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# The Reform Movement in Israel: Past, Present, and Future

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## Introduction

The Reform Movement in Israel is growing, with more Israelis turning to it as a viable alternative to both Orthodoxy and secularism, and with an increasing impact on public discourse. But the story of the Movement's experience in Israel has not been well told. This paper seeks to meet that need. It places the Movement in a larger context, reviews its history and current status, and summarizes the challenges it and similar groups are facing.

## In the Beginning

The Reform Movement in Israel has broad and ambitious goals. It seeks to provide to increasing numbers of non-orthodox Israelis the opportunity to express their Jewish identity, beliefs, and practices in a modern context. It shares with a number of other Israeli institutions and organizations the aim of ensuring that tomorrow's Israel is a pluralistic, democratic, tolerant, and socially just country. The Movement has 1.5 million adherents in North America, and a total of 2 million around the world. Yet in the first forty years of Israeli's independence, and in spite of its lofty goals, the Movement had little or no impact on Israeli society.

A look at Israel's early years of independence helps to explain why this is so. The leaders of Israel's independence movement, including David Ben Gurion, Moshe Sharett, and Golda Meir, most of whom were secular,<sup>1</sup> established a "nation state for the Jewish people," in which Jews would be masters of their own fate. Their focus was on peoplehood and self-determination rather than religious observance. In their vision, a "new Jew" would speak Hebrew, quote from the Bible, and celebrate Jewish holidays from a nationalistic perspective.

In order to show a British committee of inquiry that there was a consensus among Israeli Jews for the establishment of an independent country, in 1947 Ben Gurion wrote a letter to the ultra-orthodox World Agudat Yisrael organization (the "status quo letter"), in which he stated that, while Israel would not be a theocratic state, it would take into account the Agudah's religious concerns (Rabinovich), including keeping Saturday as the Sabbath day of rest, serving kosher food in state institutions, "preventing a rift" among the Jewish people in the matter of marital affairs, and allowing separate education systems, provided that they studied the basic education subjects such as language, math and science. While the letter itself was relatively vague, subsequent legislation was passed to institutionalize an Orthodox monopoly on all matters of personal status, including life cycle events. The result is that weddings conducted by non-Orthodox rabbis are not recognized by the state. Many secular couples travel overseas to be married in civil ceremonies. Funerals in most public cemeteries are led by Orthodox rabbis and controlled by the Rabbinate. The state pays the salaries of many Orthodox but only a very few Reform and Conservative rabbis.

By 1967, Israel's population was 2.8 million, of which 2.4 million were Jews, 289,000 were Muslims and 110,000 were "other" (Jewish Virtual Library). Among Jews, around 70% considered themselves "secular" or "traditional—not religious" (Statistical Abstract1). "Secular" Jews lived in a Jewish state and thus celebrated Jewish holidays which are also holidays of the state. Many of them were likely to light candles on Shabbat, fast on Yom Kippur, and celebrate a Seder in the home on Passover. But they rarely attended a synagogue service, except for life cycle events, often did not eat kosher food or observe Shabbat, and did not study Jewish texts. They felt Jewish because they lived in a Jewish state, spoke

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<sup>1</sup> With the partial exception of Menachem Begin.

Hebrew, knew the Hebrew Bible in words and from site visits, and lived according to the Jewish calendar. Unlike in the Diaspora, Israelis did not have to become synagogue members to define and retain their Jewishness. At the time, nearly all Jewish Israelis considered Reform and Conservative Judaism to be a purely American phenomenon with no role in Israel, since they assumed only genuine observance of Judaism was Orthodox. Many immigrants, especially of Sephardic origin, had no previous knowledge or experience of Reform Judaism.

Before the 1960's, the Leo Baeck School in Haifa was the only Reform presence in Israel, with the exception of a small synagogue (Harel) in Jerusalem. Begun in 1937 by one of the few liberal rabbis who immigrated to Israel to serve displaced children, its high school was established in 1947 and named after Rabbi Leo Baeck, a leading German Reform educator. In 1962, the Hebrew Union College (HUC), the North American Reform institution for training rabbis, cantors and educators, opened a center in Jerusalem (originally planned as an archaeology and research center), and shortly thereafter established a synagogue to welcome Reform visitors. Beginning in 1970, all entering rabbinic students, and later, cantorial and Jewish education students as well, were required to spend their first year in Israel. In 1964 the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) was formed.<sup>2</sup>

In 1973 the headquarters of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) were shifted from New York to Jerusalem. At the time there were only six small Reform synagogues in Israel (in greater Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa), all led by expatriate (American) Reform rabbis and with a predominantly Diaspora attendance (Hirsch).

In the 1980's the Movement began to have an increasing public presence. In 1981, HUC--Jerusalem ordained its first Israeli born rabbi. In 1986 the physical infrastructure in Jerusalem (Beit Shmuel) was built to offer a venue for housing, offices, and classrooms.<sup>3</sup> A pre-school was founded on the HUC campus, leading to an elementary school and later middle and high schools. Kehilat Kol Haneshamah in Jerusalem was established in 1984.<sup>4</sup> The Leo Baeck Center in Haifa had become a thriving high school, synagogue, and community center. After continuing pressure from American Reform and Conservative leadership, in 1986 the United Jewish Appeal (the umbrella US Jewish philanthropic organization) decided to fund Reform and Conservative institutions in Israel on an annual basis. Two Reform kibbutzim were established in the Negev, Yahel in 1976 and Lotan in 1983. In 1987, the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) was formed as the public and legal advocacy arm of the IMPJ, seeking to encourage pluralism and advance the causes of social justice. Rabbi Richard Hirsch, executive director of the WUPJ from 1973 to 1999, who had made aliyah to Israel in 1971, played a leading role in building infrastructure and in seeking to shift the focus of the North American Reform Movement towards Israel, a process which at the time was controversial. In spite of the changes, most Israelis continued to consider the Reform and Conservative Movements as alien or at least irrelevant to their lives, as well as vaguely "un-Jewish," some calling it "idol worship" rather than Judaism (Sales).

## Takeoff and the Jewish Renaissance

The construction in 1991 of Beit Daniel Synagogue and Community Center in Tel Aviv was a crucial step for the Reform Movement. The Tel Aviv municipality fought the construction of the building, finally

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<sup>2</sup> The word "progressive" was used since it was felt that "Reform" had a negative connotation among the Israeli public.

<sup>3</sup> It was vastly expanded in 1991 to include conference rooms, a theater and a banquet hall (Mercaz Shimshon).

<sup>4</sup> In 1987, a local orthodox rabbi and others attempted to stop Simchat Torah services and remove the Torah. Mayor Teddy Kollek, angered by this aggression, promised a piece of land to the Kehila to build a synagogue.

settling the matter before it went to the Supreme Court. Beit Daniel pioneered the idea of an “open” community, serving not only dues-paying “members” of the congregation, but also the general public on a fee-for-service basis.

Concurrently, around 1990, secular Israeli Jews increasingly began to realize that a spiritual dimension was missing in their lives. Individuals for whom religious and Halachic principles and practices were not binding began to seek to connect with key elements of Jewish culture, ritual, history, community, and belief, often, but not always, including a commitment to social justice. This change reflected a lessening of the hold on the public of what could be called a “secular religion”—the achievement of the dream of establishing a Jewish state. An amorphous process, which has been called “Jewish renewal” or “Jewish renaissance,” arose. “Renaissance” is perhaps the better word because it is a “rebirth” of Jewish connections among those who had abandoned it. The Reform Movement is part of the “Jewish renaissance,” helping to create it, benefiting from it, strengthening it, but also in competition with elements of it.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, which was considered to be, in part, the result of campaigns of hatred by those who were opposed to Rabin’s commitment to the Oslo peace process, led to growth of this Jewish renaissance. Secular Jews, feeling that far-right religious fanatics were hijacking Judaism, became concerned with the nature of Jewish tradition in Israel. Many of the leaders of the new Movement were third generation Israelis, often Kibbutz-raised, who realized that they did not know what their grandparents had rejected, and began to seek answers through text study, life-cycle ritual, and, most recently, prayer. Some had gained knowledge and direction from exposure to Reform and Conservative institutions in North America.

Several recent studies (Goldwater and MIDOT) seek to document the phenomenon of Jewish renaissance and its implications for Israel. Outside of the schools, the number of Israelis who actively and regularly participate in Jewish renaissance study and worship is estimated at a modest 20,000. But the number of people who attend these activities at least once a year is estimated to be as many as 200-300,000 individuals. At the community level, informal and formal communities celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish holidays together, using both traditional melodies and prayers along with modern Hebrew popular songs with a liturgical basis. Municipal governments increasingly encourage Jewish experiences for their residents, such as Shabbat and holiday services open to all. Small groups may meet together to study sacred and other religious, spiritual, and cultural texts, focusing on the Jewish contexts of peace, environmentalism, social justice, art, culture, the Israeli/Jewish attitude towards Arabs and other non-Jewish citizens, the rights of women, etc. A flourishing example of community involvement can be found in the municipality of Gan Yavneh, near Ashkelon.

Jewish renaissance groups have many of the same or similar goals as the Reform Movement. They seek a state which is open to pluralistic expressions of Jewish identity, belief, and practice, in which the orthodox near-monopoly of life cycle events is diminished, and state financial support is extended to the non-orthodox. Many would like to see an Israel whose various population sectors have a stronger understanding and tolerance of each other.

There have been attempts since the 1950s to enrich Jewish knowledge and culture in “secular” Jewish schools.<sup>5</sup> “Torah” has been a subject of study in secular schools for many years. The TAL school system (the Hebrew acronym for “enriched Jewish studies”) was established in 1976, with support from

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<sup>5</sup> Israel’s public school system is divided into four sub-systems—“secular” Jewish (Hebrew language) schools, orthodox Jewish schools, ultra-orthodox Jewish schools which are “private” but for which the state covers 70 to 100% of expenses (depending on their administrative structure), and Arabic language schools.

the US Conservative Movement. Now independent and partially funded by the state, the program offers a Jewish enrichment experience in 92 elementary<sup>6</sup> and 140 pre-schools (TALI). A 2011 law mandates two hours per week in junior secondary school (grades 5-8) for the study of “Jewish heritage and culture,” in order to give students “a basic knowledge of Judaism and Zionism” (Hayom). In these classes, specialized or specially trained teachers lead students to experience, contemplate, and understand their Jewish heritage, including using texts from the *Tanach* as starting points for discussions. The state provides funding, and teacher training programs for this new subject have grown. The TALI organization, the Reform Movement, Orthodox groups and others provide curriculum guides and textbooks.

The Masorti (Israeli Conservative) Movement is a partner with Reform in seeking legal and public status as a branch of Judaism on a par with Orthodoxy. Masorti counts roughly the same number of persons as Reform who self-identify with it and similar numbers of communities and trained rabbis, as well as a program for training Jewish educators. Its congregants overall are more observant and less politically active than Reform adherents, and it is less in the public eye. Its leadership believes it is important to retain Masorti’s distinct identity.

An Annex to this report provides a summary of the major national Jewish renaissance organizations, in addition to Reform institutions. These include Masorti, institutions which train educators and teachers (i.e. the Solomon Schechter Institute, the Mandel Institute for Education Leadership, the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and the Melton Center for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University), institutions working directly in schools (TALI, Be’eri, and Meitarim), “secular” yeshivas (e.g. BINA and Alma), an umbrella organization (PANIM) lobbying for increased public funding and recognition, Hiddush, an advocacy group for pluralism, and others.

## Current Status of the Reform Movement

The number of those who identify with the Reform Movement has grown. In 2009 and in 2013, it was estimated that between 7 and 8% of Israeli Jews, equivalent to around 500,000 people, defined themselves as Reform or Conservative<sup>7</sup> (Cohen and Hermann, IDI). This compares with the 11% of Israeli Jews who self-identify as “Haredi,” and is an increase of 50% over the 5% who self-identified as Reform or Conservative Movement in 1999 (Maltz). In 2013 36% of Israeli Jews, or nearly 2 million individuals, reported that they had participated in one or more Reform or Conservative events (Rosner).

The advance of both “Jewish renaissance” and “Reform” points of view is increasingly seen in the public, in the Knesset, and on television and radio. The leader of the Yesh Atid party, Yair Lapid, said, in 2012, that he did not have a rabbi, but, if he had one, “it would be Rabbi Meir Azari of Beit Daniel” (Dornbe). In 2013 Ruth Calderon, a leader of the Jewish renaissance Movement and the head of Alma, a secular “Center for Jewish Culture,” was elected to the Knesset on the Yesh Atid list. During the period January-October 2014, Rabbi Gilad Kariv, Executive Director of the IMPJ, Rabbi Meir Azari, and other leaders of the Reform Movement, appeared on numerous talk shows on Channels 2 and 10, Israel’s most widely viewed television channels, in discussions on religious issues. In a 2014 episode of the widely watched sitcom “Avodah Aravit”, which chronicles the daily life of an Arab family living in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem, the family is looking for a progressive elementary school for their

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<sup>6</sup> Around 10% of secular Jewish schools.

<sup>7</sup> Of these Reform is estimated at 50-55% and Conservative at 45-50%.



daughter and decides to send her to a Reform-managed school.

Commercial public opinion polls, as well as polls of the government's Central Bureau of Statistics, now include a question which allows the respondents to identify themselves as "Reform" or "Conservative" rather than simply "secular" or "traditional—not religious." In response to attitudinal changes, in 2014 the IMPJ added "Reform" to its name, which is now the "Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism."

In 2014, 41 "communities" or "*havurot*" composed the Reform membership. Of this number, 33 have legal status as non-profits ("*amutot*"), and eight are new and relatively small groups which are considered as "initiatives" ("*meizamim*"). The total number of "memberships" in all of the Reform communities is modest, with only 3500 dues-paying members/family units combined in all of the Reform communities in Israel, the largest being at the Daniel Centers in Tel Aviv (420), Kol Hanesama in Jerusalem (400), Yozma in Modi'in (330), and Mevaseret Zion (250) (IMPJ). Modiin, a relatively new city midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem has seen recent rapid growth (Maltz). A number of kibbutzim, with long traditions of secularism, such as Beit Hashita, have begun "Reform style" Shabbat services (Maltz).

The IMPJ aims to reach a total of 50 communities by the year 2020, with a focus on communities in provincial cities and towns. The Movement has a much broader reach than "memberships" since most Reform communities are open to all and do not restrict their services to dues-paying members. Non-members celebrate Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, conversions, weddings, etc. on a fee-for-service basis and are welcomed at holiday celebrations. While average attendance for Shabbat evening services is usually modest, except in the three or four larger communities, attendance for holidays such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Purim, and Shavuot in the existing institutions is high, as secular Jews seek more meaningful spiritual experiences. For example, in 2013 over 1000 people participated in Yom Kippur services at Yotzma in Modi'in, many of them standing outside the small synagogue and participating in the service through loudspeakers in an expansive meadow. Beit Daniel in Tel Aviv reports an attendance of 1000 at its all-night *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* service in its three centers in Tel Aviv. A summer Shabbat evening service in the Tel Aviv port led by a Reform rabbi, but not associated with the Reform Movement, attracted around 1000 participants (Kronish). Twelve hundred Israelis participated in the IMPJ's two day biennial conference in Kibbutz Shefayim in June 2014 (IMPJ Newsletter). The Tel Aviv municipality,<sup>8</sup> and more recently the cities of Modi'in and Holon, have been supportive of their Reform communities. New buildings are under construction in the small communities of Carmiel and Kibbutz Gezer.

Young people are increasingly resisting marriage ceremonies led by Orthodox rabbis. A 2015 survey found that 49% of all Jews (and 80% of all secular Jews) did not want an Orthodox marriage. 28% preferred a purely civil marriage, 17% a Reform or Conservative marriage, and 5% preferred to live together without getting married (Hiddush2). Many secular couples travel overseas (often to Cyprus) to be married in civil ceremonies recognized by the state, and are married in Israel in an "unofficial" Reform or Conservative ceremony.<sup>9</sup> Reform rabbis officiated at an estimated 1000 weddings in the year 2013. Reform communities also celebrate an estimated 1000 bar/bat mitzvahs every year, many by non-members. Since over 300,000 Israelis, especially those born in the former Soviet Union, are not considered to be halachically Jewish, the Reform Movement has begun a program which now converts 200 people a year, a number equivalent to 10% of the reported Orthodox conversions (Wirtschafter).<sup>10</sup> An

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<sup>8</sup> Tel Aviv provided land and a grant of \$2 million to build a Reform hostel and community center (Mishkenot Ruth Daniel) in Jaffa which opened in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Increasing numbers are foregoing any formal wedding ceremony (Bordschel-Dan).

<sup>10</sup> The Law of Return was amended in 1970 to state that anyone who had one grandparent who was Jewish could become a citizen. This was apparently done to encourage Eastern European migration to Israel. The result has been that many

Israeli High Court ruling requires the state (but not the Orthodox Rabbinate) to recognize these conversions and to record these converts as Jews in its state records.

Reform Judaism in Israel has evolved in ways that differentiate it from the Reform Movement in North America. Services are, for the most part, in Hebrew, with occasional translations for overseas guests. Many but not all Reform congregations in Israel expect their congregants to wear *kipot* and *tallitot*. Rules regarding conversion, such as patrilineal descent, accepted in North America but not in Israel, differ from North American Reform. Reform communities in Israel, as in North America, increasingly add modern and other "twists" to the traditional service, some focusing on more up-to-date spiritual music and prayers, others incorporating contemporary renditions of traditional prayers, some running a nearly 100% musical service, and others focusing on environmental and social issues.

Reform communities place an important focus on social action (*tikkun olam*), reaching out to minorities, especially Arabs, and helping underprivileged families and children. At the national level, IRAC lobbies not only for pluralism but also for women's and minority rights and for democracy. For examples at the local level, congregants in Modi'in tutor school children whose families cannot afford private tutoring. The small congregation in Gedera has regular dinners with residents of a neighboring Arab town. In 2015 Beit Daniel in Tel Aviv organized an intercultural art contest for school children on the subject of "Celebrating our Differences," with the winning drawings blown up and exhibited in the Jaffa Port.

The IMPJ, as well as individual Reform communities, increasingly emphasizes education activities. Five public elementary and secondary schools are explicit "Reform" institutions, Leo Baeck in Haifa (elementary, middle, and high-school), Tali Bayit v'Gan in Jerusalem, Tali Beit Hinuch in Jerusalem, Yozma in Modi'in, and Ussishkin in Tel-Aviv (primary schools). Leo Baeck is the largest Reform education institution, with 3000 students and a vast campus. Reform synagogues and communities also manage 48 public pre-schools each with 20-30 children (IMPJ). Involvement in pre-schools is a way of reaching parents with pluralistic perspectives, some of whom may become synagogue members, and is also a source of funding for religious and social services. A Reform Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation curriculum for sixth graders is now being run class-wide in 10 public schools in Tel Aviv and may eventually be used in most of Tel Aviv's 60 secular elementary schools.

Overall, IMPJ congregations have relationships with 100 schools through Jewish calendar and life-cycle events, including group Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, mother-daughter programs, and a ceremony of "Receiving of the Torah" for second graders, reaching an approximate total of 7000 students in Israeli public schools (Education Department, IMPJ). These programs emphasize egalitarian worship, discussions of how Jewish study and ethics impact modern life, and *tikkun olam* (shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world).

The annual budget of the IMPJ in 2015 was \$5.8 million. 85% of IMPJ funding comes from Zionist organizations (e.g., the Jewish Agency, the World Zionist Organization), overseas Reform organizations (the Association of Reform Zionist Americans (ARZA) and the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), North American federations and foundations, and individual donations. Direct funding from government accounts for 5% of income, and self-generated income for less than 9%. Funding from the Jewish Agency is likely to go down as the Agency's overall income declines. The individual communities, especially those located in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Modi'in, expend in total more than twice the amount of IMPJ and generate a high percentage of income through memberships and fees for services.

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immigrants to Israel do not meet the halachic requirement to be considered a Jew: having a mother who was Jewish or converted under Orthodox auspices (Jewish Virtual Library).

Since 2003 the Reform Movement has managed a year-long state-sponsored pre-army service and learning program (*mechina* in Hebrew). The army encourages these programs, of which there are now 40, as a means of getting more mature and committed conscripts. The Reform *mechina*, located in Jaffa, enrolls 50 young men and women each year, and is oversubscribed. It offers young Israelis the opportunity to intensively study their Jewish heritage and Israeli identity. The participants put Jewish values into practice by working in service projects in their community. Establishment of a second *mechina* is under discussion. Three Reform kibbutzim in the Negev--Lotan, Yahel, and Ketura—are continuing.

Beginning in the 1980's, HUC began to ordain Israeli rabbis. Through 2013, a total of 85 Israelis had been ordained, with four to six new rabbis each year. Of the 85 graduates 40 continue to be directly connected to the Reform Movement in Israel, either in individual synagogues or in the Movement's headquarters. An additional 20 work in related education and spiritual institutions, as free-lancers, or are retired (HUC). A few have established "unaffiliated" communities in Israel. 18-20 are working overseas in the US, Eastern Europe, and South America. Jointly with the Melton Center of the Hebrew University, HUC offers a Master's degree in Pluralistic Jewish Education.

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), an arm of the IMPJ, continues to encourage Jewish pluralism and social justice in Israel. It seeks state recognition, funding, and equal status for Reform and Conservative rabbis, synagogues and institutions, opposes gender segregation and exclusion of women from the public sphere, seeks freedom of choice in marriage and equal rights in divorce, and equal opportunity and recognition of the rights of minorities in Israel (IRAC). IRAC has achieved successful rulings from the Israeli Supreme Court on a number of these issues. Its vocal activism has increased public awareness of the Reform Movement.

Lobbying by the IMPJ, IRAC, the North American Reform Movement (URJ), and other Jewish renaissance organizations has had recent positive results in the increased responsiveness of the Israeli government to pluralistic concerns, including finding a way to allow women and other groups to pray at the Western Wall, the startup of public financing of Reform rabbis and Reform educational and conversion activities, and discussions on ways to legally accept non-orthodox marriages. This is in part a result of a growing conviction by 'secular' Jews that the Orthodox monopoly is intolerable. Some of these gains may be lost to the extent that Haredi political parties remain in the governing coalition.

## Challenges for the Reform Movement in Israel

**Demographic Challenges.** The long term challenges for the Reform Movement and like-minded institutions should not be underestimated. Perhaps the most difficult one is demographic. Currently the Haredi population accounts for 11% of Israel's overall population and Arabs account for 20%. Because of high birth rates compared to the rest of the population, the numbers of Haredi and Arabs in Israel will increase significantly over the next decades. This can already be seen in primary school enrollments in 2014: Haredi make up 18.8% of enrollment, Arabs 26.4%, Jews attending orthodox state schools 14.1%, and Jews<sup>11</sup> attending "secular" (Hebrew speaking) state schools 40.7% (Blass). While there may be considerable inter-generational "leakage" from orthodox and Haredi groups,<sup>12</sup> differential birth rates are

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<sup>11</sup> It is estimated that 5000 Arabs, mainly in mixed cities, also attend Hebrew speaking primary and secondary schools (Shwed et. al.).

<sup>12</sup> There appears to be a generational change from more to less religious. One survey estimates that 19.5% of

still likely to result in “secular” Jews eventually accounting for less than 40% of the overall population. The result will be a decline in the potential political clout of those with progressive Jewish values. The Reform Movement will need to find a way to capture a larger proportion of the Israeli Jews who consider themselves neither Haredi nor Orthodox. This means reaching out to groups which have not traditionally been connected to the Reform Movement, such as Mizrahi Jews, as well as those of Russian/former-Soviet Union origin.

**Building Public Support and Understanding.** Public acceptance, while increasingly positive, continues to be problematic. While there is no survey that asks these questions, observers report that many orthodox Jews, as well as those who self-identify as “traditional not religious,” believe that the only true representation of the Jewish religion is that of Orthodox Judaism. Some may consider that being secular is better than being “Reform,” which could be characterized as a “false” religion. Some “Jewish renaissance” supporters are allergic to identifying with a “Movement” or national organization which prescribes rules from above. Some Israelis argue that the Reform Movement “puts too much effort into legislation and advocacy” (Blum). Both secular and religious parents have sometimes complained when their schoolchildren have been exposed to Reform ceremonies, such as the offering of the Torah to second graders, or Reform pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah school studies programs. While the Tel Aviv, Modi'in, and Holon municipal governments are supportive of their Reform communities, leaders in other municipalities, especially the smaller ones, have been reported to be neutral or antagonistic to Reform efforts, some reluctant to provide public facilities for Reform events or to invite Reform clergy to participate in community religious celebrations.

The difficulties faced by Reform Judaism are part of a much larger problem in Israel of disunity, antagonism, and mistrust. Orthodox and secular Jews are dismayed by the fact that the Haredi community depends on the state for much of its financial support, its men do not enter the army, and most of its students do not study science, mathematics, or English. In their turn, Haredim believe that both modern orthodox and secular Jews are not following Judaism properly and some consider the state of Israel to be “idolatrous.” There is a significant level of discrimination against Ethiopian Jews. While serious efforts are being made to recognize the ‘other’s’ narrative, distrust between Jews and Arabs, as well as discrimination against Arabs, is a major challenge.

Disparaging remarks continue to be made about Reform Judaism, although they are being increasingly questioned. In February 2014, MK David Rotem accused the Reform Movement as being “not Jewish . . . they are another religion.” Subsequently, after much criticism, he apologized publicly for his remarks, which he said were “misinterpreted” (Huffington Post). In August 2014 Shimon Ohayon, a member of Knesset from the Yisrael Beitenu party, stated that the Reform Movement is “a big sack of trouble, assimilation, and neglect of Jewish education” (Sommer). These recent public outbursts could be in part a reflection of the Movement’s growing impact and visibility. In October 2014, President of Israel Reuven Rivlin, who in 1989 made disparaging remarks about Reform Judaism (Sales), met with North American Reform leadership and said “We are one family and the connection between all Jews is very important to the state of Israel” (Maltz). Subsequently he has participated in Reform-led events.

The growth of “Jewish renaissance” is both an opportunity and a challenge for the Reform Movement. The potential audience is rapidly increasing, but the Movement must compete with organizations and groups, many of which have similar goals but for various reasons do not want to be identified as “Reform.” The Masorti Movement is both an important partner as well as a competitor for congregants. Building support requires marketing the Reform brand as something which is indigenous to Israel, meets the spiritual needs of its population, and puts ritual and observance in a modern context.

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children of “religious” parents self-identify as “secular” and 41.9% of children of “traditional” parents self-identify as “secular” (Ben Porat and Feniger).

**Education Efforts.** The IMPJ platform emphasizes the importance of educational programs to reach out to teachers, students, and parents within the Israeli public school system, as well as to serve its own communities through pre-schools and elementary schools (IMPJ). But the Reform Movement is currently connected to less than 5% of the 2000 Jewish elementary schools in Israel (CBS). The Reform *mechina*, while oversubscribed, is only one of 40 *mechinot*. The joint program of the HUC with Hebrew University awarded only five Master's degrees in Jewish education in 2014, compared with 86 Master's degrees awarded by the Solomon Schechter Institute and 100 certificates as "Jewish heritage" teachers awarded by the Be'eri School for Teacher Education of the Hartman Institute. Four to six Israelis are ordained by HUC each year. While this number could be increased, graduates may have difficulty finding paid positions within the Movement. Some Israeli rabbis are working in education, as free-lancers, or in other non-profits. This helps to extend the vision of the Reform Movement to a larger audience, but the growth of "free-lancers" runs a risk of diluting the value added that a national organization brings in terms of mobilization and development of content.

High quality Reform Jewish curricula, such as school based bar and bat mitzvah programs, could be extended to more elementary and secondary schools. The HUC curriculum could be more closely connected to the Israeli context. Selection and training of future rabbis will need to increasingly focus on building leadership and management skills. Reform programs for Jewish educators should be expanded through new or cooperative programs with other institutions, including training lay leaders who could help to conduct services, a practice which is common among Masorti communities.

**Financial Issues.** The IMPJ distributes \$2.2 million directly to Reform communities, mainly for salaries of rabbis, and \$1.8 million to IRAC, with the rest going to education and national leadership. This amount is significantly more than the various unaffiliated Jewish renaissance groups spend, as well as more than twice the budget of Masorti. Nonetheless it is inadequate for future growth of the Movement. Rabbis in small communities are usually hired on a half-time basis, and funding for programs in these communities can be as little as \$10,000 per year.

After a complex court case, the state<sup>13</sup> agreed to pay the salary of Rabbi Miri Gold, a rabbi of a regional Reform synagogue and a regional religious council member (ARZA). It is expected that the state will pay the salaries of other Reform rabbis who are part of regional religious councils. The state has also begun to fund some of the Movement's education and conversion activities. Some municipalities (e.g., Holon) are helping Reform communities to obtain land and build physical facilities. But total state funding of all "Jewish renaissance" activities is estimated at only 2% of the amount provided to orthodox rabbis and communities (Goldwater).

The Movement will need to continue to lobby for increased state support. At the same time, Reform communities will need to increase their efforts at self-financing through charging for pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, weddings, bar/bat mitzvahs, and other events. Future rabbis will need to be not only spiritual and religious leaders but also entrepreneurial, opportunistic, good financial managers, and strongly bottom-line oriented. Finally it is estimated that in 2009 American Jews donated over \$2 billion a year to Israel, but only an inadequate two percent went to promote pluralism, social justice, and shared society values (Fleisch and Sasson).

**A Strategic View.** Meeting the demographic as well as public perception challenges requires a multi-pronged strategy. As expressed by the Dean of the HUC Jerusalem campus (Rabbi Naamah Kelman), this begins with an "open tent" approach-- training religious leaders and educators who "may or may not

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<sup>13</sup> But these funds are paid by the Ministry of Culture rather than the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

serve Reform congregations” and welcoming a wide variety of expressions of Jewish experience serving musical, environmental, gay, traditional, and other groups (Kelman). In particular the Movement should connect more effectively with the growing numbers of independent communities, many of which are lay led, with “Reform style” religious practices.

It also includes partnerships with like-minded organizations to achieve a critical mass which would have an impact on public opinion and policy. The Movement already works directly with BINA and TALI. It may wish to strengthen these connections as well as those with institutions which share some but not all of the Reform Movement’s objectives and principles. The IMPJ is a “public, non-party-political organization” (IMPJ Platform) and so must be careful not to become too entwined in politics. At the same time it naturally has connections with centrist and progressive political parties which have common goals. In the interest of building a shared society, it may also wish to expand its points of collaboration with the Orthodox and Haredim, to the extent to which these groups have liberalizing tendencies, as well as with Arab communities. The possibility of joining forces with the Masorti Movement could be examined more seriously.

The Movement will certainly continue to seek legal changes in the status of Reform and Conservative in life cycle events and to fight for increased state funding. But the long term test of the viability of Reform in Israel will be commitment and participation of more Israelis in the Movement. Targets could be set for increases in the percentage of those who self-identify as Reform or Conservative from the current 7-8% to 15%, as well as in numbers of Reform associated schools and communities and attendance in Reform events. All of this will require increased funding--self-generated, from donors, and from the state.

The challenges for the Reform Movement are part of a larger set of issues facing Israel. As more Israelis seek a religious identity outside of Orthodoxy, and as Israel’s Arab, Haredi, and settler populations grow, the debate over the nature of Israel’s society will intensify. Respect and recognition of the validity of others’ beliefs and narratives is neither a slogan nor a luxury but an essential part of the social contract in a democratic society. There are countervailing anti-democratic forces active in Israel. Leadership, strong management skills, and a long term perspective by the Reform Movement as well as like-minded institutions and individuals will help to ensure that pluralism, democracy, and social justice in Israel are not only preserved but strengthened.

A vibrant Reform Movement in Israel is needed for the survival of Reform and progressive Judaism in the Diaspora. The reverse is equally true. Israel needs a strong progressive Diaspora not only as its advocate but also as its partner in building a Judaism which is relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Annex: Jewish Renaissance Institutions

“Jewish renaissance” has grown to encompass a wide variety of institutions and has been an increasing subject of interest. Several studies (Goldwater and MIDOT) undertaken in 2013 provide an overview of the field. In 2013, 530 community-level and other organizations were identified as involved in “Jewish renewal.” Of the 35% who responded to a questionnaire, at the local level, 26% were local congregations of the Reform and Conservative Movement, 26% were community centers that engage to one extent or another in Jewish renewal activities, and 29% were “independent” (nonaffiliated) organizations. The remaining 9% were “parent” or affiliated organizations, pre-military programs (*mechinot*), and autonomous “projects.” Sixty-seven percent of the organizations ran both life cycle and spirituality programs. Over 50% of the programs ran programs regarding learning, leadership, culture and informal education (MIDOT).

The major national “Jewish renaissance” organizations, in addition to the Reform Movement, are described below.

- Masorti (‘tradition’), the arm of the Conservative Movement in Israel, was established in 1976 by rabbis who had made *aliyah* to Israel and initially served a mainly North American community. There are now 73 Masorti communities and ‘*Kehilot*’, up from 50 a few years ago, serving mainly native Israelis, many of them lay led. The Solomon Schechter Institute, an Israeli institution associated with the Jewish Theological Seminary (the US based institution which trains rabbis, cantors and educators for the Conservative Movement) has ordained 65 Israeli rabbis. The Masorti youth Movement (NOAM) serves 1400 youths aged 10-18. In recent surveys 200,000 to 300,000 Israelis defined themselves as Masorti. Masorti shares with the Reform Movement a commitment to a “pluralistic, egalitarian, and democratic vision of Zionism” ([www.masorti.org](http://www.masorti.org)). Beyond its lobbying for pluralism, the Masorti Movement does not take official positions on political issues such as settlements. It differs from the Reform Movement (as it does in the US) in its concept of adherence to *halacha*, and its adherents are more observant than those of Reform. The annual budget of the national organization is a relatively modest \$2.5 million. The Movement recently established a “Jewish Pluralism Watch,” which monitors and publicizes Knesset members’ opinions and voting records on pluralism issues.
- Institutions which train educators, teachers and community leaders in Jewish values and tradition include, in addition to the Hebrew Union College (affiliated with the Reform Movement), the Solomon Schechter Institute, the Mandel Institute for Education Leadership, the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and the Melton Center for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University. The Schechter Institute runs Master’s degree programs in Jewish education, reports that 600 students are enrolled in fourteen “tracks” (Schechter) and has a budget in excess of \$5 million.
- Several institutions teach or support the teaching of Jewish values in public schools. TALI (the Hebrew acronym for “augmented Jewish studies”) is an educational organization which seeks to strengthen the teaching of Jewish heritage in public schools. Established by the Masorti Movement in 1976, it has evolved into an independent institution which provides Jewish content to secular schools. In 2014 TALI was active in 110 public elementary schools and 130 kindergartens serving around 30,000 students. This is a significant growth since 2012, when there were 86 schools and 118 pre-schools. Several of these schools are associated with the Reform Movement. TALI’s educational materials are reported to be of high quality and some of them are used by the IMPJ in its own school programs. The Be`eri Initiative for

Pluralistic Jewish Education, part of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, serves 125 junior and senior high schools. It seeks to “impart to youth a brand of Judaism and Zionism that holds contemporary significance for them” (Hartman). Meitarim, the Network for Jewish Pluralistic Education, is a relatively new organization which now serves 50 schools and two post-high school Jewish leadership institutions, with approximately 5000 students. It has authorization from the Knesset to manage a new stream of non-orthodox but religiously oriented schools (Balint).

- IDF *Mechinot* are year-long pre-army preparatory programs for high school graduates. There are currently 40, about half of which are non-orthodox in orientation and study Judaism from an ethical or traditional perspective. One of these is the Reform Mechina located in Jaffa currently enrolling 50. A “Council of Pre-Army Programs” coordinates *Mechinot* activities. Most of the orthodox *Mechinot* are located in the West Bank.
- The “secular yeshiva” BINA, “The Center for Jewish identity and Hebrew Culture,” links Jewish culture with social action. It offers programs to 1000 participants and has seminars and events which reach 20,000 participants. It was established by the kibbutz movement, in response to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and has recently initiated several joint programs with the Reform Movement (BINA website). ALMA (the “Home for Jewish Culture”) seeks to “revive learning classical Jewish texts, and position Hebrew culture as an essential element of pluralistic Jewish identity in Israel and abroad” (ALMA website).
- PANIM is a voluntary organization of institutions involved in Jewish renewal, the purpose of which is to share information among its members and to lobby for changes in laws and for public support of Jewish renewal organization. Currently PANIM has 88 member organizations, of which the IMPJ is one. Other smaller umbrella groups include She’arim, Nitzanim, and Mirkam (PANIM website).
- Hiddush is an NGO which promotes religious freedom and equality through advocacy, education, legal support, and information dissemination (Hiddush website).



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