

by Steven M. Cohen

n 1897, the first World Zionist Congress convened in Basle under the leadership of Theodor Herzl. The same year, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, meeting in Montreal, issued this ringing denunciation of Zionism:

We totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish state. Such attempts . . . infinitely harm our lewish brethren, where they are still persecuted by confirming the assertion of their enemies that they are foreigners in the countries in which they are at home and of which they are everywhere the most loyal and patriotic citizens.

The Reform movement certainly has come a long way in its appreciation of Zionism and the Jewish State. By the 1930s Reform leadership had officially renounced earlier stands in favor of a decidedly pro-Zionist position. Today the Hebrew Union College requires all rabbinical students to spend one year of their five-year training in Israel. And just this year, the Association of Reform Zionists of America scored an electoral triumph by securing 33 delegates in nationwide elections of representatives to the 1987 World Zionist Congress. Today the Reform

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movement sponsors a growing network i of institutions in Israel embracing congregations, two kibbutzim, one development community, a high school, a scouting movement, a religious action center, and a magnificent multi-purpose campus on a large parcel of land in the heart of Jerusalem. Every year, Reform youth movements send impressive numbers of Reform youngsters to Israel. And the World Union for Progressive Judaism (Reform worldwide body) has its headquarters in Jerusalem.

tional study of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel I conducted for the American Jewish Committee's Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations. The survey was meant in part to replicate and in part to enlarge upon a survey of American Jews on the same topic that I had conducted in 1983. The 1986 survey is based upon responses from over 1,100 Jews throughout the United States.

The comprehensive report of the 1986 survey focused on a wide range of issues: caring about Israel, perceptions of non-But despite this complete turn-about in Jews attitudes toward Jews and Israel,

The Reform public does not share the Movement's passionate involvement in Israel.

the movement's institutional approach to Israel and Zionism, despite the solid dedication to Israel on the part of Reform Judaism's lay and rabbinic leaders, there is considerable evidence that much of the Reform public does not share the passionate involvement with Israel that has come to characterize the movement as an institution. The possibly sharp contrast between an involved leadership and a detached public poses a dilemma and a challenge to Reform rabbis, educators, congregational officers, and other leaders of the movement. But, as I suggest below, this circumstance may offer a model for building new sorts of relationships between American Jews and the State and society of Israel.

My evidence on Reform Jews' involvement with Israel derives from a 1986 naknowledge of Israeli society and Hebrew, criticism of Israel and a host of other issues.

Scattered throughout that first report were several pieces of analyses which contrasted self-identified Reform lews with members of the two other major lewish denominations as well as with "nondenominational" Jews, those who answered "Just Jewish." About a quarter of the nationwide sample identified as Reform, as compared with about a third who called themselves Conservative, almost as many non-denominational, and about 10% Orthodox. By examining the results broken down by denomination we can begin to understand just how Reform Jews differ from their counterparts in other movements.

The central thrust of the findings is that,



less attached to Israel than members of other movements, and even than "nondenominational" Jews. A telling example is provided by rates of travel to Israel. Even though Reform Jews are probably the best-educated and most affluent denomination (factors which promote international travel), only a quarter of adult Reform Jews have ever visited Israel. In contrast, over a third of Conservative Jews have been there, and a majority of Orthodox lews.

While the one-time trip may reflect only passing interest in Israel, multiple visits suggest an even deeper commitment to the lewish State. Here the gap between Reform and other Jews is more dramatic. Only 7% of Reform Jews said they had been to Israel more than once, as compared with 10% of non-denominational Jews, 13% of Conservative Jews, and 34% of the Orthodox.

Travel to Israel was only one of several measures of commitment to Israel to appear on the survey. In fact, in 1986 we repeated five questions which had appeared in the 1983 study. These questions queried: reading about Israel in newspapers and magazines, talking about Israel with friends and relatives, considering oneself a Zionist, caring about Israel as "a very important part of my being a Jew," and regarding Israel's destruction as "one of the greatest personal tragedies in my life." I combined responses to these five items into a single composite index of 'Attachment to Israel." Again, Reform lews trailed all the others. While a majority of Orthodox Jews scored "high" on attachment to Israel, only a third of the

(17%) of the Reform respondents. Thus, in the 1986 study Reform Jews ranked as the least attached of the three demoninations.

Furthermore, in comparison with the results from the 1983 survey (of a different sample of respondents), it seems that the Orthodox may have intensified their commitment to Israel, the Conservatives remained unchanged, and the Reform became even more alienated.

Reform Jews were not only psychologically distant from Israel, they were personally distant as well. They reported the fewest personal ties and contacts with Israelis. We asked whether respondents knew American immigrants to Israel, had family or friends there, or simply knew an Israeli who might invite them for a meal. More than two thirds of the Orthodox reported at least two sorts of relationships, as did almost half the Conservative respondents, who slightly outscored the Reform lews, where just over 40% reported such relationships. Similarly, we asked about various sorts of contacts with Israelis over the last year: business dealings, written corespondence, or telephone conversations. Most of the Orthodox reported at least one such contact as did over a quarter of Conservative Jews. Here, too, the Reform trailed with less than a fifth reporting contacts with Israeli individuals.

Hopes and aspirations for one's childen provide yet a different perspective on Jews' attitudes toward Israel. Whatever one's successes or shortcomings as a Jew, one can always dream that one's children will achieve a higher standard of Jewish (or,

in this case. Israell involvement than one was able to attain in one's own life. But here, as well, we find Reform Jews' dreams for their childen's Israel-connectedness lagging somewhat behind those of Conservative Jews and far behind those of the Orthodox.

We asked the respondents whether they would want their children to ever visit Israel, to spend a year there, or to settle there. Almost a third of the Reform lews had no interest in their children visiting Israel, as compared with less than half as many Conservative, and only a very small number of Orthodox Jews. In contrast, while a fifth of the Reform respondents would want their children to spend a year in Israel (or even settle there), the figure was twice as high among Conservative respondents, and more than three times as high among the Orthodox. Finally, it was only among the Orthodox that there was a sizable interest (25%) in one's children making aliyah, as compared with 3% among Conservative and Reform Jews.

We asked respondents several questions about Israeli society. They had to answer whether Shimon Peres and Menachem Begin are from different parties (only 34% knew they are); whether non-Orthodox rabbis can marry couples in Israel (34% were aware they could not); whether Arab and lewish children go to the same schools (31% rightly thought they do not); and whether most Jewish religious holidays are also national holidays (68% knew-or correctly guessed-that they are).

On these questions, the Orthodox far out-performed Conservative Jews who, in turn, slightly surpassed the Reform in "knowledge of Israeli society." While half the Orthodox correctly answered at least three of the questions, only a little more than a quarter of the Conservative Jews and a little less than a quarter of the Reform did as well.

We find a similar pattern of results with regard to self-assessed knowledge of Hebrew. More than 40% of the Orthodox claimed they could understand at least simple Hebrew "conversations, with some difficulty." In contrast, only 9% of the Conservative Jews made the same claim, as did only 5% of Reform and of nondenominational lews.

In short, not only do Reform Jews generally feel less attached to Israel, and not only do they maintain few personal ties with Israelis, they more often lack the intellectual tools with which to follow events in Israel and to understand them with any depth or vigor.

Whatever the reasons for the gap in Israel involvement between Reform and other Jews, we still need to explain why that gap apparently grew between the two surveys conducted in 1983 and 1986 (recall that the number of Reform Jews "highly attached" to Israel fell from 25% in 1983. to 17% in 1986). One explanation focuses

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Abandoning?

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on the growing chronological remoteness of hostilities in the Middle East. The 1983 survey was conducted just a year after Israel's invasion of Lebanon which certainly heightened American Jewish attention. The absence of war since then may have accounted for the growth in the number of American Iews who are most detached from Israel, primarily at the expense of the group with an intermediate level of Israel involvement. At the same time, the size of the most intensely involved group of American Jews remained about the same over the three-year period. With many Reform Jews at the intermediate and lower levels of Israel involvement in 1983, it is only natural that Reform as a group should experience the greatest growth in apparent alienation from Israel or, more precisely, in inattentiveness to

Yet one other factor may help explain the growth in Reform detachment which. we need to recall, occurred simultaneously with a surge in Orthodox Jews' involvement in Israel. More than any other denomination, Reform Jews in the sample reported the largest degree of antipathy to Israeli Orthodoxy (as measured by a number of questions too complex to detail here). The intra-religious turmoil in Israel may have given American Jews the impression-factually accurate or notthat Israeli Orthodoxy has been especially influential, if not dominant, of late. Perhaps-and this is certainly a speculative assessment-the image of a more Orthodox Israel has had opposite effects on Orthodox and Reform Jews. The American Orthodox may feel more drawn to a seemingly more Orthodox Israel, while the Reform may feel more distant for the same

One piece of evidence supports this view. Feelings about Israeli Orthodoxy and feelings about Israel generally are correlated for the entire sample. In other words, people who feel better about the Orthodox in Israel also feel more attached to Israel; and the opposite is also true: those alienated from Israeli Orthodoxy are also more remote from Israel generally. This relationship is especially strong among Reform Jews, to an extent clearly greater than among Conservative Jews. Among Reform Jews who were largely antipathetic to Israeli Orthodoxy, only 7% scored high on Israel attachment and 63% scored low; in contrast, of those sympathetic to Israeli Orthodoxy, as many as 38% scored high on attachment while only 17% scored low.

The vivid contrast between the relatively weak commitment to Israel on the part of the Reform masses and the passionate involvement with Israel among Reform leadership (one expressed in a variety of successful institutional endeavors) cer-

tainly poses a challenge to Reform leaders Gaps between leaders and followers are certainly no rarity in the life of modern lews (or other groups, for that matter). The Conservative movement has long wrestled with how to bridge an extraordinary gap between their leaders and public in ritual observance (much smaller gaps are found in Orthodoxy and Reform). Now. it appears, we may have evidence of a huge leader/public gap in the Reform movement, one centering on involvement with Israel. This circumstance raises a critical policy question: How are the educational, spiritual and congregational leaders of Reform to elevate the Reform public's investment in Israel?

Perhaps the ways in which Reform lead-

ers already have answered this question are instructive not only for the movement itself, but for others seeking to heighten the Israel involvement of a somewhat skeptical and sometimes indifferent larger American Jewish public. The educational and political programs of the Reform movement have been built around a key assumption. They have sought to strengthen and identify Reform Jews with only selected segments of Israeli society. Thus, on war and peace issues, they have aligned with the Labor Zionist political camp; in the religious sphere, they have played a leadership role in the fight for tolerance and pluralism: and in the cultural and intellectual arenas, they have identified with the more cosmopolitan segments of Israeli society. In other words, to those American Jews who might otherwise find Israel generally unattractive, the Reform movement's leadership has (if only implicitly) devised a ready response. It says, in effect, that one can identify with parts of Israeli society, the parts one finds most attractive.

This selective, discerning strategy offers a useful counterpoint to the historic efforts of the UJA, Israel Bonds, and many Jewish educators to "sell" the complete Israel (as in the slogan, "We Are One"]. American Jews today may no longer be ready to "buy" the whole Israel, but they certainly can "buy into" one or another part of Israel (as even the UIA and local federations are beginning to learn).

In short, Reform leaders who care about Reform Judaism, Israel, and the relations between the two need to come to grips with the enormous challenge posed by laity relatively unattached to Israel and Israelis. At the same time, they need to consciously recognize the virtues of their approach to Israel involvement heretofore, one which advances what they regard as the most appealing features of Israeli society, while at the same time opposing what they view as its most distasteful elements. It is just such an approach which may well serve to enhance and broaden Israel involvement among the wider Reform Jewish public in the United States, if not among other American lews as well.

God Traces

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back and say they saw something sacred and that somehow they have been touched and changed by the encounter

I am reminded of a time when my young est child. Aviva, traveled to that frontier. There she made her own connection between the embrace, suffering and sanctity. For several years Aviva helped the high school students of our congregation's religious school to organize a spaghetti dinner, the proceeds of which went to a soup kitchen. One year Aviva had the privilege of delivering the donation. She decided she would work at the soup kitchen on the day she brought the money. I picked her up after she had participated in serving the noon meal. On the way home she told me about her morning. She said, "Mom, this may sound strange, but in that damp, crowded kitchen, I think I experienced God." I flashed on Heschel's claim that a mitzvah is a place where God and people meet.

Perhaps it is not that God's tracks are most apparent in the secular encounter after all. Maybe we are instead called to achieve a new religious understanding: that the distinction between the secular and the sacred is a false one, that the repair of the broken religious vessel will

be achieved only when we acknowledge that every act of human caring has the potential for holiness.

And so does every ritual act. Recently I was reading Life is With People, the lovely anthropological study of the culture of the shtetl. In a discussion of the three mitzvot traditionally encumbent upon women, I learned about the practice of "taking challah." that is, taking a bit of the unbaked dough from a loaf and throwing it into the fire or oven. Now one of the few advantages of living in a place with a small Jewish population and no Jewish bakery is that I was forced to learn to bake challah. The next time I fashioned my loaves, I decided to try this exotic mitzvah. I did, however, engage in a bit of creative interpretation of mitzvot encouraged by Reform Judaism: I chose to cast the dough to the earth rather than the oven, thinking perhaps a bird might be the beneficiary. On performing the act some unexpected words presented themselves to me. I heard myself saying, "It's not all for you. This dough becomes sanctified only when a portion of it is shared." This sudden understanding, a sort of domestic benediction-I think it was a God-

So I will look to the embrace as I will look to mitzvot, not as commands, but as invitations to walk in God's ways. In the walking, I pray that I will notice God's

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