

Excerpts From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)

**Section 6 - Reform Zionist
Youth Movement in Israel**

Authority in Telem Noar¹

Telem Noar: The First Educational Council, Kibbutz Yahel

The attempt to establish an independent youth movement within the framework of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) immediately raises an important question: How will this movement determine its educational and Jewish direction, and from where does it draw the authority to make rules for itself? This question naturally relates to the general question of the authority to introduce Tikkun or reforms. An independent youth movement of the IMPJ may be seen as a synthesis of Reform, general Zionist and pioneering elements. Thus Telem Noar has inherited varying and complex traditions on the question of authority.

Telem Noar draws from two ideological traditions, that of the Reform movement and that of pioneering Zionism. Both these traditions are movements for Tikkun that have emerged among the Jewish people in modern times. In different ways, both movements attempted to bring new forms and content to the Jewish people by separating the religious element of Judaism from its social element.

The classical Reform of the early nineteenth century negated Judaism as a national and social entity. However, it accepted the religious element, while attempting to adapt this element in the spirit of the times and the circumstances of “followers of the Mosaic faith” immersed in western culture. The Reform approach to religion was based on the conclusions of historical research showing that Judaism had always developed and changed throughout the generations according to changing social circumstances.² As an *a priori* principle, Reform

1. April 1980 (translated from Hebrew).

2. A comprehensive summary of the principles of development in Judaism was provided recently in an article by the philosopher Robert Gordis: “A Dynamic Halacha: Principles and Procedures of Jewish Law,” *Judaism*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Spring 1979.

See also: Gil Nativ, “The Tikkun of Tradition in the World of the Sages” in *Tikkun in Jewish Tradition*, colloquium at Kibbutz Yahel, Pesach 5738 (Hebrew), and: Michael Chernick, “Which Halacha” in M. Langer (ed.), *Reform Zionist Perspective: Judaism and Community in the Modern Age*, UAHC Youth Division, New York, p. 356.

Judaism negated the authority of Rabbinical Judaism, seeing its uncompromising positions as one of the reasons for the spread of assimilation, and thus as a threat to the continued existence of the Judaism that many had begun to abandon.

For its part, the pioneering Zionist movement negated the religious element of Judaism, i.e., faith and Halacha, while affirming the national social and communal element (though it demanded far-reaching changes in the social structure of the people).

The main components of the Tikkun advocated by pioneering Zionism were: the return of the Jewish people to its land; the revival of Hebrew language and culture; a communal and cooperative structure; manual labor and agricultural work. For the purpose of our discussion, however, the important point was the negation of the social authority embedded in the alliance between Rabbinical Judaism and the communal leadership that had typified life in the small Jewish towns of Eastern Europe. The pioneering movement also saw these distortions as one of the causes leading many Jews to assimilate in the general humanistic Socialist movements which were opposed on principle to manifestations of Zionist nationalism.

Ideological sources for authority

The question we must ask is: what were the ideological sources used by the movements concerning their authority to introduce Tikkun, and to what extent could these serve to develop a "Halacha" that would be accept as legitimate among the movement?¹

In the Reform movement, the authority to introduce reforms rested (and to a large extent still rests) with the individual conscience. This was a natural consequence of the fact that the Reform movement constituted an integral part of the bourgeois liberal revolution of the eighteenth century. According to this approach, religion was a matter of the individual's personal conscience. As will be recalled, the separation of religion and state was one of the guiding principles of the liberal revolution that overthrew feudal society. The liberal revolution led to the end of communal life. In Judaism, however, the community had been the social basis and authority for a way of life based on tradition and Halacha. Now each individual was entitled to interpret the sources and observe the commandments as he or she saw fit. It should also be recalled that classic Reform saw itself

1. Hanoch Jacobson addresses the question of the sociological criteria require for acceptance of reforms: "Essential Conditions for the Success of Reforms in Religious and Cultural Tradition in Modern Times," *Tikkun in Jewish Tradition*, colloquium at Kibbutz Yahel, Pesach 5738 (Hebrew), Ihud Publishers, 5739.

as integrating in the nation state as a purely religious community. In keeping with this perspective, Reform consciously gave up most aspects of social authority in the community.

The pioneering Zionist movement, by contrast, negated religion and did not even address the question of religious authority. However, as a movement that strove to transform Jewish society, it did address the issue of authority in general. The pioneering movement found itself torn between two approaches to authority prevalent in the Socialist movement as a whole. On the one hand, centralist Socialism (whether democratic or totalitarian) adopted the position that authority rests with a central body such as the state, central committee, etc. On the other hand, decentralized Socialism (or anarchistic Socialism) argued that authority rests with cooperative communities, whether rural or urban. The general meeting in the kibbutzim, as the authority for social reform, can be seen as an expression of the decentralized approach. However, the institutionalization of the Labor Zionist movement, particularly after the movement led Israel to independence, was mainly in the direction of democratic centralized Socialism.

To sum up, the authority for reform in both the Reform movement and the pioneering Zionist movement is based on the democratic principle. However, since the Reform left all decisions to the individual, and Reform communities seeking a comprehensive Reform way of life were not established, the movement's reforming decisions did not have extensive social implications and remained mainly in the field of religious ritual. On the other hand, the social reforms of the Zionist pioneering movement were based on communal democracy and reflected an attempt to develop a comprehensive and distinctive way of life. However, these reforms as a matter of principle ignored the sphere of "religion," and were therefore not of significance in terms of cultural and religious change. In the Zionist pioneering youth movements, the tradition of moral authority developed as the basis of the authority to introduce reforms. This authority was based on an integration between the individual future and the future of society. In other words, the perspective was that personal change within each member of the youth movement community would create change in the future Jewish community. I believe that this perspective has direct ramifications for Telem Noar. This aspect is currently lacking in the other "youth movements" (which are in fact primarily youth organizations rather than movements).¹

1. See Zippora Efrat, "The Youth Movements in Contemporary Israeli Social Reality," *Year Book of the Kibbutz Seminar*, 5739, Beit Midrash Mamlachti, Tel Aviv, 1979 (Hebrew).

Authority in Judaism

God's commandments are ostensibly the supreme authority in Judaism. For practical purposes, however, the question is: who are those responsible for interpreting the injunctions embodied in the written and oral Torah in the context of the changing circumstances of each generation? One concept that was certainly absent in the past was individual authority. I believe that this reflected a different social reality: until the modern age, the individual was not a player in the social arena. The basic unit was usually the patriarchal household. The concept that the individual is born free, and has autonomous rights as distinct from the social, communal and affiliative entity to which he or she belongs was not found in any society until 300 years ago.¹ Cases were found where authority rested with a given institution or individual, such as Ezra, the Sanhedrin or the Nesi'im during the Mishnaic period.

In his book *Hebrew Law*,² Menachem Eilon stresses that there have always been many sources of Jewish public authority in place of or in addition to the authority of the sages. In general, public authority was derived from the law of the king, who was anointed by God. However, this authority was not always in harmony with the authority of the prophets, who were also emissaries of God. In the ritual sphere the priests also enjoyed authority. Over the course of time, when there were no longer kings, patriarchs (Nesi'im) or other forms of spiritual hegemony accepted by the entire Jewish people, the monarch's authority devolved to the community. In the Middle Ages, communities and associations of communities came together to legislate "communal ordinances," although according to Eilon, "the Talmudic Halacha does not even discuss the concept of the source of authority of the public to enact ordinances."³ However, Eilon notes that questions of permissions and prohibitions continued to be the sole prerogative of the sages (the rabbis). While it may be possible to produce a forced interpretation of the sources providing a basis for broader, communal and democratic authority, Progressive Judaism (as distinct from the Conservative movement) as a whole cannot accept the path of forced interpretations — and this applies even more so to the youth movement.

Democracy as a value, and its integration in Judaism

As a general rule, Judaism has never been democratic. Moreover, Judaism has not

1. On this subject, see Stanley Meron, "The Individual and Society" (Eng.), in Michael Langer, ed., *Reform Zionist Perspective*, UAHC Youth Division, New York, 1977, p. 38.

2. Menachem Eilon, *Hebrew Law*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 5733; esp. pp. 42-49, 561-574.

3. Op. cit., p. 561.

acted according to the principle of human equality (many humans were seen as no more than property). This is true despite the fact that one may easily base democratic ideas on the Book of Genesis. We are all descendants of Adam, who was created in God's image. As for equality of the sexes: "And God created man; in God's image he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27). Or, for example, take the vision of Hosea (2:18): "And in that day, said the Lord, you shall call me 'my man' (*Ishi*) and you shall no longer call me 'my husband' (*Ba'ali*)."

We must accept that our moral and ethical awareness has developed over the generations and continues to develop and change. Accordingly, there is certainly room in Judaism for the "shedding" of injunctions (the rituals of *Yivum*¹ and *Halitsa*,² the annulment of debts, the death penalty). Equally, however, there is room to enrich our Judaism with values from other peoples that may be reconciled with the sources. The equality of the sexes and democracy are two such values. The question is how to interpret the sources in each generation in a manner that draws us closer to the prophetic vision that guides us in interpersonal relationships to maintain "justice, law, loving kindness and mercy" (Hosea 2:21).

Where does this leave us?

1. We must accept the principle of development in Judaism: the right and obligation of each generation to introduce reforms.
2. We must accept the value of democracy as a pan-human value latent in our sources for the first time in human history. It remains to be determined how to realize this in Telem Noar.

The authority for reform in democratic Judaism

As mentioned above, the form of public decision-making in a democracy may be either centralized or decentralized. Centralized authority means that the state, through institutions (such as the Knesset or courts) introduces reforms. This involves the establishment of the mechanisms of a centralized state for the purpose of implementation. Examples of centralized authority in Judaism include the Sanhedrin, the Chief Rabbinate, and the Council of Torah Sages.

Decentralized authority means that communities of various types (rural or urban) make decisions which guide and/or bind only those members who voluntarily affiliate to the community. This is direct democracy. The internal

1. The requirement in certain cases for a man to marry his deceased brother's wife.

2. The ritual according to which a woman frees a man from the duty to follow the rule of *Yivum*.

political reality of the State of Israel means that cultural and religious reform on the state level is impractical. This is a considerable limitation, particularly in areas such as personal status (marriage, divorce and so on) where it is impractical to reach decisions on the level of a single community or group of communities.

However, the model of decentralized authority applied in the kibbutz community (the general meeting as the body determining the rules of the kibbutz) can operate in most areas of our life. Will this not lead to chaos due to diverse developments in different communities? Not necessarily! Over several generations, what one might see as a kibbutz "Halacha" has developed in the field of social reform. Each kibbutz clearly enjoys a large measure of sovereignty (varying to some extent according to the movement to which it is affiliated). Yet while there are approximately 250 kibbutzim in Israel, and each one differs from the next, they may certainly be identified as a single movement.

The social "Halacha" of the kibbutzim is the product of joint experience and joint discussion of problems. I believe that this should also be the case in the field of cultural and religious reform. As already mentioned, the kibbutz movement for many years negated the Jewish sources as a primary ideological source, and accordingly negated the authority of those who interpreted these sources. Accordingly, the kibbutz movement preferred universalistic theories such as Socialism as the basis for its reforming efforts. This is unacceptable in our case.

On the other hand, we in Telem would be mistaken to attempt to cut ourselves off from the world of thought and practice beyond our own people and state. Even in the past, this could not be maintained on a long-term basis. Jewish history during the Persian and Greek periods is evidence enough of this. However, our interpretative efforts must be directed primarily at our own accumulating sources, which often absorb external influences.

The starting point of the IMPJ, and particularly of comprehensive communities such as our kibbutzim and youth movement, could be similar to that of the kibbutz movement. The kibbutz movement did not set out with a social "Shulchan Arukh" or constitution which was then tested and amended. The principles were built and developed layer by layer according to actual needs. In my opinion, Telem Noar has the social conditions needed in order for reforms to take root. According to Hanoach Jacobson,¹ these conditions are:

1. In principle willingness on the part of the public to accept reform.
2. Willingness on the part of the reformers to reform.

(In the case of Telem Noar and the kibbutz, there is no need to distinguish between these conditions.)

1. See note 2 above.

3. Improved “functioning” of tradition; enhancing the “acceptability of the rationale.” We may and indeed must ask whether this “works” for us and perhaps even adds to the sense of uniqueness in the movement activities.

In my opinion, the very process itself does indeed enhance our uniqueness and, one might even say, it sanctifies us.

This principled approach is a response to those who claim that we act according to “whatever is convenient for us.” We must act according to actual needs in the field; there is no obligation to feel that we must examine in advance each of the 613 commandments. The question of how we are to define our priorities is an extremely important one.

Our starting point is not a community of believers in the 613 commandments who have suddenly decided to introduce far-reaching reforms. For us, the principle of “we shall do and [then] we shall understand” can apply only to such a period and field as we decide in advance¹ — we have taken on the burden of all aspects of our heritage. We see its renewal in a way meaningful to us as our life project. This is our path to personal self-realization. We take on authority as a movement aware that we are responsible to past, present and future. Yet the yardstick must be what we ourselves are willing and able to accept. In this respect, the experience of communal authority on kibbutz is clear: common responsibility is always more binding than personal responsibility. This may already be seen in the decisions made by Kibbutz Yahel regarding Kashrut and regarding driving and smoking on Shabbat. But the priorities regarding the subjects we needed to address were a product of ongoing pressure in our day-to-day work.

One of the complex questions regarding which we will have to develop a tradition is that of *leadership*, including the question of *rabbinical authority*. This question is also far from simple in the kibbutz movement. The Ha’artzi and Meuchad kibbutz movements both have a powerful “historic” leadership (whether formal or informal). In the Ichud movement, by contrast, rotation is a sacred principle.

As for the place of the rabbi, it is interesting to note that in the religious (i.e., Orthodox) kibbutz movement a rabbi with Semicha² is not considered an authority — he is simply a member. A religious committee is accountable to the general meeting.

It may be (and this is the view I favor) that the status of the rabbi in Telem

1. For example, decisions for the movement to follow a certain format (Garin or youth group tradition) regarding prayer at a given movement stage.

2. Ordination.

Noar is mainly that of teacher and educator. The rabbi as teacher is a familiar concept in Jewish tradition; this implies that the rabbi of a youth movement is an educator and teacher rather than a rule-maker (*Posek*). As a movement, Telem Noar must make its own rules or set its own Halacha. Accordingly, I believe that the authority of the rabbis who work in the movement should be informal and not institutionalized.

Conclusions for Telem Noar

1. Our youth movement must function as a communal and social framework. The participants will come and go, and we must ensure both development and continuity — and, perhaps above all, we must ensure continuing vitality. I believe that no ideological tradition is better prepared than Progressive Judaism to meet this goal. We may succeed where older movements (including kibbutz movements) have slid into various “orthodoxies.” In recent generations, we have sadly learned that ideological orthodoxy (whether Socialist or religious) is a sure route to a centralized system whose commitment to democracy will be doubtful at best.
2. The subject of this article, authority, is one of the subjects we must clarify for ourselves as we set out. There are many innovations in the proposed process of democratization.
3. As a movement just setting out on its way, we must be careful in deciding how to prioritize our establishment of movement rules. Movement life must determine these priorities. For example, the subject of Shabbat in the movement is one that demands immediate attention,¹ particularly in the light of our intention to integrate in the Scout movement as an independent unit. Another subject is prayer — many members believe that this also requires urgent discussion.

By way of a conclusion, a word of warning. The challenge facing Telem Noar is considerable. We cannot answer every question at once. We cannot reach solutions of one hundred percent. If we demand immediate perfection of ourselves, we will secure only immediate failure. We must gather up courage, make decisions and act according to them. We must also not be afraid to discuss issues again after a reasonable period of time.

Will we be prepared to move down the difficult way that lies ahead?

1. See “Shabbat in Telem Noar,” Section 6:2.

Appendix

DECISIONS ON AUTHORITY IN TELEM-NOAR

First Educational Council, Kibbutz Yahel Ayar 5740 — 17 April 1980

1. The Educational Council will discuss Halacha and norms¹ for Telem Noar members — as individuals and as groups. The decisions will be authoritative for all national activities of Telem-Noar. The decisions will constitute recommendations for the norms of individuals, local youth groups, garinim,² etc.
2. The Educational Council will conduct discussions on the basis of the platform of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.³
3. The Educational Council will meet twice a year. National Board meetings have authority to convene an additional council (by a two-thirds majority vote of those present).
4. The National Board of Telem-Noar will meet at least once every two months and will constitute the authoritative forum between meetings of the Educational Council.
5. Any member of Telem-Noar, garin, leadership group or Vaadat Higui,⁴ has the right to suggest issues for discussion on the National Board and the educational council.
6. The National Board will determine the agenda of the Educational Council and will publicize it at least one month before the council's meeting date.
7. All bodies and individuals participants in the Educational Council are entitled to submit an appeal against the agenda. To this end they must notify all constituent groups two weeks in advance. The appeal will be discussed at the beginning of the Educational Council (one person speaks in favor; one against). The appeal will require a two-thirds majority.

Trans from the Hebrew: Michael Livni.

1. "Halacha VeHalichot"

2. Garinim — settlement groups within the army framework.

3. Much of the IMPJ platform was declarative and required interpretation in a given situation.

4. Vaadat Higui — Joint steering committee of the United Kibbutz Movement and the World Union of Progressive Judaism.