Judaism had been appropriated and left to the religious zealots, which led to a desire to reclaim the tradition, study the sources with an eagerness to understand and interpret them, and bring them closer to our lives. Israelis found a desire to shape our lifestyle around a heritage that belongs to us and that many of us are discovering anew only now.

When I arrived in Israel 23 years ago from a community in Buenos Aires (the Beit El congregation of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who later became the rabbi of Bnai Jeshurun in New York), I felt that I had come home; I did not, however, feel that I had come home spiritually. Without a doubt, if I were to make *aliyah* today, the transition would be much easier.



Recreating Jewish Community

Moti Zeira

DURING THE FIRST DECADES following the establishment of the State of Israel (and also prior to this), the boundaries of the state and those of the community overlapped. The Israeli Jew fully identified with the state, and the state system provided individuals with the basic needs that any community provides for its members: a sense of belonging on one hand and a meaningful existence on the other.

Over the past three decades, the provision of these basic needs by the state has been rapidly deteriorating. Among the reasons for this are: social atomization, massive privatization of all systems, constant anxiety about security, development of tribalism within Israeli society, and political, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions.

Today, most Jews in Israel do not find strength and inspiration from knowing that they live in the only Jewish state in the world, that their spoken language is Hebrew, and that they live in the land of Israel.

The gap between the citizens and the state reveals a void within Israeli society. In order to give the individual a sense of belonging and a meaningful, connected life, a more intimate framework is required — renewing the idea of community and providing a new sense of belonging.

While the traditional Jewish Diaspora community environment served this role, creating such community within an independent Jewish state is more problematic. Community, in general, is based on a "treaty" that includes commitment and responsibility and is built by forming a network of opportunities for bonding: through learning and celebrating together and through the development of mutual responsibility and giving. A network that is too weak will not sufficiently answer the needs of the individuals within it.

Much of Israel's general public (often, and problematically, referred to as "secular") is

experiencing withdrawal, ignorance, hostility, rejection, anger, guilt, and maybe worst of all — indifference to everything "Jewish." While the reasons for this are well known, almost everyone — including secular Israelis at some point finds themselves suddenly questioning their existence. At that moment they are ready/willing/obligated to face the cultural, Jewish, social elements in life. The critical question is when and where these moments occur; it is not a coincidence that these moments occur at life's stepping stones and special occasions: birth, death, marriage, maturity. The questions also arise when children ask questions that require parents to decide what kind of social, cultural, and emotional environment they create within their families. What is their link to their heritage, and what is their future?

Israelis conduct life according to the Jewish calendar. While Shabbat is the formal day of rest and during Jewish holidays there is no school, this is a source of confusion, embarrassment, and dissatisfaction. Zionist philosopher A. D. Gordon said that the Jewish holiday is "the essence of secularism," but what is the correlation between my everyday life and the holidays? How is the celebration of holidays an expression of who I am? Should I celebrate holidays like the religious communities? What do I tell my children? Should I ignore the day? Should I, like many Israelis, spend Pesach in the Sinai?

These questions, and the underlying confusion from which they emanate, create ripe turf for building new Jewish-Israeli communities. As in the Diaspora, holidays and lifecycle ceremonies can create entry points to community and provide a sense of belonging and meaning for otherwise disenfranchised Israelis. Our Jewish culture, which revolves around family, study, and emotional connection, can evolve as a base for the renewal of community life among the Israeli secular public.

Moti Zeira is one of the founders and current director of Hamidrasha **Educational Center** for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Israel. For the past two decades, he has been active in formal and informal education in Israel. Dr. Zeira has a B.A. in Hebrew Literature and Jewish Philosophy, a Masters in Eretz Israel Studies, and a PhD in Jewish History, focusing on the attitude of the secular Zionist pioneers toward lewish tradition. He can be reached at saramoti@hamidrasha. org.il.

May 2006 Sivan 5766 To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA www.shma.com