

Excerpt From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)

**Section 5 - Educating
for Reform Zionism**

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A Letter to ARZA¹

May 6, 1992

Mr. Norman Schwartz
President, ARZA
1402 Fairoak Drive
Silver Spring MD 20902

Dear Norman,

Enclosed please find a position paper on ARZA and Reform Zionist Youth Programming in the UAHC Youth Division.² The purpose of this paper is to raise policy questions which deal with the *raison d'être* of ARZA.

It may seem strange that with the Congress upon us I should choose this time to raise questions which some may feel are not within the purview of ARZA at all. Furthermore, within the context of the daily crises in my ongoing work as Executive Director of the Department of Jewish Education and Culture (“our” Department under the stewardship of Rabbi Hank Skirball), it never seems to be a suitable time to deal with other than immediate burning issues. Indeed, this letter has been put off time and time again since my visit to America in January because of constraints related to this situation.

I accept that one important purpose of ARZA and ARZENU³ is to serve as a lobby for Reform interests (however defined) in the WZO and the Jewish Agency. But if this is the central purpose of the organized Reform Zionist movement then this paper will miss the mark. On the other hand, if ARZA and ARZENU seek to define essential interests and policy stemming from a Reform Zionist perspective, then hopefully this statement will contribute to the process of defining those interests and translating them into policy — including effective lobbying for our organizational interests.

It is precisely against the backdrop of the upcoming Congress (with the possible denouement between ARZENU and the established institutions of the WZO) that we should also be considering in terms of “deep background” seminal

1. ARZA — Association of Reform Zionists of America.
2. Unpublished memo to the ARZA National Board, 1992.
3. World Confederation of Reform Zionist Movements.

questions facing Reform Zionism not only at present but also after the Congress. This letter is not the place to review again the possible operational implications that I submitted to Rabbi Skirball and that I know he passed on to ARZA a number of months ago.

I do attach great importance to the current political initiatives of ARZENU to democratize the murky world of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency. Nevertheless, in my opinion ARZENU (and within it ARZA as the largest body by far within ARZENU) must deal with questions of Reform Zionist substance within the Reform movement in the Diaspora. Otherwise, the emphasis on “tikun” in the political and organizational instrumentalities outside the Reform movement becomes an exercise bereft of much of its potential significance and moral basis.

In the same spirit, the ARZA initiatives in Israel are to be commended — whether in the area of sponsoring the center for Democracy and Pluralism or whether in the area of funding the nascent system of education of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (I also happen to be a member of the Israeli movements’ education committee). Even though I feel these areas of activity are deserving of the support of all Reform Jews I do not suggest that ARZA lessen its efforts supporting projects of the Reform movement in Israel. However these activities fall into the category of Reform Jewish pro-Israel activity rather than Reform Zionist commitment. They do not deal with questions of Reform Zionist substance in the Diaspora with which the enclosed position paper and its appendices seek to contend.

Looking forward to seeing you at the Congress,

B’vracha, Michael Livni

cc: ARZA Board

ARZENU Executive

UAHC — Rabbi Alexander Schindler, Rabbi Daniel Syme, Rabbi Howard Bogot
Youth Division Staff — Rabbi Allan Smith, Rabbi David Frank, Rabbi David Forman, Paul Reichenbach

Shlichim — Meir Yaffe, Micha Balf

Netzer Olami — Lea Ronen, Mike Nitzan

Rabbi Stanley Davids

Rabbi Henry F. Skirball

Rabbi Richard Hirsch

Gidon Elad

POSITION PAPER

ARZA AND REFORM ZIONIST YOUTH PROGRAMMING IN THE UAHC YOUTH DIVISION

The purpose of this paper is to raise policy questions which deal with the raison d'être of ARZA.

It is my thesis that if ARZA seeks to have a substantive long-range impact it must become a serious advocate for a Reform Zionist educational policy within the Reform movement nationally, regionally, and locally. Of course adult education should be an integral part of the ARZA program for its own chapters as well as a means for outreach into the congregation and the region. But my concern here is with advocacy for Reform Zionism in the educational institutions of the Reform movement such as the Divisions of the UAHC dealing with education and the Hebrew Union College. However, this paper deals with the Youth Division of the UAHC in particular.

The Youth Division of the UAHC has been the focus of Israel activity in the past and has had *shlichim* assigned to it for this purpose. Hence it constitutes the logical venue for the implementation of a Reform Zionist educational policy. ARZA should find constructive ways to participate in policy formation of the UAHC Youth Division.

Background

Fifteen years ago as the first *shaliach* to the UAHC Youth Division I was involved in the initiative which resulted in the creation of ARZA. After the Yom Kippur war and the "Zionism is racism" resolution in the United Nations the temper of the times became ripe for the Reform movement to become more involved in the Zionist movement. The trigger to become a regular political party within the WZO (as distinct from the associate membership of the World Union) was the unacceptable system for allocating WZO resources for those not part of the system — in our case the Youth Division of the UAHC. The initiative of *Garin Arava*¹ of that time to submit a formal request for WZO membership was happily "preempted" by the movement as a whole. ARZA was founded and created a tremendous feeling of accomplishment and expectation with regard to the future of Reform Zionism in America among those who had initiated the process.

At that time it was my hope (and I know that this hope was shared by others) that ARZA would be that activist element in American Reform Judaism working

1. *Garin Arava* — settlement group composed of American Reform college-age youth.

within the institutions and the congregations of the movement in order to make Zionist commitment an accepted norm.

In particular we were hoping to create a degree of personal engagement with the Zionist enterprise on the part of American Reform Jewish youth as a norm for ensuring the ongoing creative continuity of the Reform movement within contemporary Judaism. We saw the task of Reform Zionism as imparting both the framework and content of what was to be an innovative phenomenon in modern Jewish spirituality. We felt that the synthesis of Reform and Zionism, the two major responses of the Jewish people to the modern age, had the potential for this kind of fructifying impact on Reform Judaism and the Jewish polity of the Diaspora and Israel in general.

The last decade has seen the partial realization of such a vision in a number of smaller Reform communities — particularly in Great Britain and in Australia. Reform Zionist youth movements (which founded Netzer Olami) have evolved there as a result of educational policy supported by the movement leadership in those countries. I don't want to paint an overly idyllic picture. The process in these countries was (and is) sometimes accompanied by friction and misunderstandings. However, the net addition to just plain Reform Jewish commitment (i.e., young people prepared to do for themselves and others and not just prepared to have others do for them) is proving itself. In these countries the Netzer Reform Zionist program has become the normative path for informal Reform Jewish education.

There is a difference between active commitment and passive identity. Netzer Olami has shown that there is an energizing potential to the synthesis between Reform Judaism and Zionism. That energy is beginning to express itself both in the home community and in a small but significant *Aliyah* movement. This is not just an *Aliyah* of individuals who feel that Israel is the answer to living a life of Jewish identity for them and their children — even though in and of itself this continues to be an excellent reason for an *Aliyah* decision. The significance of the *Aliyah* movement stems from the fact that it has a sense of Reform Zionist purpose vis-a-vis the Jewish National Home. This is precisely the type of Reform Zionist *Aliyah* that we so desperately need to catalyze the growth of Reform in Israel. For those who do not opt for *Aliyah* it is also the type of commitment needed for activist Zionistically oriented Judaism in the Diaspora.

The scenario we hoped for in North America fifteen years ago was an ARZA which would provide the political “backstopping” both within the Reform movement and within the World Zionist Organization for this kind of development. After all the bulk of Reform Jewry is in the United States. Of course there is

no point in extrapolating numerically from the experience of Britain and Australia — they are very different kinds of communities.

Nevertheless, it is also true that THE YOUTH DIVISION HAS PURSUED EDUCATIONAL POLICIES WHICH COULD NOT (AND DID NOT) LEAD TO THE RESULTS THAT WE WERE ABLE TO ACHIEVE IN OTHER COUNTRIES. This is NOT 20/20 hindsight. In the late Nineteen Seventies, prior to the establishment of Netzer Olami,¹ the same policies in principle were suggested for the United States but rejected by the Youth Division which feared that they would be too disjunctive. Trite but true — there can be no movement without some friction.

The article, “Zionist Youth Movement for Reform Judaism” which I submitted to the Youth Division at the end of my *shlichut* to the UAHC in the summer of 1977 and published in the *Garin Arava Iggeret*² in October of that year is appended to this position paper.

I know there has been criticism of the *shlichim* assigned to the Youth Division during the past ten years and perhaps some of the *shlichim* could have been more adequate to their task. However the fact of the matter is that during the past ten years the *shlichim* did not have the support for an overall strategy of Reform Zionist programming that was given to the *shlichim* during the Nineteen Seventies. Nor would I say that the *shlichim* sent to other countries were inherently superior to the *shlichim* sent to America although they did of course work in a more favorable environment.

The ten years we have lost in terms of building Reform Zionism have seriously impeded our growth and vitality in Israel. My estimate is that we lost 50-100 committed young Reform Zionist *Olim*. This has had a negative effect on the growth of our kibbutzim as well as the emergence of alternative urban congregations. More specifically, this type of committed and knowledgeable *Aliyah* would have significantly augmented the future leadership — in particular the lay leadership — of the Israeli movement in both the urban and rural sectors. The lack of adequate lay leadership and the resulting over-dependence on professional (paid) leadership is proving to be the bane of the Israeli movement.

I do believe that it is the responsibility of ARZA to relate to policies within the UAHC Division which have a deleterious effect on the future of Reform Zionism in Israel as well as the Diaspora. Therefore I am suggesting that this become a central item on the ARZA agenda.

1. Netzer Olami — *Noar Zioni Reformi* — Reform Zionist Youth Movement outside of North America.

2. *Garin Arava Iggeret* — newsletter (the article appears in Section 5:1).

Current Youth Division Policy: Pro-Israel But Non-Zionist

In January of this year when I visited New York a meeting took place on my initiative between the staff of ARZA and the Youth Division of the UAHC with the participation of Gidon Elad (Noar and Hechalutz) and Etti Serok (Dept. of Jewish Education and Culture).

In my opinion, there were important substantive results. It was agreed that the Youth Division would highlight a NFTY¹ High School in Israel program for Grade 11. My understanding is also that ARZA will co-sponsor this program. I believe that the involvement of ARZA in an educational program must surely be seen as a truly positive precedent.

In Israel we are negotiating to make the planned new NFTY High School semester and the preparatory program leading up to it a joint project of both the Dept. of Jewish Education and Culture and the Dept. of Youth and Hechalutz. In cooperation with the Youth Division and the Division of Religious Education of the UAHC we hope to evolve a series of activities projecting options of Reform-Jewish identity for the Junior High School years (between Bar Mitzva and Confirmation). The program would be adaptable to both religious schools as well as to the UAHC camps. It would impart legitimacy to the idea that a significant learning experience in Israel should become a norm for every young Reform Jew. Hence the program would also constitute preparation for the NFTY semester in Israel. Such a project is also a legitimate recipient of financial and other support from our Department and will be submitted as such to the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education.

On the other hand, the Youth Division remains adamant in its refusal to subscribe to an overall strategy of Reform Zionist education — in particular insofar as High school graduates and college students are concerned. The pro-Israel proclivities of the Youth Division remain unquestioned and its investment in the area of Israel programming over the years has been considerable. However, this investment has NOT been expended within the framework of an overall strategy of Reform Zionist education and hence it has had little or no Reform Zionist impact during the past ten years. Without the establishment of post High School programs with a Reform Zionist Orientation the NFTY Semester will not be a part of a potential educational continuum. Hence its Reform Zionist potential will not be adequately realized.

I pointed out at our January meeting that in the absence of a Reform Zionist rationale a *shaliach/shlich*a is reduced to being an Israel resource person servicing

1. National Federation of Temple Youth (of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations).

a pro-Israel youth program. It is questionable whether maintaining a *shaliach/shlichah* (or *shlichim*) for this purpose justifies the outlay of \$90,000 per year of the Jewish people's money.

The purpose of pro-Israel education is to utilize Israel in order to strengthen Jewish identity as it relates to the existing community (of which support for Israel is an integral part). Pro-Israel education is a basis for Zionist education — but it is not Zionist education as such. Attached is a precis of my paper, “Educating to Zionism” which expands on this differentiation.¹

Zionist education means cognitive and experiential exposure to alternative modes of Jewish Zionist self-realization. Classically, it is the task of the *shaliach* to counterpoint the normative path of Jewish identification (including pro-Israel Jewish identification) with an alternative path. The *shaliach/shlichah* has to be able to work with youth leaders who in turn will be role models for others as they contend in their personal lives with alternative value paths. The creative tension in the dynamic field between these alternative paths is the energizing factor in Jewish Zionist education. This creative tension is largely absent from pro-Israel education. It is this creative tension which creates Zionist commitment.

Clearly, if this concept is not acceptable to the Youth Division (as it once was) then having a *shaliach* becomes a symbolic act without real meaning. A meaningful *shlichut* program means a conscious decision to live with two partially contradictory educational philosophies within NFTY, the UAHC Camps, the College Age Department and of course the International Education Department.

As *Achad Ha'am* pointed out in his essay “Priest and Prophet” such an ambience is a quintessential part of the Biblical tradition. The task of Zionism and a Jewish State as *Achad Ha'am* understood it was to revivify the contradiction and tension that we find in the Bible between priests and prophets in a contemporary context. Only thus could Judaism remain meaningful and creative in the modern age. If the Youth Division seeks a “tame” Zionist program then this is a contradiction in terms.

The Desirable Educational Policies

What are the educational policies necessary in addition to the current pro-Israel policies of the Youth Division? To be more precise — what should be added to the building blocks already in place in the Youth Division in order to transform an educational policy geared to inculcating a pro-Israel Reform Jewish identity into a policy which has some prospect of leading to Reform Zionist commitment whether it expresses itself in the Diaspora or Israel.

1. See Section 4:3 for the ideas summarized in the precis.

1. There must be a semi-autonomous program, adequately funded and with a *shaliach*-advisor for graduates of Israel programs. This would be an American version of Netzer. As we are talking about a post-NFTY age group such a program should be the joint responsibility of the Youth Division and ARZA. The *shaliach/shlicha* assigned to work with this program should therefore be assigned jointly to the Youth Division and ARZA. (Such a *shaliach/shlicha* would also be available for adult educational work in ARZA.)
2. The following are operational examples of how the various departments of the Youth Division could up-grade their current pro-Israel orientation so that the implementation of an overall strategy of Reform Zionist education would be enhanced.
 - A. The planned participation of NFTY graduates who are members of American Netzer at regional NFTY Conclaves.
 - B. The staffing of every UAHC Camp with some qualified members of American Netzer. The integration of cognitive and experiential programming projecting Reform Zionist approaches to questions of Jewish identity. (Some of the UAHC Camps already try to do this).

ARZA members serving on the various Camp boards which determine policy for particular camps could further this component of Reform Zionist education.
 - C. The International Education Department of the Youth Division should be taking affirmative action to encourage attending long-term Reform Zionist Israel programs — see points 3 and 4 following.
 - D. In a number of regions the College Age Department should seek to establish “Batim” (cooperative apartments or housing) for committed American Netzer activists which would not only serve as support groups for those already committed but also as centers for outreach to the larger campus community.

In the Nineteen Seventies the *shlichim* (including myself) began to organize such a framework but there was no continuity to this effort in the Eighties. The Youth Division at the College Age level must be prepared to work in tandem with an American Netzer but in today’s circumstances this should be the youth movement of ARZA. As distinct from other Netzer movements (which begin at ages 9-10), American Netzer should be a college age movement. However, the question of Netzer in Canada on the British model should be the subject of a separate discussion.

3. A NFTY Contingent of 10-20 per year, recruited from NFTY Leadership in the senior year of High School, must become a part of the existing Reform Zionist

contingent to the Youth and Hechalutz Departments' Leadership Training Course for Youth Leaders from abroad. This will catalyze the process of American Reform Zionist identity formation in a group of young leaders by virtue of being in ongoing contact not only with members of other Reform movements but with young people from differing Zionist backgrounds as such. A more general framework of a NFTY year in Israel (similar in its framework to the Young Judaea Year Course) should be established later.

4. A significant period of time (three to six months) in any Israel program of the Youth Division for the 18-20 age group must be spent in a Reform Zionist environment in Israel. Otherwise there is inadequate contact with older Reform Zionist role models and hence no basis for confronting the question of Reform Zionist *Aliyah* within the Israel experience.

By isolating its programs (particularly its long term programs) in Israel from the other Reform Zionist youth movements the Youth Division is severely hampering the emergence of a world Reform Zionist movement.

The British and Australian experience have shown that four or five consecutive years of ten to twenty youth going through this kind of a program was necessary for building the critical mass which was able to bring about a sea change in the home communities. The South African movement which could not pursue such a policy because of governmental constraints has remained relatively small.

It is not the adoption of one or another of the above points which will lead to Reform Zionist impact. Only the deliberate implementation in an integrated way of ALL of these parameters during the coming decade can lead to the critical mass of young people (perhaps 200-300 by the end of the decade who are truly committed and perhaps half of these will make *Aliyah*). Of course they will be the visible minority of a much larger number that will have been influenced by going through the process of confrontation with Reform Zionist identity.

The Youth Division: Administrative Implications For ARZA-ARZENU

Given the current situation in the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency and especially the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, it seems more than likely that ARZENU (in effect ARZA) will become involved in questions affecting the Youth Division that arise in these forums.

1. The Youth Division and Netzer Olami have partially parallel and overlapping administrative structures in Israel. In fact, if there were no ideological differ-

ences between Netzer and the Youth Division there would be no good administrative rationale for the coexistence of two such administrative infrastructures. Given existing financial constraints this question could become a public issue in the near future.

Both Netzer Olami and the Youth Division service the needs of their home communities for an Israel experience under Reform auspices. However, the Netzer Olami approach is an integral part of an overall Zionist educational program in the Diaspora geared to inculcating creative tension with a Reform Zionist ambience.

2. The ideological difference which does exist is exploited by those outside the Reform movement in order to discount the Zionist nature of the Youth Division and the legitimacy of investing shlichim and shlichim type resources in the Reform movement (especially in North America) at the expense of the "classical" youth movements.

Both Netzer Olami and the Youth Division will have to grapple with the implications inherent in the establishment of the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education. The ability of ARZENU representatives to perform as advocates for the UAHC Youth Division while the latter maintains a Pro-Israel but non-Zionist structure which in essence competes with Youth and Hechalutz will become more and more problematic within the framework of the Joint Authority.

3. Because of the establishment of the Authority there is and will be continuing pressure to cease funding Diaspora clients (as distinct from Israeli clients and institutions) by special allocations from the Jewish Agency. This will have a relatively marginal effect on the UAHC Youth Division but will be most problematic for Netzer Olami.



The veteran staff of the UAHC Youth Division have been my good friends and associates for some 15 years. I hope we will maintain that relationship. In a sense, this is a family argument and ARZA is part of that family. I have tried to follow the injunction: "*Hocheach Tochiach et Amitecha*" (Reprove your friend). I do not think I would be furthering the integrity of our relationship — or my personal commitment to Reform Zionism — if I did not, after ten years, raise these issues as central to the existence of ARZA.

Michael Livni
May 1992, Iyar 5752