

Excerpt From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Section 5 - Educating
for Reform Zionism**

Reform Zionist Communities and Values¹

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Panel Members: Michael Langer, Gidon Elad, Rabbi Tovia Ben Chorin

Michael Langer: I will try to take up where Mike left off and assume that my fifteen minutes will be a bit of an introduction on where I think that Reform Zionist community should be going.

You all hopefully remember this quick summary of Reform Zionism as a synthesis of classic Reform Judaism and classic *chalutzit* — Zionist pioneering.

Judaism	Classic Reform	Classic Chalutzit	Reform Zionism
"Religion" Belief Halacha	<u>Affirmation</u> with Reform	<u>Negation</u> (Substitute Universal Ideology-Socialisms)	Affirmative Synthesis
Peoplehood Community	<u>Negation</u> (Substitute Universal Mission)	<u>Affirmation</u> with Reform	Particular and Universal Reform Religion and Community

In the wake of the Emancipation and the resultant breakdown of the Jewish community, Classic Reform posited the continuity of Religion, whose injunctions and rituals would have to be reformed. Community was negated. Judaism was to be a brotherhood of the spirit, with a universal mission of being a "light unto the nations" by virtue of being dispersed among them.

On the other hand, three generations after Emancipation, the emergence of a non-viable situation for Jews (as a result of anti-semitism) and Jewish Culture (as

1. Unpublished minutes of a discussion in a Netzer Olami (Reform Zionist Youth Movement) conference.

a result of assimilation) spawned the Zionist movement. Within it, the *chalutzic* vanguard posited the continuity of Jewish peoplehood — radically reformed. *Chalutzit* negated particularistic religious culture and espoused universalistic ideology — various brands of Socialism.

The synthesis is Reform Zionism which believes in on-going reform and negates the artificial separation of Religion/Culture from Community/Peoplehood. But then we are left hanging, because the question becomes, what is the content, what is the texture, what is the nature of this Reform Zionism, this synthesis of classic Reform Judaism and *Chalutzit*. It is on this question that I want to share some thoughts with you.

1. Community Responsibility for all Aspects of Reform — From Its Inception

Community is responsible for all aspects of reform! If one of the questions is: should Reform Zionism community have communal responsibility for cultural, spiritual, ritual life, my answer is yes. If there is going to be a group of people living together in a Reform Zionist community, they must expend energy on spiritual, cultural, creative togetherness. They must say immediately: "This is why we are here. No, we will not wait until we have solved all our Klitah problems. And of course there should be democracy in spiritual-ritual matters as well as communal matters. Community responsibility for community spiritual life is a matter for immediate *hagshama* (self-realization) within the Reform Zionist community, and not deferred until we solve economic and social and personal problems.

But I also want to say a few words about what community means. There are many overused words, but community in the historical Jewish sense implies more than people living together in a particular geographic location. It implies more than people living together with some degree of mutual responsibility for each other within that particular geographic location — more than sharing certain life patterns on an existential level. All that is inadequate as a description of the historical concept of community in Judaism, as I understand it. *The concept of community is linked to purpose.* In other words we are talking about a community in which there is a *community of purpose*, a community of *shlichut*. A community of purpose in that sense (an English phrase) relates to the concept of community called "*Kehilat Kodesh*." "*Kadosh*" means separated out for a purpose, separated out for the purpose of achieving the best possible world. This is the ideal of *tikun olam* (world mending) which became imprinted in the collective psyche of the

Jewish people. Perhaps in the *galut* (exile), *tikun olam* lost its meaning. People simply went and did all their 613 *mitzvot* (divinely ordained commandments), and these were an *end* in themselves. The idea that the purpose of existence is to bring about the best vision may have been back somewhere in some rear chamber of some people's minds, but it really went underground except for certain schools of Kabbalah. The central idea of Zionism, particularly cultural Zionism, is to recreate a contemporary political situation for that community of purpose — *kehilat kodesh* — to exist again.

That is the element of *shlichut*, of purpose, that must express itself in Reform Zionist community on a practical level. I have emphasized that purposiveness is something which expresses itself over and above meeting existential needs of mutual help and interaction, living together, praying together, playing together. So we are talking about the community, a true Reform Zionist community, immediately taking upon itself responsibilities of cultural creativity as a way of life. We are also talking about elements outside of that community. Now very clearly, Reform Zionist community of Netzer Olami is the *hagshama* of Netzer Olami. Hence, the first primary responsibility of Reform Zionist community of Netzer Olami graduates is continued involvement with Netzer Olami.

In Israel we have the precedent of institutionalization of this idea, even if the people have already forgotten where it comes from. In the kibbutz movement 5% of all people power is apportioned to this element of responsibility to the community of purpose as distinct from the community of day-to-day existence. My feeling is that, in Reform Zionist community, the 90-95% of the day-to-day efforts to maintain its own existence cannot become meaningful if it does not serve as the basis for the other 5 or 10%. At this time that investment must go into strengthening the Netzer Olami (including Tzofei Telem) movement process.

A community of purpose *from the beginning*, a community of *shlichut* — that is the central orientation that I see for Reform Zionist Community. At this stage the main beneficiary of such *shlichut* should be Netzer Olami.

2. Ideological Tension Within Reform Zionist Community

The concept of purposiveness and the concept of “*tikun olam B'Malchut Shaddai*” — perfecting the world in the divine image — implies an ongoing tension and this has been from earliest times. It is the tension between what is and what should be. It is the tension between the priest and the prophet, to use the name of the article by Achad Ha'am. The priests and the kings are the political establishment

and without an establishment you can't really exist. But without the prophetic element pushing for this community of purpose, there may be community but not, in the long run, a truly Jewish community, not an activist Jewish community and, therefore, not a true Reform Zionist Community. By the way, I once heard a definition of Zionism as being activist Judaism. But in terms of ideological underpinning Reform Zionist community must relate to the ideological tension inherent between taking care of established needs and going out on *shlichut* as a community of purpose, a holy community, a *kehilat kodesh*.

3. Cooperation, Mutuality — How Much?

It is very clear that community and mutual responsibility on a practical level must mean a certain amount of cooperative life within the community. At what exact level that is going to be determined, I don't want to say. I am a member of a kibbutz, and as such have my own specific ideas on that subject. However, you will not be able, in my opinion, to define Reform Zionist community as Mike has pointed out in his introduction, by negatives. To say: "We want a framework which isn't kibbutz, and doesn't have as much cooperation as kibbutz," is a negative definition. In other words you have to define what various frameworks of Reform are going to do in terms of positives.

Keep in mind, Reform Zionist Aliyah cannot be meaningful without being part of a Reform Zionist community. In other words, Reform Jews coming to Israel make for nice statistics for the Jewish Agency; however, it doesn't relate to Reform Zionist purpose. At this stage, I will say something, after my colleagues have spoken.

Mike: We will take two questions for each person, and then questions can be directed to whomever one wants.

Sylvia: You talk about the *kehilat kodesh* and the community of purpose. What ultimately is the purpose of *kehilat kodesh* as you see it?

Michael Langer: In traditional Judaism, the ultimate purpose is to live according to 613 *mitzvot*. A community which lives according to the 613 *mitzvot* will bring about *tikun* or the betterment of the community, and if all Jewish communities will do this, all the nations will eventually see the light in this way. The Torah will go forth from Zion to all peoples and then perhaps the Messiah will come. That's the traditional point of view.

I think that the Reform Jewish point of view on the question of the Messiah is that we try and strive for a better world which will, eventually, bring about a

messianic age. *But our specific Reform Zionist contribution is that we must begin with our own community* and that means, first of all, establishing community perfection which is an infinite concept. If the question is asked in terms of today, then, in 1984, a Reform Zionist community which is not just a classic Reform “*kultusgemeinde*” (a community of ritual) is required to take stock of the situation and define goals for itself.

It must do this *not* as an isolated community dealing with its existential concerns. It should be in a federative relationship with other Reform Zionist communities and with the movement, Netzer Olami, in which future communities are gestating. The federative relationship should be the organizational reflection of *movement process*. This movement-federation must plan year by year: socially, politically and in terms of spiritual cultural life.

Sylvia’s question regarding the “purpose” of the community is ultimately the question of the purpose of Jewish existence which I related to in my opening remarks. You yourselves must outline the specific goals year by year. I can only start talking to you about the social vision of the prophets and say to you now, it’s your responsibility to take that prophetic vision, bring it down to the level of 1984, and decide on a program for your community that can bring between 1984 and 1985 that vision one step closer. *Lo Aleicha HaM’lacha Ligmor...* (it is not for you to finish the task, nor are you free to desist from it) fits here exactly.

The lecture today is what socially, politically, culturally, Netzer Olami communities should do this coming year. First of all, you have to decide if you accept, if you are committed, to the concept. Do you see it as being legitimate? That’s what you have to do this year — decide on your self image — Reform Jews in Israel or Reform Zionists. What I fear is so-called Reform Zionist groups landing here and really worrying a lot about themselves, and about their partners and where they are going to live and what kind of job they are going to have and worrying about themselves existentially and forgetting that they are here for a purpose, otherwise there is no Reform Zionist significance for their being here. There is a danger of Netzer Olami focusing on frameworks to help Reform Jews make Aliya without any of the purposive commitment to *shlichut* I have emphasized.

Russell: It was mentioned that a Reform *kehila* in Israel will have to take into account the experience of those preceding it. Lotan considered Yahel and now the *mitzpe*¹ (Har Chalutz) should take into account the experience of Yahel and Lotan. My question is: Do you feel that a *mitzpe* 1) can be called a Reform Zionist community? 2) will they approach the questions which Yahel and Lotan have

1. *Mitzpe* — lookout, generally in a strategic location, its economic format is individual.

approached, with regard to religious practice, economic cooperation and all sorts of things from the same standpoint — in other words, the same attitude as developed on Yahel or Lotan? Would you say that the *mitzpe* is going towards a Reform Zionist *kehillah* (community, congregation), as you've spoken? Or Michael, will this be a community of purpose like Yahel and Lotan?

Michael Langer: It's my opinion that any group that organizes here that cannot assign some of its members to movement work, without, in any way, that having a negative economic effect on the individual so assigned, is not effective in meeting the needs of Reform Zionist Community, under the particular circumstances in which Israel finds itself today. So I cannot see any way around that point in terms of Israel 1984 and Reform Zionism organizing itself to have an impact.

The proof of my point is the current impotent state of the Israel Movement for Reform Judaism. The Reform Judaism here is based on congregations. They are called *Kehillot* (communities) but they are not in reality communities of the type I discussed. They are an import into Israel of the classical Reform concept of Ritual Community — *kultusgemeinde*. It is true some Israeli rabbis, perhaps Tovia among them, are trying to change that. I think they are shooting water pistols into an inferno. I don't think "professional Jews" (another problematic import from Diaspora conditions) can do it. And I admire the effort but don't believe that it can be effective. Leadership must be from within community. The professional Rabbi is a shepherd to his flock but sheep are no basis for Reform Zionist community.

At present only the kibbutz community can mobilize for movement work according to my criteria. If Reform Zionism wants to include other types of communities as well, then I don't believe — and I'll be happy to be proved wrong — that the present tactics and approach can succeed. In other words, I don't believe that out of nothing, a new framework which meets Reform Zionist community criteria can establish itself in Israel under the present circumstances. Rather I see a necessity for the next half of a generation, of strengthening the existing Reform Zionist communities that meet the criteria.

Currently what it boils down to is that Netzer Olami and Telem Noar are 90% dependent on that community structure for even putting on the line what exists at the moment. I'll be very practical. There is not and there will be no *adequate* funding. There will be no "sugar daddy" to fund Reform Zionism. It will have to be done by the people who are committed to doing it and who can organize to do it one way or another. Right now our bottleneck in Reform Zionist is that we have no activists. The Israel Reform movement does not have the organizational wherewithal to have any impact on the Israeli polity. We are incapable of making

any kind of show versus the orthodox onslaught. Reform in Israel at this stage of the game is a failure. Read Tavory's analysis in the Fall '82 *Judaism*.¹ The community concept that is needed is an entirely new one. In the end, in terms of process, it will doubtless be heterogeneous in terms of its age framework. But I think the initial stage of creating community means that a group of people must take upon themselves the realization of different community concept. So at this historical juncture, there will not be age/heterogeneous community. An age-heterogeneous community would be subject to these economic limitations which prevent Reform Judaism right now in Israel from doing anything. That is my rather pessimistic analysis of the situation. So without anyway discouraging Reform Zionist Community concepts outside the established ones, I think that right now we are totally dependent on the established ones for people-power and help of all kinds from a kindred communal movement, called the kibbutz movement. I agree in principle that additional communal forms are necessary but they must *evolve from what we have*. They will not come about by spontaneous generation. The process may take ten to fifteen years.

1. Tavory et al., "Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel Today and Tomorrow," *Judaism*, Fall 1982, Vol. 31:4.