

Excerpt From:

REFORM ZIONISM

AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL LIVNI (LANGER)

**Section 5 - Educating
for Reform Zionism**

gefen  **גפן**
publishing house בית הוצאה לאור

JERUSALEM ♦ NEW YORK

A Reform Zionist Policy for the Hebrew Union College¹

August 18, 1996

Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, President
Hebrew Union College
3101 Clifton Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45220

Dear Sheli,

As a participant in the meeting of July 7 held in Jerusalem I want to thank you again for your openness and patience in hearing the variety of views expressed. In addition, it was a pleasure to meet you again after so many years.

I'm going to accept your offer to all those present to submit their views in writing. I am writing you in a personal capacity, within the context of over 20 years of involvement in Reform Zionist education. In order to put my general views into perspective I am enclosing three articles published in recent years.

1. Democracy, Religion and the Zionist Future of Israel — for a general perspective on where Reform Zionism should fit in here in Israel.²
2. Reform Judaism and Reform Zionism in Israel — presenting the basic problems of the interface Reform Judaism/ Reform Zionism in Israel.³
3. A Rationale and Program for Reform Zionism — my perspective of what Reform Zionism in the Diaspora should be about.⁴

My comments will relate to:

- 1) The HUC program for American students
- 2) The HUC program for Israeli students.
- 3) HUC in Israel

1. Unpublished letter to Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, 1996.

2. See Section 3:3.

3. See Section 2:5.

4. See Section 1:7.

1) *The HUC Program for American Students*

I know that you have heard many people say that the HUC Jerusalem program is in fact a year inside a “Cincinnati bubble” located in Jerusalem. I agree but I assume you are interested not only in metaphors but also in practical suggestions. Mine is predicated on an assumption which I am not certain has been shared by the HUC in the past. That assumption is that a central consideration in having the students spend a year here is spiritual encounter with relevant foci in the Jewish National Home. The experiential is more important than the cognitive. If that assumption is incorrect then what follows is not very relevant. The student experience will certainly continue to contribute to a certain superficial familiarity with Israel but it will in fact reinforce the Israel-Diaspora dichotomy instead of promoting a sense of interdependence.

I do agree that the wisdom of spending the first year (instead of the third year) in Israel is questionable. I am well aware of the personal (family) constraints that may preclude this option as well as the implementation of some of my suggestions below.

Spiritual encounter means value clarification and confrontation. For myself, as an engaged Reform Zionist in Israel (a category which exists in limited numbers) the indirect proof of the lack of spiritual encounter in the HUC program is the rarity of an HUC student who makes the decision to fulfill himself/herself Reform Zionistically in Israel. Nor do I find myself being called upon to engage in such encounter.

Spiritual encounter is best done in smaller groups than the current HUC classes. In my opinion the class should be split up with sub-groups spending three or four months in the framework of willing Israeli teacher colleges such as Oranim, Seminar Hakibbutzim, or David Yellin. The key is that some of the subjects would be taught partly by their staff and that there would be a structured program of ongoing interaction between students at the teacher colleges and HUC students. I know that there are major logistical questions and educational questions (e.g.,. The preponderance of women students at some of these institutions). On the other hand, most of these colleges are capable of fielding intensive *Ulpan* programs and utilizing their students as tutors to HUC students thus facilitating even more interaction. One idea would be to divide the class into two groups — half the class would spend the first semester in Jerusalem and half would start in the teacher colleges. They might have to be divided according to level of Hebrew knowledge.

As for the cognitive program, I can vouch for Seminar Hakibbutzim and

especially Oranim that they have people who can deal with central Jewish value questions such as the value and meaning of *Wo/man*, *Kehilla*, *Shlichut*, Torah, *Avoda* and *G'milut Chassadim* and *Eretz Israel*. (The Oranim dialogues of the early Seventies paved the way for the establishment of the Reform kibbutzim.) These institutions would utilize sources classical and modern from a "secular" point of view — but that is part of the encounter.

This idea of spending significant time in Israeli teacher seminaries also connects with topic 3 below. Such a semester would be rounded out by two additional two week modules. The group would again sub-divide for a month (one quarter of the entire class)

- A. A two week module with the cooperation of the Religious Zionist movement. I refer to the liberal "Meimad" (Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein) wing of the Religious Zionists and their institutions in Gush Etzion. I can't guarantee that they will agree to have HUC but in the interests of *Clal Israel* they might. I think that such an encounter would be of tremendous importance for both sides. Religious Zionism is not monolithic.
- B. A half month (two *shabbatot*) within the framework of the Reform kibbutzim. This should combine learning (Reform Zionism from the kibbutz point of view), work and encounter. Ideally the group would be divided into half between the kibbutzim and "A" above. Even more ideally, in order to foster integration, the groups should be small, split between Yahel and Lotan.

In fact, currently the HUC groups get a three day Negev tourist tour led by Yahel and a three hour look-see stay on Lotan. I think this is a travesty. After all, the kibbutzim represent authentic value encounter from a Reform point of view.

The semester in Jerusalem should include much more structured contact with the Israeli Youth movement, Netzer Olami and Telem. I know that "it takes two to tango." Nevertheless, the ball should be put into the court of the Israeli movement. The Jerusalem stay should also be used to learn about the institutions of the Jewish people, the World Union and ARZENU.

2) The HUC Program for Israeli Students

I approach this question from my perspective within the Israeli movement. My perspective is not shared by most of my fellow members on the *Hanhala*¹ of

1. Hanhala — Executive Board.

Telem. On the other hand, at your meeting with us in July you heard the unsolicited comments of dismay regarding Telem voiced by a number of those involved in education. The matter is also dealt with in my enclosed articles.

Simply put, the idea of training Israeli Rabbis for congregational posts in Israel is a total misconception and has no future within Israeli reality. If pursued further in its present form the Israeli Rabbinic program will die. The very notion that congregational Judaism (of any stream) can be cloned from the Diaspora and can be the focal point of Jewish identity in Israel (for which an Israeli will pay congregational dues) is simply a non-starter. Only the ultra-Orthodox who live in the "Israel as Diaspora" mode can make it work. I don't suggest that we emulate them.

The Israel Rabbinic program has to be a program which centers on education. It must grant a teaching certificate (recognized by the Ministry of Education) in Jewish subjects and humanities. The rabbinic element should be a part of such a program and should be recognized as equivalent to an MA so that teachers can get salaries at the MA level. Israelis have to be prepared to teach as their economic mainstay and in order to outreach for Reform Judaism. Part of their training has to be integrating Jewish values into the general curriculum. They have to be familiar with the syllabi of the humanities and Jewish studies as they exist. They have to do lots of exercises planning modules in various subjects that fit in with the curriculum. They have to teach in specific schools open to our integrative liberal approach to Judaism. They have to staff Reform Tali¹ schools such as we have started in Jerusalem. Right now we don't even have enough Reform teachers for Leo Baeck in Haifa let alone for the general educational system which is wide open for us to place qualified teachers.

I don't think all this is possible in the absence of at least an initial stage of cooperation with university affiliated Israeli teacher seminaries.

3) HUC in Israel

A number of people have told you that HUC (and the very name of the HUC) projects a Diaspora image. I know that HUC cannot suddenly become the type of educational institution that we need here in Israel. The Conservative movement with their Beit Midrash is way ahead of us. And yet, paradoxically, with the ideological mandate of Reform Judaism, we have potentially more to offer. The way to begin is by cooperating with existing teaching colleges which already have recognition. That would work in with points 1 and 2 above.

1. Tali — Tigbur Limudei Yahadut — reinforced Jewish learning.

One way to begin is to offer joint In-Service training with the seminaries in areas of Jewish Studies. Such a policy has the additional advantage of outreaching to the staffs and students (Israel's future teachers) instead of locking ourselves up in the HUC Campus. HUC could offer the Jerusalem Campus as home for Jerusalem modules of those seminaries with whom HUC cooperates. They could be introduced to the Reform movement from that vantage point.

Keep in mind — the Reform movement in Israel is small and isolated. The Israel Religious Action Center has given the word “Reform” word recognition in the media but vanishingly few, (even in the miniscule “movement” that we have), can talk about Reform Judaism as a Zionist alternative which could play a vital role in the emerging culture of the Jewish State. HUC could play a major role if it chooses — in doing so it would strengthen Reform Israel-Diaspora ties and make the concept of Jewish peoplehood more meaningful for the entire movement.

These are my thoughts — but they are not only abstract ideas. Given a suitable framework, I will be happy to assist in the implementation of the above proposals.

B'vracha

Dr. Michael Livni

cc: Rabbi Shaul Feinberg — HUC Jerusalem

Rabbi Joel Oseran — WUPJ, Jerusalem