Ma'ayan arranged for me to have individual meetings with HaMidrasha leaders and teachers and to attend a number of sessions of major programs. A description follows:

³⁰ In the case of training early childhood teachers this means bringing stories from Talmud and other Jewish sources into the classroom, something that has rarely been done in the public schools.

³¹ Ma'ayan is Director of Resource Development and Marketing and on the Steering Committee for the Elga Stulman Women's Institute of Jewish Studies within HaMidrasha

³² A meeting with a former teacher of mine at the Ulpan in Haifa, from the summer before I entered AJR, was fortuitous, though not uncommon in Israel! Shlomit had set up a "home ulpan" where her home served as both a Bed and Breakfast and a Hebrew Ulpan which she taught, and it happened to be right in Ramat Yishai, virtually down the block from where Ma'ayan lives. Thus I was able to commute with Ma'ayan to Tivon where Oranim/HaMidrasha is located. I was able to stay with Shlomit for the 2 weeks that I was there, just for the B & B since I was busy at HaMidrasha. www.homeulpan.com

Kehillot: One of the first programs that I attended was the Kehillot Program. This program met from 2pm-9pm with breaks, including dinner, and brought together about 30 people from across the region, who were serving as Spiritual leaders in small prayer communities throughout the area. Shai Zarchi, Lior Kolodny, and Hadas Zariz Ron provided leadership for the workshop. Some of the issues addressed during the workshop concerned form, that is, which Psalms might/should be used, should the liturgy be fixed or vary week to week, what about nusach, was it important, and should familiar Israeli melodies and poetry be used to make it authentically Israeli. But an even stronger thrust of the workshop was how to create a spiritual atmosphere. Shai Zarchi led this section and he emphasized that Kabbalat Shabbat was not an intellectual or rational experience and weight should not be placed on the words but on the emotional aspects. He emphasized the expression “tongue without words,” and the use of *nigunim*.³³ A third major area of discussion revolved around problems and disagreements within the *kehilla*, such as a *maven* who takes over and others don’t want to be there when he comes, disagreements about the wearing of *kippot*, lighting of candles there or at home, and the concepts of commandedness and its language in prayer.³⁴

HaMidrasha has developed a pilot two year program leading to a certificate of spiritual leadership training. A description appears below. The Kehillot workshop was part of that training program.

³³ is a leader at Kabbalat Shabbat services at Nigun HaLev which, as illustrated in their siddur, is consistent with his teachings.

³⁴ This entire workshop was in Hebrew, as was virtually everything I attended at HaMidrasha and in other programs, including each of us introducing ourselves and our reasons for being there. I managed pretty well in speaking and understanding, because of my familiarity with *Kabbalat Shabbat*, and had an English speaking woman next to me willing to help. Part of the workshop was conducted in Hevruta.

Project Description

The Jewish community life that is practiced in various streams of Judaism is not seriously considered by the broad secular Israeli population – primarily because many Israelis have difficulty entering a synagogue – *any* synagogue; orthodox, conservative or reform. The challenge that we therefore face, is the formation of authentic Jewish-Israeli community life that would be meaningful to the secular population in Israel. This goal is a crucial factor in forming Israel's future as a democratic Jewish state with a vibrant connection to the Jewish people worldwide.

Training Course for Spiritual Leaders of Jewish-Israeli Communities

One of the unique characteristics of the "emerging" spiritual communities is that they are initiated and led by local lay leaders. This characteristic is key to their authenticity and credibility. The existence of leading spiritual figures within the secular population in Israel is essential and a prerequisite for developing permanent communities. Few figures who currently meet these criteria can be found. Hence, it is necessary to create a cadre of people who can assume responsibility to meet this existential challenge.

In response to this need, Hamidrasha developed a pilot curriculum this past year. The course aims to provide potential leadership with the information, content and skills to facilitate and lead the development of indigenous, Jewish-Israeli spiritual communities in the "secular" setting.

The course aims to balance the tension between the exploration of concepts and the development of practical skills, between content and process. One of the unique characteristics of the course is that it aims to empower potential leadership with the knowledge and skills to lead a meaningful and engaging process of community-building. This process includes sharing individual spiritual biographies in light of Jewish and local tradition and forging their collective expression. The course does not transfer a particular formula but aims to provide a variety of tools and materials in creating community ritual. Another unique element is the emphasis on Zionist and Israeli experience – examining and understanding social and cultural processes which have contributed to the current situation. The purpose is two-fold: empowering participants in their own personal experiences and also understanding in depth the context of our communities (what draws and repels them). Both of these elements are required to create authentic community which responds to actual needs.

Moreover, the course is a mutual learning experience where facilitators and participants are exploring together various foundational concepts of emerging spiritual communities, and therein also helping to shape and strengthen the broader phenomenon of Jewish renewal in Israel. We view the course as more than the "transfer of skills", it is a reflective and formative part of the Jewish renewal movement, providing critical experience and learning which will help lay foundations for future growth in this ground-breaking field.

Sample Course contents in the pilot two-year group:

- The community in Jewish sources — social and cultural questions that were part and parcel of Jewish community life throughout history.
- The development of community in Israel over the last century — community issues from the first Zionist settlers until the present day.
- Group dynamics theory and skills and their relevance to the community setting
- Workshops and Experience
 - Practical experience in preparing and leading a Kabbalat Shabbat or holiday ceremony.
 - Acquaintance with the traditional Jewish siddur and prayer books of a variety of religious streams.
 - Examining questions of how prayer can fit in to the secular person's world.
 - Writing a drasha and blessing — personal voice development for participants.
 - Learning Nigunim (traditional tunes and songs)
 - Shaping Kabbalat Shabbat ritual in the spirit of the local community
 - Hassidic thought and leadership

8 hours weekly for two years + Shabbat weekend together and 3-day annual Nigunim conference

Nigun Nashim

Nigun Nashim is a program of Talmud Study for women, which is within the Elga Stulman Women's Institute for Jewish Studies at HaMidrasha. A variety of levels of study are offered. "The study integrates textual study with personal dialogue, using diverse Jewish texts and contemporary Feminist Theory. The diversity of perspectives provides an open space for women to explore different ideas, a place where studying together becomes a process of discovering one's voice- individually and collectively"³⁵

I attended a session of the *Yotzrot Nigun* group, the Advanced Women's Talmud Study Group that met from 9:00am-1:30pm³⁶ and we were working on a tractate from *Ta'anit* 23a. The session was taught by Esther Fischer who is Orthodox and yet totally on board with the open approach toward text of HaMidrasha.³⁷ She posed questions to the group that allowed them to draw on their own experience and place themselves into the text. Virtually all the 20 or so women voiced opinions and also verbally noted how important it was for them to be able to do this, and to bring the text into their own lives. This was a long session, though I only observed for about 2 hours, but included in the break, without apology for taking on such a traditional female role, were wonderful home baked goodies of various kinds for which this women's group had become famous.

The creativity of this group extended into an evening performance of a woman's interpretation of the sugiya, or what women might have said and done had they been included in the Talmud in this sugiya. The portion deals with our dependence on God for the rain that we need, and becomes a metaphor in the play for women's broad set of needs from the physical to the intellectual and the spiritual. I was not able to attend the performance in person, since it was held at kibbutz Levi, some distance away, but I did see the video broadcast that was made of it by the news media.

³⁵ From HaMidrasha's Brochure.

³⁶ Note that most sessions at Hamidrasha are long because participants come from a wide area and therefore one long session is more attractive for travel reasons than more frequent shorter ones.

³⁷ Anat Israeli, another women's Talmud teacher and a co-founder of the program is secular and well versed in Talmud.

Army Youth Leadership Program

In Israel High School graduates have an option to defer their military service for a year by participating in a *Mechina*, a preparatory program before military service. Many such programs are offered in Israel and generally include study and other activities meant to cultivate leadership, some are religious, some are secular and some are designated as a mix of the two.³⁸ HaMidrasha offers a Talmud text study program which also includes social action in the communities. I attended a session of this group which consisted of about 20 students, both male and female, though the majority were male. Only one of the students was wearing a *kippah*. Students were very eager to talk to me during the break and had many questions about my being a female rabbinical student since the teacher, Itamar Lapid, had introduced me that way. The one with the *kippah* explained to me that he was not religious but he wore the *kippah* to honor his father because his father wanted him to.

Itamar Lapid is a very skilled teacher³⁹ and he operates on the principle that he wants the kids to come to learn out of a love for learning. He solicits personal reactions to the text, relevancy to their own lives, and there is a lot of participation. During *hevruta* my friend with the *kippah* showed a high level of familiarity with Jewish text and participated in the post *hevruta* group discussion.⁴⁰

³⁸ The description of study for this group captures the division in Israeli society that our programs seek to address. “The joint religious and secular *Mechinot* were founded to help bridge the widening gaps in Israeli society. As such, they focus on teaching a range of subjects to a mixed student body, including Zionism, leadership, Judaism, political science, philosophy, alongside intensive community and societal involvement and volunteering.”

Note that historically Israeli public schools have been divided into distinct categories of religious and secular, and the curricula were correspondingly either heavily religious, or without much Jewish content at all. In 2000 through a lot of hard work and the support of Labor MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, Yachad schools were opened and a third public school system was created. Melchior believed that educating together is the way to a more cohesive Israeli society. (source- Katz, Lisa Educational Revolution in Israel, Israel’s State Combined Secular-Religious School September 8,2008 <http://judaism.about.com/od/education/a/yachad.htm>)

³⁹ If there were a chance for a teacher exchange from HaMidrasha he would be an excellent choice to offer learning at AJR.

⁴⁰ He even attributed to me a point that I had made in *hevruta* during the group discussion!

Meetings:

I had a number of individual meetings with teachers and leaders at HaMidrasha over the course of my stay which enriched my understanding of this community, its principles, its history, its role in the changing society, and what has drawn those involved to work here. They are a group with a very strong commitment toward pluralistic learning and Jewish identity building. This was further confirmed for me when I was asked to meet with a group of leaders for a discussion of our respective communities. I met with Hadas Zariz Ron, and Shai Zarchi, co-directors of the Community Leadership Development Program, Lior Kolodny, Pedagogical Director, Itamar Lapid, Director of Army Youth Leadership Program, and Moti Zeira the Executive Director of HaMidrasha.⁴¹

We first exchanged information about our institutions, history, values, approaches etc. followed by specific questions in both directions. I learned, among other things that they are fully open to anyone who wants to study, homosexuality is not an issue for them, and there is a special focus on study for women because they still do not have all that many venues for studying text. We discovered that we all had an interest in pursuing possible learning exchanges, while I acknowledged that I could only be a liaison since I am only a student. They asked me to stay for their committee meeting where I learned a little bit about some of the difficulties they had experienced in the past. We parted with the promise of following through with more dialogue after my return to the states.

⁴¹ Fortunately for me the initial part of this meeting was held in English and all expressed themselves quite well in English.

III. Reflections on Communities of “Secular” Jewish Learning in Israel and the Importance of Pluralistic Approaches

Felix Posen, advocates for the critical need of “Secular Yeshivot” in Israel⁴², based on the imminent danger of losing to Judaism over 50% of Jews, not only in Israel but worldwide. He describes them as “Jews for whom the concept of God and the keeping of *mitzvot* are no longer an option....” And he adds “Yet most of these people consider themselves, culturally and emotionally, Jews.... There is clearly a problem about transmitting Jewish culture to the next generation of a Jewish community that is very much assimilated to the host nation’s culture and does not teach its children and youngsters anything about their own history and heritage.” This is something that has been fully appreciated by the “secular” grassroots movement. We see that transmission of the history and culture of the Jews, is at the forefront of study at Alma, Tmura, Bina and HaMidrasha, as is the issue of Jewish identity.

Posen notes that the Oxford English Dictionary defines “secular” as concerning oneself with the affairs of the world and not with spiritual and sacred affairs.⁴³ By this definition virtually none of the secular prayer and learning groups visited is truly secular. We have seen that they are drawn to prayer and learning in search of that very spirituality that they have lacked in their lives. They simply want it on their own terms.

And employing different visions of God and *mitzvot* than are found in existing versions of traditional Judaism in Israel is not total rejection of God; we see that God is very much a player in all of these learning centers. And only the blind acceptance of all *mitzvot* without the opportunity to seek their *raison d’etre* is an obstacle to Jewish learning and identity building among skeptical Jews in Israel.

What is critical within these “secular” communities is actually pluralism itself. Rabbi Elliot Dorff describes “The Theological Basis for Pluralism,”⁴⁴ drawing heavily upon examples of the expressions of that Pluralism found throughout the Talmud and Midrash, noting that the

⁴² Posen, Felix “The Need for a Secular Yeshiva” Free Judaism http://www.free-judaism.org/site/detail/detail/detailDetail.asp?detail_id=1030517&printDetail

⁴³ Though I am not a Hebrew expert I believe the sense of the Hebrew word *hiloni* is the same.

⁴⁴ Dorff, Elliot “The Theological Basis for Pluralism” Parashat Pinchas July 3, 2010 <http://judaism.ajula.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=936&u=8714&t=0>

Talmud is filled with one argument after another, often without resolution and similarly, the Midrash often possesses one “*d’var aher*” after another (another way of looking at it), without inclining toward one opinion. Most familiar to students of Talmud is one dispute between the School of Hillel and the School of Shamai where each insisted upon its position until the voice of God responded, *Elu v’elu divrei Elohim Chayim*. (Eruvin 13b) “These and these are the words of the living God.”

In reference to this discussion David Hartman⁴⁵ quotes Tosefta (Sotah 7:12) which says, “Make yourself a heart of many rooms and bring into it the words of the House of Shamai and the words of the House of Hillel, the words of those who declare clean and the words of those who declare unclean.” Hartman adds, “In other words, become a person in whom different opinions can reside together in the very depths of your soul. Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty.”

Gil, a student at Bina’s Secular Yeshiva is in the pre-army program, and a proclaimed atheist. He says that he believes very strongly in translating Jewish texts into social action. “I really believe in Judaism as a culture. If Judaism is a culture, it has nothing to do with religious belief, there are lots of things we can take from Judaism and relate to our lives and our society.”⁴⁶

But does Jewish culture have nothing to do with religious belief? Are Torah values not embedded into our culture? One of the conceptions that some Jews hold is that Jewish values are not that different from those of the wider western culture. Dorff⁴⁷ maintains that they are quite different, and he illustrates that with his experience in teaching a group of Catholic teachers as part of the “Bearing Witness” Program of the Anti-Defamation League, where his Catholic co-teacher stated to the group that “We Catholics are good at reception. We receive what we are told.” He replied that we Jews are distinctly not good at reception; we need to argue. Without a deeper understanding of Judaism, which comes through study, we are not

⁴⁵ Hartman, David *A Heart of Many Rooms- Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism* Jewish Lights Publishing Woodstock, Vermont p. 21 Hartman takes his title from this beautiful verse from Tosefta and his entire book is devoted to discussions of Pluralism.

⁴⁶ Guarnieri, Mya “Meeting God in the Middle” *Jerusalem Post*, June 10, 2008

⁴⁷ Op cit.

equipped to fully appreciate the differences, which is ultimately why Posen is correct that there is a critical need for pluralistic learning opportunities in Israel.

A definition of a pluralistic Jewish culture put forth in a report on the effectiveness of Meitarim schools, an educational network which promotes pluralistic Jewish Education in Israel, is that such a culture “develops an authentic Judaism that is compelling and meaningful to teachers, students and parents, which at the same time assumes the value of dialogue- that is interaction between Jews from different backgrounds. Dialogue includes the development of self-awareness and knowledge of the other.”⁴⁸

This definition characterizes an important element as AJR and other pluralistic institutions understand it, that is, pluralism goes beyond tolerance, acceptance, respect for, and even listening to other views. It requires meaningful dialogue, not only for the sake of dignity for but for the spiritual growth of all Jews.

At the inauguration of the first seven Humanistic Rabbis emerging from Tmura, the Humanistic Seminary,⁴⁹ Rabbi Sherwin Wine, co-dean of Tmura and President of the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, characterized Jewish Humanism the following way: “Humanistic Judaism embraces a human-centered philosophy that affirms the power and responsibility of individuals to shape their own lives independent of supernatural authority. It maintains that ethics and morality should serve human needs, chiefly the preservation of human dignity and integrity. Humanistic Jews endorse ideals derived from the Jewish experience—democracy, justice, tolerance, pluralism, and equal treatment for all individuals.” What is surprising is not how far but how close their thinking is to central values of Judaism as we know it, at least in non-orthodox communities in the US.

Similarly, the words of Eran Baruch, the head of Bina, “I relate to Torah, to the “Jewish

⁴⁸ Kopelowitz, Ezra and Stephen Markowitz “Furthering Pluralistic Jewish Education in Israel: An Evaluation of the Meitarim School Network” *Berman Jewish Policy Archive*, March 2010
<http://bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=4525>

⁴⁹ Rosenblum, Marvin A. “The Birth of a New Era in Israeli Pluralism,” *New Jersey Jewish News on Line*
<http://www.njewishnews.com/011807/commTheBirthOfANewEraInJewishPluralism> The chief Ashkenazi rabbi attempted, unsuccessfully, to ban this very event through government channels. And there has been a heavy pushback from Israeli Orthodoxy, targeting pluralism to remove it from the Jewish agenda in organizations like the World Zionist Organization. See Haviv Rettig Gur, *Jerusalem Post* May 28 2010

bookshelf,” as a source of inspiration and not as a source of authority,” brings to mind the “credo” of the Reconstructionist Movement in the US (“a voice and not a veto”).

IV. Establishing a Connection Between AJR and a Pluralistic Israeli Learning/Prayer Community

There are a number of centers of learning in Israel which present good opportunities for AJR students to study. Several of them are pluralistic, and those that are not quite pluralistic in the fullest sense of the term still offer our students worthwhile learning opportunities. The last section of this paper characterizes these communities and what they have to offer to our students individually.

However, the idea of the creation of a well conceived and carefully designed program of engagement between the two communities is especially attractive for two main reasons. Learning in a pluralistic program in Israel would magnify the breadth of the dialogue, because of the broader range of experiences and perspectives of the participants, and especially the benefit of exposing ourselves to the perspectives of those who have lived in Haaretz and been uniquely exposed to its culture, history, and even defense needs. Similarly for Israelis who would have the opportunity to engage deeply in thought with diaspora Jews. The possibilities for creative thinking, pressing the boundaries of traditional thought, evolving, and being inclusive would be greatly increased. This would contribute even more to the intellectual and spiritual growth of participants. Even within the AJR culture many students learn that we don’t really know what we truly believe until what we think we believe is challenged.⁵⁰

Secondly, rather than dropping into an existing program, with a formal arrangement between programs, we could carve out compromise offerings of study that meet the specific needs of our students toward developing Hebrew skills, at an appropriate pace, and toward the completion of study that would fulfill requirements of AJR’s rabbinical and cantorial programs.

⁵⁰ *Kol shechen* in encountering the beliefs of Israelis!

Furthermore, setting up a program for our students to study at HaMidrasha opens the door to all kinds of other learning exchanges. Perhaps Israeli students at HaMidrasha will be inspired to study short or long term at AJR, and perhaps our respective teachers will offer learning opportunities to each other's students.

V. Making a *Shidich*, Preliminary Discussions and Brainstorming.

When I left HaMidrasha in January 2010, it was with the promise to speak about what we had discussed there with the leadership at AJR, in the hope that we could continue to explore the idea of initiating some kind of learning exchange between the two programs. Of all the pluralistic learning communities that I had visited in Israel, HaMidrasha seemed the most suitable for us, and moreover, was especially desirous of creating such an exchange.

Our first opportunity to come together for further talks was April 29, 2010. A delegation of the leaders of HaMidrasha was visiting the US and was able to spend an afternoon at AJR. Present at the meeting were Hadas Zariz Ron, Shai Zarchi, and Lior Kolodny from HaMidrasha, and Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, Rabbi Jeff Hoffman and myself from AJR. I had hoped that there would be an opportunity for our students to be present for some of the exchange in order to interest them in the possibilities of study at HaMidrasha, but we were unable to schedule the meeting for a time when classes were in session.

Most of the meeting revolved around describing the history, philosophical thinking, approach, and goals of the two institutions, one to another. All participants came away with the sense that we are very much on the same wave length in our philosophies of education and Jewish pluralism and would be a good match. In follow up conversations, Lior Kolodny, HaMidrasha's Pedagogical Director, expressed a strong interest in doing something concrete, such as some form of joint study, to energize the process.

While Rabbi Jeff Hoffman was in Israel he arranged to meet with leaders at HaMidrasha on October 3, 2010, to continue the dialogue. He learned about a relatively new formal program of study for spiritual leaders leading to a certificate of completion of the program. A description of this program appears in this paper in the Section on HaMidrasha. Our students might be able to participate in it. This raised some concern about the difficulties in granting

credit to AJR students for study completed in a non-matriculating program. I was aware that several students from RRC and JTS had taken one or more courses at HaMidrasha and hoped to find out how their seminaries went about granting them credit for the course work done there. Ma'ayan has assured me that since Oranim College grants first and second degrees and credit is given for courses taken at HaMidrasha, this would be the likely avenue of pursuit. This requires further investigation.

At this meeting of HaMidrasha with Rabbi Hoffman leaders put forth the idea of a pilot program next summer, built around 2 events that are already planned for the Israeli audience- the Nigun Conference and the Women's Retreat. If there are 5 Academy Students interested in joining a two or three week program, they would be able to add and/or tailor events. The Nigun Program is a three day seminar on Nigunim, examining the role of music in prayer.

Shared Visions:

I initiated an exchange of possible visions with leaders at HaMidrasha, sharing some of the advantages of our learning exchange that I had perceived as cited above. Their response was consistent with many of the ideas that I had put forth with additional advantages particular to them.

They confirmed that a learning connection of their students with a community of students of the diaspora and from a non-denominational perspective would be very interesting and enriching for the students at HaMidrasha, though they thought the extent of their students attending courses at AJR would be limited to individual short term visits, in part because the size of their program to train spiritual leaders is yet small. They were attracted to the idea of the exchange of teachers for short term workshops and seminars.

They stated that the collaboration on courses designed with the specific need of our students in mind was definitely a possibility, given sufficient enrollment. They also felt that they have much to learn about the development of their nascent programs from the long established program at AJR.

At the time of this writing Ora is poised for a trip to Israel tomorrow night, and has contacted

HaMidrasha in the hopes of making a visit there and continuing the dialogue.

VI. Conclusion

This study has profiled some of the major “secular” learning and prayer institutions and communities that have arisen in Israel over the past decade, by means of visitation and participation in programs, interviews, internal documents, and academic and public media articles. The purpose of the study has been two-fold: first, to characterize a highly significant change that is currently taking place in Israel, Jews returning in large numbers to traditional and modern Jewish texts and prayers in order to recover a tradition which is rightfully theirs, and which has not been accessible to them. This has been due at least in part to a competing tradition of secular Zionism and in part because of the orthodox hegemony over Jewish learning and practice in Israel. It is a struggle for lost spirituality and for their rediscovering Jewish identities.

In exploring these communities, and in the interest of helping to provide rabbinical and cantorial students at AJR with fruitful opportunities to learn in Israel during their rabbinical and cantorial studies, the exploration became an examination of the programs of these organizations focusing on looking for a “fit” for a long term learning partnership, whereby our students could gain from integrating into an Israeli community and learn in a pluralistic context, Hebrew language and Jewish text, history, and culture.

HaMidrasha presented the best opportunity for such a connection among the communities considered. Its size, history, reputation, connection to the Education College at Oranim, nature of its course offerings, strong dedication to pluralism, and strong interest in such a connection are all great advantages and we are continuing to pursue this option.

Addendum- Learning Options for Individual Students at AJR (web sites listed in bibliography)

All of the 4 major learning centers examined, as well as the prayer groups, are distinctly Israeli, and thus prayer and learning are conducted exclusively in Hebrew. This would make them difficult independent choices for all but the most proficient Hebrew speakers at AJR. While immersion in the Hebrew language would certainly be a goal of a learning partnership

for AJR students, a partnership would require some accommodation to the Hebrew levels of our students at HaMidrasha.

Alma and Bina each offer short term study options for English speaking students as described in those sections, either of which would serve as an enriching experience for AJR students. A few other learning programs in Israel which are directed explicitly toward English speakers include Pardes, Shalom Hartman Center, and Conservative Yeshiva.⁵¹

Pardes Institutes of Jewish Studies: Established in 1972. Pardes is an independent institution, not affiliated with any religious or political movement. It is a co-ed learning environment focusing on Torah, Talmud, Halakha, and Jewish Philosophy, in a traditional manner, but considers itself welcoming of students of all Jewish backgrounds and belief systems, including all American denominations, however it targets college and post-college “young people” which could be a deterrent to some of our older AJR students. It offers options for year long, two year educators program, and shorter programs in the summer and January. Classes are well taught from my experience there, and study there is a worthwhile option.

Shalom Hartman Center: Founded in 1976 by Rabbi David Hartman. Hartman Institute considers itself a pluralistic⁵² combination of contemporary Jewish think-tank, fosterer of Israeli Jewish Identity, and preparer of rabbinical leadership in North America. It is text-study based and focuses on the interaction of tradition with modern Jewish thinking. Among the programs directed toward North Americans are a one-month Summer Study Program at Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, in which some AJR students/Alumni have participated and found invigorating; lay leader training, including one month at Pardes with follow up distance programs; and a graduate program of teacher training. A new program for rabbinical students was piloted last year and continues this academic year; it meets one evening a week from October 2010-May 2011, which unfortunately would make it prohibitive for anyone who is not living in Israel throughout the year.

Conservative Yeshiva: Founded 1995. “Offers Jews of all backgrounds the skills for studying Jewish texts in a supportive environment...to meet the need for serious learning in a co-

⁵¹ I have personally attended short term programs in each of these institutions.

⁵² Rabbi Hartman has written extensively about Pluralism, and is quoted from one of his books in this paper.

educational, egalitarian and open-minded environment,” though the Yeshiva does not explicitly refer to itself as pluralistic. Courses are offered in classical Jewish subjects, including Talmud, Tanach, Halacha, and Jewish Philosophy, and an Hebrew Ulpan; teachers are extremely well qualified. There are year round programs, summer programs and distance programs, as well as additional workshops, seminars, and guest speakers on a regular basis.⁵³

⁵³ Opportunities to study at a Hebrew Ulpan in Israel are plentiful. I will mention two that I am familiar with. I attended the summer Ulpan at Haifa University, overseas program which is an excellent program, very reasonably priced, and offers the option of living on the campus, which is very convenient and puts you in touch with Israeli students. You can opt for one or two months. <http://overseas.haifa.ac.il/> One of my former teachers at that Ulpan has opened “home ulpan” providing B & B as well as Hebrew tutoring. I recommend her highly. As well. <http://homeulpan.com/>

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www.conservativeyeshiva.org<http://www.navatehila.org>
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