

Excerpt From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)

**Section 5 - Educating
for Reform Zionism**

What Is the Meaning of Your Aliyah Framework?¹

Dear Caroline,

As per your suggestion, I am reviewing some of the questions we discussed in our short conversation during your stay in Lotan.

The central question which those of you who are seriously considering Aliyah must confront is whether Aliyah is a technical act or whether it is part of an ongoing Reform Zionist commitment. The reflex answer that you might want to give — “Obviously, both!” — is invalid in the absence of a concrete program of self-definition within the Misgeret² which reflects both purposes.

I want to clarify that I do not in any way deprecate the importance of an Aliyah framework which gives you mutual support and technical assistance in your preparation for what is under the best of circumstances a complex logistical operation for each and every one of you. Nor am I unaware of the many advantages that such a framework has in buffering the shock of your initial Klita³ both in terms of the initial supportive environment and also in terms of dealing with the carnivorous bureaucracy.

Aliyah Within the Context of Reform Zionist Commitment

The sincerity of your individual Reform Zionist commitment is not in question. Undoubtedly you are also concerned with the question of how that commitment will express itself in Israel. But the message I hear is that you are saying: “Let us get to Israel first and let us get settled in our personal lives and livelihoods and then we will see about Reform Zionism!” You believe (wrongly, in my opinion) that your major immediate focus has to be Aliyah and Klita — and the rest will (hopefully) develop. Without any doubt there are many who would concur with this emphasis — in particular those whose primary concern is the annual “head-count.” I don’t negate the relevance of that consideration either but it is

1. Open letter to Caroline Walsh, Secretary, Netzer-England (Reform Zionist Youth Movement), 26/9/1987.

2. Misgeret — Framework.

3. Klita — Absorption.

not priority number one. *But in fact, your continuous and ongoing involvement with Reform Zionism, as individuals and more particularly as a group, will be a major factor in your successful klita.*

It seems to me that the basic point of departure of RSY Netzer has to be: "At this juncture of Reform, Zionist, and Jewish history what type of Reform Zionist commitment will have the maximum impact — on Israel, on Reform Judaism. Aliyah is just a technical step — albeit one of cardinal importance — in realizing Reform Zionist commitment. *Aliyah, in and of itself, is not an aim.*

There can be (and unfortunately is) Aliyah of Reform Zionist individuals which has little or no significance in terms of Reform Zionist impact. Please don't misunderstand. Of course such Aliyah is important — for the individual and for the State of Israel. Of course we want to encourage the Aliyah of any Jew who is willing to make his/her life a part of the Jewish National Home. But that is not what we are talking about here.

Only as a group/groups can you put your distinctive stamp on any part of the Israeli polity in which you lay down anchor. This is so even if part of your Misgeret makes Aliyah to a Kibbutz. However, as it is reasonable to assume that a significant part of the Misgeret Aliyah would eventually want to integrate within an urban framework, your prior commitment to some kind of group framework would seem to be an even more necessary prerequisite both for impact and for a more successful Klita.

Such a commitment to a group framework means not only an Aliyah commitment — it means making an initial commitment to an outlook of values and principles which in microcosm already reflect the Reform Zionist outlook by which you will try to live and the direction of the impact that you want to have. If you think that this is putting the cart before the horse, then in terms of "conventional wisdom" you are correct. The problem is that "conventional wisdom" has not gotten Reform Zionism in Israel very far at this point. Contemporary "conventional wisdom" on this point is also at variance with the historical record — most of the Aliyah organized by the pioneering youth movements from Chutz L'Aretz¹ (or from the Yishuv² itself) was organized through Garinim³ and Hachsharot⁴ in which commitment, values and principles were crystallized. The resultant impact determined the orientation and values of Israeli society up until the Nineteen-Fifties.

1. Chutz L'Aretz — Outside of Israel.

2. Yishuv — the pre-State Jewish community of Israel.

3. Garinim — Settlement groups.

4. Hachsharot — Training frameworks.

Reform Zionist commitment must become an ongoing *movement* process dedicated to furthering central theses of Reform Zionism in the personal lives of its members and within Israeli society in general. It means being involved in shlichut, and in a framework that support shlichut. Over the years such shlichut has to express itself from the base of a Reform Zionist community life situation here (ideally with like-minded Israelis) and its impact has to be felt both in Israel as well as in the Diaspora. This scenario is not compatible with the idea of individual Aliyah of individual Reform Zionists. The Aliyah framework/s of RSY Netzer have to project themselves forwards over a period of five years and this clearly means ideological education and commitment of a different order than the norm existing today. This includes confronting a number of questions which apparently are passed over in your present process.

What Seem To Be The Undiscussed Issues?

1. Is the Misgeret Aliyah interested in a total-life, purposive community? What is the ultimate rationale for such comprehensive community?

Keep in mind that at the level of religious commitment Reform Zionism must ultimately present a purposive total-life alternative to the various types of Orthodox total-life commitments (Zionist and non-Zionist) that exist in Israel. The Diaspora style of synagogue-centered or even community center Judaism *may* succeed in attracting a certain amount of organizational *affiliation and attendance* but that is not the type of *determined and even militant movement commitment* which is needed for Reform Zionist impact given current and foreseeable pressures within Israel's society and body politic.

And keep in mind another point. Building Reform Zionism on the basis of attendance and affiliation of individuals means in fact building the movement on the basis of professional organizers who will perforce become the professional Reform Zionist party machinery of tomorrow. Do we want to replicate the phenomenon of a professional bureaucracy within the Reform Zionism of the coming generation (your generation) that has become such a millstone around the necks of the classical Zionist parties? Only the total-community can send shlichim instead of what must become a group of Reform Zionist technocrats (be they rabbis, social workers or whatever) and only an actively concerned and involved total-community will be able to give them the political backing that they need. Please apply a little salt and pepper of sophistication to the above statements. Some professionalism will be unavoidable. But we can't have a *movement* of professionals.

Has your Misgeret really discussed Israel's political-social state, its prognosis and what the implications are for your having any impact here at all? Here is the "lay of the land" as I see it.

The forces of moderation in Israel are in disarray. They have been devitalized. Broadly speaking, this means the weakening of those forces whose major criterion for political action is furthering the good of the individual within a Zionist context — Buber once referred to it as Hebrew Humanism. The aim of political and social action is not the divinely ordained Mitzva (religious or national) nor is it the State. The aim of social and political action is a society in which every individual attains maximum self-fulfillment; and as Zionists we believe that maximum self-fulfillment is possible only within the context of Zionist self-realization.

The lack of new ideas in both the Labor party (including Mapam) and the moderate right (the Liberals) has resulted in the elements of grass-roots movement being eliminated. Much of the sense of purpose in the community elements of the Labor movement (the Kibbutzim) has been eroded and replaced by concerns of day-to-day existence. The moderate elements of the National Religious Party have been similarly affected. Instead there is a continual jockeying for personal position and endless political in-fighting. A new generation, largely Levantine has arisen. Its attachment to ideas and ideals is relatively superficial when compared to the pre-State norm. People are mainly concerned with and committed to the immediate welfare of their family-clan (that old Mediterranean phenomenon — the Mafia syndrome). In contrast to the society of the pre-state Yishuv, negative elements of an Israeli mass society without any real ideological or philosophical roots have emerged. Hence much of the younger generation is susceptible to slogans, demagogues and appeal to tribal loyalties on a primitive level. This basic Zionist rootlessness is also the cause of the Yerida¹ phenomenon. The actual percentage of Yerida is only the tip of the iceberg.

Only the extreme religious groups, Zionist (Gush Emunim and Kahana) and non or anti-Zionist (from Aguda and, more particularly, Shas all the way through to Neturei Karta) really know what they want. They are backed by significant numbers of purposive communities who are on call for shlichut at all times.

They have maneuvered the Government into financing their communities — the Gush Emunim settlements and more especially the Yeshivot. They have established a marriage of convenience with the economically opportunistic and populist, demagogic and nationalist right wing of Herut. The liberal nationalism

1. Yerida — "descending." Emigration from Israel.

of Jabotinsky is bereft of heirs. The ultra-nationalists of T'chiya are calling the shots for Herut nationalism. The Peace Now movement and Ratz¹ are rallying points of a small but basically isolated minority.

So here you are, a Reform Zionist Misgeret idealistically planning to put your lives and the lives of your future families on the line within this happy scenario. I am not being cynical. I know that your decision is motivated by ideals. But I'm nonplussed by your naivete. A Misgeret Aliyah under current circumstances that sends its chaverim on Aliyah into the Israeli pressure cooker as individuals will have most of their Reform Zionism cooked out of them in short order in their struggle for survival — unless they are directly maintained in their Reform Zionism by becoming Reform Zionist professionals and receiving continuous transfusions of Reform Zionist money from the Diaspora.

For the future of Reform Zionism the comprehensive community framework is the best chance for surviving and creating. It is the symmetric answer to the level of commitment and shlichut being put on the line by the ultra-orthodox and the ultra-nationalist. I would like to be unambiguous. *The life frameworks that Reform Zionism must create in Israel must be Jewish value alternatives to those of the ultra-orthodox and ultra-nationalist expressed at their level of commitment or shlichut.*

By the way, this opinion is not shared by the existing tiny Reform movement. There are those who feel that it is all a matter of more and better professionals. Any short-run political battles that Reform may win (and we all hope that they will win and we are all in favor of maximum political activism in this area) have no meaning without long-term lay commitments of tens (that is where we are at and that is why you are critically important and why it is critically important that your Aliyah be significant for Reform Zionism) and later hundreds — who are prepared to put their lives and personal futures on the line within frameworks of commitment. Can the varieties of Jewish Humanism generate the same level of communal commitment that Jewish "Humeini-ism" is capable of mobilizing? Once upon a time the secular Kibbutzim could and did. They have lost their "religion." Can Reform Zionist community be a relevant replacement — a rallying point for those who believe in democratic, humanistic, Zionistically committed Judaism?

Disagree with me if you must — but come with *your* version of a political-social map and how you think RSY Netzer (and all Netzer Olami for that matter) should negotiate the problematic terrain.

1. Ratz — Citizens Rights movement currently merged as part of "Meretz."

2. What is Total-Life Community? Is it for me/us?

Now we have to get into the bugaboo of total-community and the individual. No doubt, this question reflects what is so far a non-success story in Netzer Olami.

There are all kinds of total-communities — including those where “total” really means totalitarian. That is so in many of the ultra-orthodox Kollelim and Yeshivot. *We are obviously talking about democratic frameworks in the context of this letter.*

About Comprehensive Community — and Your Experience

Theoretically you have all had experience with one type of total-community — the Kibbutz. Some of you have had personal experience with more than one Kibbutz. Re-im, Yahel, Lotan are all total-communities and yet they are different from one another as are three different people who can all be typed, biologically, as Homo Sapiens! And if a third Reform Kibbutz is established by the generation that will make Aliyah sometime in the early Nineties then doubtless it too will have a different personality. On the other hand, very few of you (if any) have had personal experience with total-community in an urban setting which is the major challenge that Reform Zionism must confront — I would guess by the mid-Nineties. I don't see the educational process in Netzer Olami (or Tzofei Telem) which will create adequate numbers before then. My guess is that the Kibbutzim will have to be strong enough to support such an endeavor which ideologically would be quite close to them.

Unfortunately, within the context of the experiences you had it would seem that the rationale of total-community for Zionist living (the possibility of mobilizing people and community for shlichut is just one example) was not discussed adequately. On the contrary, many of you even absorbed some fallacies — and you can hardly be blamed for this for even some Kibbutz members subscribe to them.

THE FALSE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL SELF-FULFILLMENT AND ZIONIST SELF-REALIZATION¹

Perhaps the major fallacy is the idea that there is an inherent contradiction between individual self-fulfillment and Zionist self-realization within a comprehensive community. In actual fact, the belief in the equal worth of all people in

1. See Section 4:2.

tandem with the belief that the aim of a humanist community is the maximal fulfillment of the individual provides the firmest ideological base possible for individual self-fulfillment. The base is firm because it exists *regardless* of one's personal ability (or the ability of one's children) to compete in an inhuman culturally sanctioned (by Western Society) race for individual achievement. Why inhuman? Because the purpose of the race (whether in London or in Tel Aviv) is the accumulation of status, power, money — in some combination and *not* the nurture of the human in the human being created in the divine image. The basic rule of the game is that most of the good things in life come only via the route of personal achievement in the competitive framework that constitutes the “natural reality” of life.

A life in community (let alone Jewish community committed to the ongoing attempt to maximalize the realization of the divine image within it) is predicated to the basic value-proposition that as humans and as Jews *we create social reality*. And of course as Zionists with a certain outlook we feel that we did not come/are not coming to Israel to create a State and society “like all the Nations.” Hopefully, Reform Zionist communities will be the building blocks to illustrate that point — in our own lives, for ourselves and, perhaps as an example to others.

Ultimately, the compatibility — indeed the advantage — of comprehensive community for the development of the individual is based on the belief that as humans we determine our cultural values and way of life congruent with those values. We must eat, drink, sleep and (in terms of the species) reproduce. We must protect ourselves from the vagaries of nature (clothing and shelter). Our innate drives of sex and aggression need outlets to ensure normative human psychological functioning but those outlets are not biologically predetermined. They find their human expression in an infinite variety of ways in which we can love and work. As human beings (distinct from animals) we reject the idea of a “natural reality,” in the spirit of a modified Social Darwinism, to which we must adapt in the spirit of survival of the fittest.

Another aspect of the misunderstanding of the relationship between individual self-fulfillment and Zionist self-realization stems from the false assumption that Zionist self-fulfillment is possible without frameworks of self-realization. If we are talking about movement, and if the function of movement is always to move (change) society in some way then we must do so with others. But if the aim of the movement is to change a way of life (and not just a single issue before society at a given moment — e.g., Reform rights in Israel) then that way of life has to be lived by those who wish to change it. If Reform Zionism wishes to change the nature of Jewish society (not just the format of Jewish ritual in Israeli

synagogues) then that way of life has to be lived and preached. To do so one must live in a community committed to that kind of shlichut. Ultimately, if the struggle of Reform Zionism is not your personal struggle, alongside any other work that you may want to do, then you are not a candidate for a community of Reform Zionist self-realization. But if the problem of Reform Zionism is your *personal* problem then you cannot really achieve individual self-fulfillment except in a community of Reform Zionist self-realization — i.e., a community of Reform Zionist shlichut.

Please note that I'm being very careful not to say "kibbutz" as code-word for community of shlichut. There are Kibbutzim where this element is weak or absent. There is nothing wrong in wanting to live on Kibbutz for a host of valid reasons — many of which I personally identify with fully. But this is not the subject of our discussion.

THE FALSE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC ZIONIST COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

But what about freedom, you ask? What will happen to my basic freedom in comprehensive community even if I accept the necessity of Community for Shlichut?

What is freedom and what is its purpose? Here too we are confused as Jews, as Reform Jews and as Reform Zionists. We have all grown up in the cultures of the West. These cultures have taken the symbolic concept of Freedom as embodied in "Let My People Go" and applied it to the modern liberal concept of the individual freedom of individuals and nations. This idea of individual rights was the outcome of the Enlightenment and its human-centered secular as opposed to God-centered theocratic world outlook.

The original idea of freedom was purposive — freedom was a means and not an end in itself. The passage reads: "Shlach et Ami VeYaavduni" — i.e., Let my People Go and They Will Worship Me. In other words, the purpose of freedom for the People of Israel was to enable them to live according to God's commandments so as to being about "Tikun Olam B'Malchut Shadai."

Reform Judaism, at its outset adopted the Western concept of Freedom as a part of its adaptation to Emancipation. Zionism was of two minds — on the one hand, the Political Zionism modeled on other European national movements saw freedom in and of itself as an inherent right. On the other hand, most schools of thought in Cultural Zionism, while not negating the Political Zionist approach to freedom, related to freedom as purposive in terms of the continued role of the

Jewish People as an educative force in the history of nations. Reform Zionism as a whole has scarcely begun to confront such fundamental questions. But Reform Zionist community cannot evade the question. It exists as an affirmation of the proposition that a synthesis of the two concepts of freedom — freedom as a right and freedom as a means to fulfill our Jewish responsibility — is not only possible but also the only possibility for a contemporary Jewish society that can make a difference.

Simply put, the Western and Jewish concepts of Freedom must be melded — democratically, in voluntary frameworks. How, to what degree, under what circumstances, etc. — all these are part of the discussion that will have to take place (already is taking place) where Reform Zionist community exists.

The proposition that I would like to focus on is that a Reform Zionist Misgeret that merely constitutes a technical framework for furthering Aliyah and Klita of RSY Netzer graduates is not a Reform Zionist Misgeret in the true sense at all. It is a technical aid to young British Reform Jews making Aliyah period. And if your practical rejoinder is “But what about all those who have already reached a personal stage of development and commitment where they can no longer undertake a re-evaluation of their whole basic life outlook? — then I only have two possible answers (I am writing this during the Yamim Noraim).

Answer number one — insofar as we are human we always have the power within us for a change of heart and mind. We always have the power to wrestle again with question of our ultimate nature and identity and to discover in ourselves that mysterious quality within us that drives us to search for the eternal. It is easier to do it together with others on whom one can draw for support.

Answer number two was given to the generation that went out of Egypt. Individual, non-community Reform Zionist Aliyah is a contradiction in terms. Even those who “make it” materially in Israel will, in a sense, be condemned to returning to Egypt in spirit and wandering in the desert of non-purposive freedom that they have set up for themselves as an ideal.

Differentiating Between G'milut Chassadim and Shlichut

The third seminal question that you have not dealt with is the question of shlichut as a value and clearly distinguishing between Shlichut (mission) and G'milut Chassadim (good works, charity). Reform Judaism has a particular problem with this terminology because of its past history.

The Mitzva of G'milut Chassadim is essentially an act of grace, an act of love

toward one's fellow for which no recompense is expected. The idea of the Reform Zionist community must surely include G'milut Chassadim as a central facet of interpersonal relationships between members. Moreover the community must also see itself as relating in this spirit to the outside world in ways commensurate with its ability. But this is not in and of itself Shlichut.

Shlichut means an action program of one kind or another (e.g., political, educational) in order to change the world. It is true that the political vision may be informed by a spirit of love. But that does not make it G'milut Chassadim.

We must keep in mind that much of the necessity of G'milut Chassadim in the pre-modern Jewish community stemmed from basic social inequality which existed as a norm within the community. Certainly, everyone including the wealthy have social responsibility. But the prophetic spirit of social justice calls out for an ultimate harmony in which some aspects of G'milut Chassadim will be superfluous. Of course this comment does not relate to such aspects of G'milut Chassadim as, for example, visiting the sick. But many if not most aspects of G'milut Chassadim ultimately relate to social problems. For Reform Judaism the active pursuit of social reform in order to abrogate the need for G'milut Chassadim can be problematic. This is without gainsaying that Reform Judaism (in America in particular) has been actively involved in social reform — but note, for purposes mainly outside the framework of the Jewish community.

Here in Israel the word "outreach" has been currently used as a term almost synonymous with shlichut. Again, outreach is a positive aim. (The current attempt to place it almost totally in the hands of "professionals" is a less positive manifestation.) However, "outreach" in and of itself is meaningless if its aim is simply to increase the "head count" of people affiliating with Reform. Outreach is only relevant if Reform Zionism has an action program to which those who affiliate will eventually commit themselves. There is not necessarily any relationship between the number of Jews affiliating with Reform and its political impact.



All of the above constitute questions that the Misgeret Aliyah — and indeed all of RSY Netzer must work through. And if the Misgeret is not prepared to do so as a Misgeret then those who want to relate to these questions in their personal lives must form Garinim. The immediate tactical question of what such Garinim should relate to, organizationally in Israel, is for future discussions. But first — on with the work of self-definition as stated at the outset of this missive. This letter has been an attempt to describe some of the questions that you must deal

with in the Misgeret's attempt to define itself. I have not claimed that these are the only questions.

One last sobering thought. The history of "Anglo-Saxon" Aliyah and its impact on Israeli society has not been a success story. Reform Zionism must inevitably base itself on significant Aliyah — qualitatively and then quantitatively. Much of the impotency of "Anglo-Saxon" Aliyah has been its inability to translate ideas into ideological action programs — and from there to long-term commitment of shlichut to further those action programs. It has to do with our cultural propensities, our inability to link our individual lives of self-fulfillment (even on the Kibbutz!) with *our* long-term program of Zionist self-realization.

My best wishes.

LeHitraot B'Aretz.¹

1. See you again in Israel.