

Excerpts From:

# REFORM ZIONISM

**AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

**MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)**

**Section 7 - The  
Reform Kibbutzim**

# Sovereign Chupa (Wedding): Communal Authority as an Ideology in Cultural Zionism

## Appendix: What Does a “Sovereign Wedding” Mean For Us?<sup>1</sup>

The Zionist Movement arose not only to assure a political framework so the Jewish People could be “Like all the Nations.” On the contrary, the aim of Zionism is to assure the unique nature of the Jewish People and the continuity of its creative existence — wherever it may be. This is the basic assumption of Cultural Zionism, and today it would seem that without this, Zionism has no meaning.

Cultural Zionism means reshaping the face and format of Jewish Society and its culture. Many of the founders of the Zionist Labor Movement thought that in and of itself, self-realization in a cooperative framework on the soil of Eretz Yisrael constituted an adequate social framework. But a person’s culture and his ties to his society are shaped by a world of symbols which repeat themselves throughout the year; symbols which accompany the cycle of the individual’s life, and the collective life of the community and the people.

No people more than Israel has known throughout the generations how to maintain a world saturated with religio-symbolic deeds in the social context of its communities. These symbols repeat themselves over and over every day, every week, every month, every year, generation after generation, and thus guard our singularity and identity.

In a sense it was easy to be revolutionary in renewing the face of a People, sovereign in terms of communal authority — *creatio ex nihilo*. There was no weighty tradition of autonomous social-political existence in the land, since the destruction (of the Second Temple). Anything was possible.

On the other hand, the situation regarding cultural reform is different. There we have the accretion of a two-thousand-year tradition and Law shaped by Rabbinic Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism determined forms for the ways of expression in the religio-symbolic realm. This brought about not only the negation of the

1. *Shdemot* — Literary Journal of the Kibbutz Movement, No. 102, August 1987, pp. 75-77. Translated from Hebrew by Lea Benami and Michael Langer.

traditional way, in which these symbols were expressed, but also the negation of the symbols themselves as a part of the revolutionary act of rejecting the existing fossilized Jewish society.

During the last generation more and more voices have been raised calling for the renewal of cultural initiative. Certainly *Shdemot* has established a reputation for itself as a forum for these discussions.

But Movement organization arising specifically as a result of a conscious desire and feeling of obligation to an organic total social-cultural reform, is a new phenomenon. Tzofei Telem — which functions as an autonomous movement process within the Israeli scouting movement — is still tiny in numbers. Nevertheless it has established several far-reaching principles in this matter. Its first Educational Council (at Kibbutz Yahel, Passover 1980), in considering the whole question of authority concerning reform, determined: “The Educational Council will discuss Movement norms in matters of Jewish and general conduct (Halacha VeHalichot) both for individuals, and for Movement groups. Its decisions will be binding on national movement activities and will serve as recommendations for a way of life for its members.”<sup>1</sup> Here we have the idea of the communal democracy as authority for cultural-religious reform — sovereign democratic communal authority instead of traditional rabbinic authority.

In the years since then various questions have been discussed in Tzofei Telem — the nature of Shabbat, creative prayer (called Ma’amad),<sup>2</sup> and social questions such as the relationship with the Israel Scouting Movement and frameworks for self-realization. Communal authority (in this case the authority of the autonomous Youth Movement) takes the place of Rabbinic authority (including the authority of reform Rabbis). The Rabbi is seen as teacher-educator-advisor, and not as an arbiter of Jewish Law.<sup>3</sup>

This ideological approach finds its clear expression in the reasons adduced by the couple from Kibbutz Lotan for their sovereign chupa.

Up till now communal authority in Yahel and Lotan in matters pertaining to Jewish observance has been exercised only regarding the internal life of the Kibbutz. In 1980 there was an attempt to have a Reform Rabbi officiate at a wedding. There was no follow-up and as a result the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism appealed to the Supreme Court to grant its right to officiate at and register marriages. No verdict has as yet (May 1988)<sup>4</sup> been handed down.

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

2. See Section 6:14.

3. See Section 6:10.

4. A negative verdict was finally handed down by the Israel Supreme Court in 1989.

However it is clear that even a favorable verdict would not satisfy the ideological approach of the Lotan couple.

The sovereign wedding of the Lotan couple (both of them Tzofei Telem graduates) constitutes a precedent because it raises the question: Can new movement norms emerge which constitute a renewal of cultural Zionism and a message for Israeli Society as a whole?

Time will tell.

## **LETTER TO THE MEMBERS OF LOTAN: WHAT DOES A "SOVEREIGN WEDDING" MEAN FOR US?**

To the members, shalom:

We wanted to write to "Babayit"<sup>1</sup> our feelings concerning our wedding. And especially as we relate to the wedding ceremony in a manner different than that of the couples who have wed at Lotan until now, and in our position as "firsts," or singular in our approach, we want to clarify together with you what the significance of the wedding ceremony is for us.

### ***Rabbinic Wedding***

For ourselves we cannot even consider a "rabbinic" wedding. From a legal standpoint, there is no possibility in Israel to be registered as married without a religious (orthodox) ceremony — there is no civil marriage in Israel. We believe that, given the present political situation, the way to fight such compulsion is by opposing the institutional authority of the rabbis "within reason" by/while creating meaningful/viable alternatives. To this end, we have written to the group which is trying to help couples who wish to marry in such a manner (they are called "The Secular Service"). We hope to receive from them, and from others as well, legal advice, as needed.

### ***Reform Wedding***

For ourselves, a reform wedding might be considered but even it is not exactly in accord with our ideas. (We shall certainly consider it seriously should the movement win its case in the Supreme Court.) We believe that the task of Progressive Judaism in our generation, is to go from a stage of rabbinic authority to one of communal authority. The fact of our life on Lotan expresses this idea. It

1. "At Home" — Kibbutz Lotan newsletter.

is important to us to express, in the wedding, the effort (which has not yet been successful and which even has trouble staying alive) to create communal spiritual authority which derives from all of us together. In the process of study which we wish to undertake (together with you) in the coming months, we will try to create the spiritual authority and sanctity of Ma'amad, but not via a rabbi who comes from outside the community, not even a reform rabbi.

### ***What We Value Positively***

We want a wedding in which/by way of which we will declare (by the *ketubah*<sup>1</sup> we will write and other expressions) to you and our families our shared life. A Jewish wedding which will express our feeling of obligation to the continuation of the creativity of the life of the Jewish People. A wedding in which the members of the community are full participants in the process.

### ***The Process***

We attach great importance to the process of study. We want to learn in the near future as much as possible about the Jewish, legal and intellectual aspects of our feelings, in partnership with you. We hope that “in the end” we will know more exactly what it is we want. What kind of ketubah? Rings — yes or no? Breaking of the glass? Will both partners say “According to the Religion of Moses and Israel” or a different formula, and many other questions.

In any process of learning we hope to share with you in different ways. You are our real witnesses to this experience. (We don't intend to do anything which would not be accepted in the community.) It is very important for us to get from home both emotional and collective support if the need arises. All are welcome to speak with us as much as possible and we will try to have organized opportunities to study together and see where we will get to.

This challenge, to realize the dreams of the Youth Movement and words like “Communal Authority” and “Ma'amad” in the actual lives of grown-up people (more or less) is very attractive, but we need a great deal of support.

Chanan Cohen

Osnat Elnatan

1. *Ketubah* — marriage contract.