

Religious Pluralism in Israel

Sha'i ben-Tekoa

In February, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, head of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations, jetted to Israel for a Jewish Agency meeting in Jerusalem to lobby against legislation, pending in the Knesset, that would finally codify in law the practice as old as the state of denying validity to Reform and Conservative conversions performed inside the country.

His trip followed by a couple of weeks a minor media event, when a party of American Reform and Conservative activists chained themselves at the entrance to the Ministry of the Interior in Jerusalem to protest that department's refusal to recognize their movements' conversions. It is not enough for them that the Israeli government recognizes their activities outside Eretz Yisrael; they want the Orthodox rabbis who live there to be compelled to accept them as equals.

During his trip, Rabbi Yoffie was interviewed by the *Jerusalem Post* on a related subject and expressed his puzzlement at finding the latest tidal wave of an aliyah of refugees from the old Soviet Union, who he believes should be his natural allies, siding with the Orthodox on this matter. Largely non-observant themselves, they follow their leader Natan Sharansky in opposing the legal recognition of Reform and Conservative conversions in Israel.

Jetting back to New York, Rabbi Yoffie met with Prime Minister Netanyahu and pressed him on his country's lack of religious pluralism.

The Prime Minister listened politely, of course, but refused to be photographed with him and his fellow Reform/Conservative leaders. By April, the Knesset had passed the first of the three necessary readings of the bill on its way to becoming, finally, written law.

In June, threat of its passage triggered another anxious mission to the Holy Land by Rabbi Yoffie and Rabbi Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary and others who "defused" the crisis by putting it off until September.

Mainstream American Jewish anger at this ongoing rejection by the Israeli Rabbinate is understandable, but one may also say that Rabbi Yoffie and his people still don't get it. Reform and Conservative Jews are indeed treated "badly" by the Orthodox here and in Israel, and they still don't understand why.

As a teacher over the years to hundreds of Soviet Jewish refugees who also knows something of Israel, perhaps I can help the Rabbi and his flock see why these refugees from and survivors of Marxism aren't flocking to Reform

Judaism, and why the snubbing of his movement's rabbis by Israel's religious establishment continues.

The problem begins, I'm afraid, with Rabbi Yoffie's inability to see Judaism through Israeli eyes. He complains of the absence of religious pluralism there, but from an Israeli perspective, things look different.

American Reform/Conservatives decry Orthodox practitioners of the same multifaceted Judaism the *Baal Shem Tov* and his rival the *Vilna Gaon* knew, in the name of democracy (a word of non-Jewish provenance) and religious pluralism (a phrase also appearing nowhere in the Torah), but in Orthodox eyes what's really at stake here is neither tolerance nor its opposite but "copyright infringement."

Let me explain. American Jews have for years been upset about what they call The "absence of religious freedom" in the Jewish state, though the few Israelis aware of their distress are somewhat mystified: What could be more pluralistic than a tiny country in which a great percentage of its people come from more than 100 countries where they practiced Judaism in all its local varieties and continue to do so in Israel? Judaism has been, by the very nature of the great Dispersion, a variegated thing.

In Israel, there are *olim* who emigrated from Ireland and Iran, Peru, Poland, England, India, Morocco and Sweden, all brought up with some variations on the theory and practice of their scattered people's ancient way of life but who, despite their differences, found common ground in Israel. For example, no matter where they were or when, this people observed the Sabbath, followed dietary laws, and recognized the authority of the Talmud, while American Jews, in their overwhelming majority, never have.

A coat of many colors in the Diaspora and Israel, Judaism in Yemen made Jews dress one way; in Tunisia, another, in a *Chasidische shtetl*, another. A Moroccan Maimouna festival at Passover time was unknown not only in Denmark but in Kurdistan, whose Saharane festival was unknown in I.B. Singer's Warsaw.

Among the Orthodox are the "Modern," distinguished externally only by their little skullcaps; the "Black Hat" by their fedoras; some Chasidim wear their sidecurls one way, others go without sidecurls altogether.

If you want uniformity, the antithesis of pluralism, visit at random any Episcopalian church on Easter Sunday and three Reform temples from Maine to California on Yom Kippur and try to spot the differences.

The sad fact is that while Judaism has always remained within certain boundaries, today's American Reform and

Sha'i ben-Tekoa studied comparative religion at Columbia University and the University of Chicago.

Conservatives have drifted so far from what most Jews have understood as theory and practice, they are viewed in Israel, even by those of minimal observance, as beyond the recognizable pale.

It is, frankly, provincial of Rabbi Yoffie and liberal (in their religion) American Jews to protest the Israeli Rabbinate's firm stand against accepting their conversions, because it reveals a lack of awareness of just how eccentric they have become and how far from the beaten path of 4,000 years of Jewish life they have strayed.

Leonard Fein, the director of the Reform movement's Commission on Social Action, has sermonized grandly that Judaism belongs "not to the rabbis in Israel but Jews around the world," when, in fact, "Jews around the world" have known little of his organization's philosophies and behaviors: like dismissing the dietary laws; like sometimes holding bar mitzvahs on Sundays; like staging bar mitzvahs whose star performers fly through the ceremony not as the beginning of a deeper Jewish identity after which, like their fathers, they will don *tefillin* when praying, but like a "jailbreak," a merciful end to having to go to those stupid Reform Hebrew schools.

Around the world, Jews have always been less than perfect in their observance of their religion, but at no time, until in Germany about 190 years ago, did they preach a Judaism without Shabbat. At no time and in no place from Mashad (Iran) to Manchester did Jews do absolutely nothing to mark off the Sabbath day, like today's American Reform.

At no time anywhere did rabbis keeping no dietary laws preside over marriages to non-Jews or, like a senior Reform rabbi in Great Neck recently, conduct a "marriage" ceremony in his "temple" between his female assistant rabbi and her lesbian lover.

At no time did Jews in the Dispersion call their meeting houses "temples," for they thought of rebuilding one Temple only.

The thousands of Jews recently liberated from Syria and Yemen, some of whom I have also known and taught, don't know what to make of mainline American Judaism, and the Russians not much more.

Rather than accusing Orthodoxy of "delegitimizing" them, Reform and Conservatives, by their self-proclaimed liberal "values" and behaviors, have distanced and literally delegitimized themselves by de-linking themselves from the laws of the Jews, thus alienating themselves from the common denominators in communities from Murmansk to Madrid.

While it is true that much of world Jewry during the last two centuries stopped being observant altogether, those who did not remained faithful to the basic ways of their forefathers. "Orthodox" Judaism, perhaps the most adaptable religion in the world, hardy enough to survive in scores of cultures and climes over millennia, nonetheless has a core of ideas and laws that cannot be tampered with.

No religion does. One has known "progressive" Roman Catholics who profess great love for the Church and its spirituality but dismiss belief in the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth, the divinity of Jesus, and the

infallibility of the pope in matters of faith as sops to the masses.

But these are not serious thinkers. Strip the Church of its basic identifying ideas and what is left? Ethics? Every religion preaches ethics.

Communists cannot believe in private enterprise and an interest-charging banking system, and capitalists do not preach nationalizing industry. Every intellectual system draws borders between acceptable and unacceptable ideas, and religions are no different.

To the Orthodox mind, liberal Jews who send contributions to "Save the Whales" but wouldn't dream of insisting that the meat they eat be from animals slaughtered humanely are also not thinking consistently.

Since the French Revolution, it is true, vast numbers have either abandoned the faith and lapsed in observance or actually converted to Christianity, like Heinrich Heine, or Karl Marx's father, or Madeleine Albright's parents; or have sworn allegiance to the substitute religions of Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Ethical Culture, Christian Science, Hare Krishna, or the Jesse Jackson wing of the Democratic party, but few have tried to rework the central tenets of Jewish metaphysics and observance as radically as 19th-century German/American Reformers and 20th-century Conservatives, their spiritual stepchildren. Only in Germany, and later in the US, was the Jewish religion so drastically "re-formed."

From the Orthodox viewpoint, these "modern" trends, by rejecting the Sabbath, Kashrut, and Talmud, are not new at all but as hoary as Christianity. The first Christians also claimed to be on the true Jewish path when they dispensed with the dietary laws and Talmud. When the medieval Church was into book-burnings, the bishops didn't dare touch the Bible, which they had appropriated as "their" "Old Testament." Their target was the Talmud, the "user's manual" without which much of the Bible cannot be understood, the guidebook for Jewish leaders, lay and rabbinic, for generations.

By abandoning the Oral Law, Reform Jews went back even further than Christianity to the period of the Sadducees who also rejected it; or forward and eastward to 9th-century Babylonia, when Karaites dismissed the Sages of the Mishna and Talmud too. From the standpoint of Classical Judaism, it is not surprising that over time those sectarians disappeared.

The Israeli rabbinate also knows — composed as it is of intelligent, educated people, not "medieval" (Rabbi Yoffie's word) obscurantists — that, organizationally, America's movements contributed little to the building up of the Land. This was so because Reform's birth during Napoleon's overrunning of Europe and the Emperor's desire to de-nationalize all peoples, and especially the Jews, led them to jettison the ancient longing to return to Zion as basic Jewish doctrine. Until 1967, Reform Judaism was notoriously un- and even anti-Zionist.

The contributions to the Zionist cause by great, individual Reform Jews, like Herzl or Judah Magnes, must not be denied. But this is not the same as their movement's having played any intellectual or institutional role in the

national rebirth. The religious were always in Eretz Israel; the Socialist Jews came and populated hundreds of settlements; Jabotinsky's liberal bourgeoisie filled up cities; the Reform movement put up one kibbutz.

Above all other considerations, the Israeli Rabbinate can hardly be expected to bless Reform/Conservative conversions when they look on in horror at the assimilation rate in America and weep. The Sunday *New York Times* nuptial announcements have become the obituary pages for the American Jewish community. More than half of the Jews shown getting married on any given Sunday are not marrying within. (Today's refugees from the old Soviet empire are puzzled by wedding announcements in the *New York Times* reporting that Levy married Gillespie and "a Catholic priest led the ceremony, assisted by Cantor Amy Shmendrick." This befuddles them; it doesn't fit their mental template of Jewish behavior).

In the first decade of this century, the German sociologist, demographer, and Zionist leader, Arthur Ruppin, did a study of Trieste, where intermarriage was skyrocketing. He concluded that such a cosmopolitan Jewish community with such an intermarriage rate (56 percent) could not sustain itself, and he was right.

Today the intermarriage rate in the US is 60 percent. The great ship that once was the American Jewish community — whose greatest personalities included the men who gave the country and the world American (Hollywood) movies, from Goldwyn to Mayer to Spielberg; who won buckets of Nobel Prizes in Medicine and the Pure Sciences and Arts; who entertained us, from Gershwin to Bernstein to Rodgers and Hammerstein and *Seinfeld* — is sinking. Like the *Titanic*, it is disappearing beneath the waves in a foaming sea of assimilation, with its rabbis in a lather because, in the words of one of this community's comedians, Rodney Dangerfield, in Israel they "don't get no respect."

The Israeli Rabbinate and Knesset have not surprisingly concluded that whatever Reform and Conservative Judaism is or is not, their conversions cannot be accepted because — if this people had done nothing else in 4,000 years — it has survived, which it never would have, had it intermarried like American Jews today.

In Orthodox (Israeli) eyes, the catastrophe of intermarriage in America alone disqualifies these movements as legitimate converters of proselytes. Rabbi Yoffie's born-Jewish congregants are fleeing in numbers not seen since 19th-century Germany and 15th-century Spain; yet their traditionally non-Zionist clergy claim authoritative parity in Eretz Yisrael in the instruction of would-be Jews?

According to the now-famous (or is it infamous?) National Jewish Population Survey of 1990, there are more than 200,000 Jewish children attending church in America.¹ Before fishing in new waters, or trying to get the rabbis in Jerusalem to accept their opinions, the people who chained themselves to the Ministry of the Interior might first explore the American interior and consider a rescue mission closer to home.

Orthodox rabbis are neither primitive shamans nor enemies of free thought; the Talmud, after all, is an 18-volume transcript of their arguing and frequently agreeing to disagree

Neither bigots nor idiots, they look at what is happening in America, compare it to the Holocaust, and grieve. There were 4.8 million American Jews in 1928.2 This number should be triple that today, but it is even less.

A demographer can easily make the case that no less than another six million are missing. Through assimilation — a sterile euphemism for apostasy-in-slow-motion over three or four generations — American Jews have undergone a silent but no less effective Holocaust. And these Six Million are mourned by Orthodox Jews no less than those who perished in the ovens at Birkenau.

Among America's mainstream movements, there are no doubt fine individuals dedicated to the well-being of the Jewish people, but they should stop bashing Orthodox rabbis for reasoning, not via medieval narrow-mindedness but the hard evidence of history, that traditional law and practice has preserved this particular, even peculiar, people from century to century and culture to culture — not the "innovations" that always seem to de-judaize and "modernize" Judaism in the direction of assimilationist oblivion before washing up on the river banks of history.

Eric Yoffie's use of "medieval" is a good example of how far Reform Judaism has drifted from normative Judaism. For him, "medieval" is an insult, because he subscribes to the Darwinian view of life which posits humankind's evolving to ever higher states of being and wisdom, where Classical Judaism does not. According to the principle of *yeridas ha-dorot*, Abraham was the greatest of all Jews, and it's been downhill in righteousness ever since. Also, "medieval" is an idea that makes sense only in a non-Jewish context, *i.e.*, according to the Christian calendar. Yet according to the principle of *yeridat hadorot*, in the medieval period one finds Rashi (1040-1105), Rambam (1136-1204), and Ramban (1195-1270), among others. Reform Jews know so little of these giants they don't understand that to compare today's Orthodox rabbis to them is the highest compliment.

So, in the end, it's a case of "copyright infringement," not intolerance. How authentic can these movements be if 60 percent of their children many out?

And as for my Russian students and the hundreds of thousands in Israel who are not flocking to Reform, they are, by and large, serious people, and when they learn what Reform Judaism is, it does not fit their picture of the memory of this faith they gleaned in whispered words from their frightened parents and grandparents. Brain-washed by atheistic Marxism, the greatest intellectual hoax in human history, most of them may never be candidates for any stream in Judaism, but the synagogue they *don't* attend is Orthodox.

Natan Sharansky is a good example. This secular former Soviet chess champion and computer whiz knows at least that within Classical Judaism and the Talmud great minds toiled and that yeshiva students break their heads over their brilliancies, while in America's Reform Sunday schools the curriculum is ... what? "No religion is better than any other, homosexuality is good, save the whales, and the Holocaust." They are very big on the Holocaust. Because Reform

has circumsised Classical Judaism of its practice, the metaphysical theory also dies on the vine. What is left is rooting for "social justice" and remembering the Holocaust.

Well, the Quakers and Unitarians are also into "social justice," so that leaves only the Holocaust, the nightmare side of being Jewish. Nowhere is there joy and an identity independent of satanic persecution. No wonder 60 percent flee.

Reform Bar Mitzvahs are, for virtually every boy who suffers through one, days of jubilation, for they signal an end to the torture of having to go to those stupid Reform Hebrew schools, destructive wastes of time because they are so detached from a basic human truth: Even Orthodox children do not get their Jewishness from their teachers in religious schools but from their parents in the house.

The response of Reform and Conservative to the "Holocaust of Intermarriage" is to call for "more funds for Jewish education," when it is perhaps their version of "Jewish education" that is driving people away.

They seem to mean that one must spend more on their schools because *that* is where Jewishness is acquired. They have forgotten that Judaism is largely a religion practiced not in glitzy temples but at home.

What is the point, for example, of learning about the great pilgrimage festival of Succot if no one in one's Reform Jewish community builds a *succah* and actually uses it for

a week?

What is the point of learning anything in those inane Reform Sunday and weekday Hebrew schools when outside of them, in the homes these kids come from, there is nothing of Jewish life, discussion, or practice?

Liberal American Jews should look more to themselves as to why their numbers are diminishing to the vanishing point and less to rabbis in Israel for a *brachah* over philosophies that only seem to make this beleaguered people grow even smaller.

In 1965, the intermarriage rate among American Jews was eight percent, about where it may be today among the Orthodox. Let Reform-Conservative communities get their intermarriage rate back down to where it used to be and they will have a greater chance of finding acceptance among Classical Jews and a place in Israel's already pluralistic society. •

Notes:

1. See Edward Norden. -Counting the jews. *Coinmmtarv*. October 1991.
2. Abraham Karp. *Haven and Hoer*, Schocken, 1955, p. 28.
3. The NJPS estimated 5.5 million Jews but admitted that this method included all members of a Jewish household if one parent %%as Jewish. The core, more reliable figure. teas 4.3 million.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Re Sha'i ben-Tekoa's "Religious Pluralism in Israel" (*Midstream*, August/September 1997), rarely have I read an article on an issue as serious as religious pluralism in Israel that reflects such an insensitivity to the nuances of the subject. Sha'i ben-Tekoa's article shows he does not grasp the problems related to the issues he raises.

He displays only a casual reading and understanding of Jewish history in arguing that democracy and pluralism were unknown in the Jewish experience. The terms "pluralism and democracy" generically reflect the diversity of religious, cultural, and ethnic ideas that have been part and parcel of Judaism throughout its long history. The arguments that raged in the historical past were as acrimonious as our current ones, and Ben-Tekoa's accusations against all of Reform and Conservative Judaism bespeak a polemic thrust of dubious value, rather than an accurate historical analysis of select areas with which one may disagree.

It would take an article as long or longer to refute Ben-Tekoa's errors of fact and omission and his misunderstanding of the achievements of these modernist movements in Judaism. These movements also supplied to the Zionist movement, in addition to Judah Leon Magnes, a graduate of the Hebrew Union College and a former Reform rabbi of Temple Emanuel of New York, whom Ben-Tekoa mentions, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a Reform rabbi of Cleveland, Ohio, and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, a liberal rabbi, founder of the Jewish Institute of Religion and a founding president of the ZOA and WZOA. In addition, there were a host of Zionist rabbis of this generation who have changed the classical phase of Reform Judaism into a dynamic Zionist oriented religious movement, which deserved much better at Ben-Tekoa's hands than the slaps he sees fit to render.

There unquestionably are serious problems of mutual understanding and honest differences of opinion. But Ben-Tekoa's attempt to write off the vast majority of American Jews as inauthentic bespeaks a hardheartedness and a hardheadedness that is not commensurate with the seriousness of the ques-

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tions that he raises and any hope of resolving them. The alternative he suggests is a return to the past and its high walls of coercion, exclusion, expulsion, and excommunication.

Alfred Gottschalk,
Chancellor and Professor of
Jewish Religious Thought
Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion

Dear Editor.

Having recently received the August /September issue of *Midstream*, I turned to the article titled "Religious Pluralism in Israel" because it is a "hot" topic for us in the Conservative movement.

Who is Sha'i ben-Tekoa anyway? The biographical note says nothing about him except that he took courses in comparative religion at two universities. Content aside, his style is not that of a scholar or even of someone who went beyond a high school education. It is juvenile and offensive.

I am certainly not a spokesman for Reform Judaism, but I take strong exception to his use of a puerile term like "stupid" in describing Reform education as well as his contention that all students discontinue their education after Bar Mitzvah. His comments about Conservative Judaism are hardly kinder, for they distort the nature of our movement.

If one is going to write a polemic about religious pluralism with which I may disagree, I should at least have some regard for the high level of the polemic and the spirit in which it is written. I fault the editor for accepting such a monstrous piece for publication.

Rabbi Robert Layman,
Executive Director
The United Synagogue of
Conservative Judaism

Dear Editor:

Sha'i ben-Tekoa's reasoning ("Religious Pluralism in Israel," *Midstream*, August/September 1997) fascinates me. It can be reduced to the following: Since American Reform Jews have abandoned *kashrut*, Shabbat, and Talmud, and American

Conservative Jews are clones of American Reform Jews, conversions performed by *Israeli* Reform and Conservative rabbis should not be recognized.

I observed two glaring flaws in this formulation. First, if Ben-Tekoa is referring to doctrine, either he is ignorant of Conservative doctrine, or he deliberately obfuscates. Conservative doctrine has by no means abandoned any of what are apparently to Ben-Tekoa the three essential elements of traditional Judaism. If he is speaking of practice rather than doctrine, I suggest he take a closer look at the conduct of numerous Orthodox Jews. As an example and in a word, on Shabbat many, not all, Conservative Jews park openly in the shul parking lot; many Orthodox Jews park furtively on the street around the corner. I shall not even mention the practices of secular Jews, which Ben-Tekoa appears to approve.

Secondly, if the proposed law denying recognition to conversions performed by *Israeli* Reform and Conservative rabbis is indeed based on reasoning like Ben-Tekoa's, how does he explain repeated assurances by the Likud government that the law will have no bearing on conversions performed by American rabbis? How will the law protect Israel from the heresies of Reform and Conservative Judaism if those converted by heretical American rabbis will be accepted by Israel as Jews?

Finally, I cannot close without expressing outrage at Ben-Tekoa's gratuitous implication that Reform Yom Kippur services are identical with Episcopalian Easter services. That is a rank calumny.

David Trachtenberg

Dear Editor:

As a traditionally observant Jew who identifies as Conservative ideologically, I found Sha'i ben-Tekoa's "Religious Pluralism in Israel" (*Midstream*, August/September 1997) to be strident and offensive. More's the pity, because he happens to also make some valid and important points. A Judaism that denies the binding validity of Jewish law, does not require a minyan, has done away with *kashrut*, observance of Shabbat, insistence upon Jewish marriage partners, etc., etc., indeed has moved so far from the essence of traditional

Judaism as to be alien and unacceptable to those immersed in traditional forms of Judaism. That Judaism is Reform Judaism, which so dilutes the requirements and obligations of being Jewish that there are Reform rabbis who will do conversions without benefit of *mikvah* or *brit milah* (ritual circumcision or drawing of a drop of blood — *tipat dam*).

But why does Ben-Tekoa then find it necessary to paint Conservative Judaism (*l'havdil!*) with the same brush? Conservative Judaism is too lenient, but there are strictures. Shabbat and *keasbrut* are supposed to be observed. Changes in the law are addressed by a Committee on Law and Standards that bases rulings on traditional sources. No Conservative rabbi is supposed to participate in an interfaith marriage ceremony; Conservative conversion requires *mikvah*, and no man converted under Conservative auspices is ever uncircumcised! Ben-Tekoa's inability (or lack of desire) to differentiate between these two movements does not speak well for his ability to think critically.

There is, moreover, another even more serious flaw in Ben-Tekoa's argument. The most persistent theme in Ben-Tekoa's piece is the high rate of assimilation in America by Conservative and Reform Jews, which fact renders their movements unacceptable. But Ben-Tekoa is missing an essential point: the vast majority of Israelis consider themselves to be *lo dati*, not religious. It's an old joke that Israelis prefer that the shul they do not attend be Orthodox. But it's not funny. The secularization of large parts of Israeli society, with its loss of traditional values and its failure to identify, Jewishly, is as serious a threat to the Jewishness of Israel as assimilation is a threat to the American Jewish community here. Were these secular Israelis in this country, many of them would assimilate too. There are Israelis who identify just that way: by their national allegiance to Israel, rather than as Jews. So we might say that Orthodox Judaism isn't cutting it either!! And perhaps instead of pointing fingers, what we need to do is look for all available alternative means for encouraging Jews to continue to identify as caring Jews.

Conservative (Masorti) Judaism in particular can provide Israelis with an alternative way of expressing their Judaism that would keep them thinking as Jews, and practicing as Jews at some level. But most Israelis don't even know what Masorti Judaism is and what it offers them. And right-wing Orthodoxy in Israel is too rigid to consider such an alternative. They would rather that a Jew went to the beach on Yom Kippur than to hear *shofar* in a Masorti synagogue. That is not only a grave insult; it is a tragedy for us all.

Arlene Kushner

Dear Editor:

Although your statement of purpose says that you wish to enable a wide range of thought to appear in [*Midstream*], the major contributors to the magazine have been representatives of the paranoid school of modern Jewish opinion (which I cannot dignify by calling "thought"). The article by Ben-Tekoa "Religious Pluralism in Israel," in your August/September issue, is the last straw.

It is ironic that a magazine published by the Theodor Herzl Foundation, named after a great reform leader and the founder of Zionism, should publish an article that says that American Reform and Conservative Jews "are viewed in Israel, even by those of minimal observance, as beyond the recognizable pale." Oddly enough, Mr. Ben-Tekoa several times hints that it is much more acceptable that Jews be non-observant, which I suspect is true of a majority of Israel's Jews, than that they be Reform or Conservative. He says of the Russian immigrants that "the synagogue they don't attend is Orthodox," as if that reflected credit on either the Russian immigrants or the Orthodox Jews.

Although you have published a great many articles of extreme right-wing view, Mr. Ben-Tekoa's article passes the bounds of civilized debate. In addition to saying repeatedly that American Reform and Conservative Jews are not Jews, he

hints that they are no different from the early Christians or present-day Episcopalians and charges that they have done nothing to support Zionism, forgetting that they have supported the State of Israel with massive financial contributions and political pressure in the US Congress.

Mr. Ben-Tekoa's sneering comments on American Reform and Conservative Jews use untypical examples to characterize an entire movement (actually two movements, since the Conservative and Reform movements are quite different).

It is obvious that Mr. Ben-Tekoa has little or no understanding of American Reform Judaism, or of the American factors that have shaped the non-Orthodox movements as well as the born-again Orthodox, the cowboy Orthodox like the Jewish Defense League and their Israeli offshoots.

This, however, is not the main point. In a country in which the Orthodox rabbinate controls what would be matters of civil law in all Western countries, Reform and Conservative Jews are second-class citizens. It is from the State of Israel that we want recognition, not the rabbis.

Lila Gimprich

Sha'ben-Tekoa responds:

Chancellor Gottschalk, I did not write that democracy and especially pluralism were unknown in Judaism. On the contrary, I composed a paean (as the title suggested) to the pluralism in the Israeli/Orthodox world that uninformed Reform know little about. I merely observed, etymologically, that both concepts are of Greek, Hellenistic provenance and by implication not the highest Jewish values, which is not the same as worthless.

He accuses me of "dubious historical accuracy" but points out no inaccuracies. In any case, the article was about the present, mad careering of the once great American Jewish community towards oblivion, via the "Holocaust of Inter-marriages"

performed by his rabbis.

He further accuses me of "writing off the vast majority of Jews as inauthentic." Why do progressive Jews do this? Why do they persist in flailing about with this lie? Surely he knows this is not the classical, Orthodox, Jewish position. Presumably born of a Jewish mother, Gottschalk is no more or less authentic than the late Lubovitcher rabbi of blessed memory. I merely pointed out that one may distinguish between essence and existence. I wasn't judging the authenticity of anyone's essential Jewishness but the Jewishness of one's actions. If even a Cardinal Lustiger, a *meshumad* ("apostate," derived from the Hebrew "annihilate") remains a Jew, *kal vachomer* (even more so) unbaptized Reform Jews.

Gottschalk calls me "hardhearted." The American Jewish landscape is hemorrhaging, littered with millions of grieving parents and grandparents because a child is marrying out with the blessing of one of his former students. I scream, "*Gevalt*," "the American Jewish community is dying," and he attacks me Christian-style, suggesting the Orthodox Jew's G-d is cold, wrathful, merciless.

Says the very Talmud both he and Christians dismiss: Those who are kind to the cruel end up being cruel to the kind. By like reasoning, I suggest that Reform rabbis who are "compassionate" to a few people wind up being cruel to millions. He accuses me of no compassion?

Robert Layman for the Conservatives opened his fusillade by demeaning the two-line bio of one who shies from self-promotion because he has no rebuttal for my ideas. He objected to my using the word "stupid," when I think it was a splendid word for the topic at hand: the feelings of your average Reform bar mitzvah boy about his experience, the cognitive dissonance between being told in Reform classrooms about Jewishness (as Reform understand it) and the absence of any distinctively Jewish activities outside of them and especially in the lives of the parents who paid to send him to these temples. This leaves these kids with an inarticulate resentment, which the adolescent expletive "stupid" fits.

My point was that Reform/Conservative schools crank out sneerers like Layman not primarily because the staffs are incompetent or the curriculum wholly worthless but because they have

no bearing on the students' lives.

I was actually quite pleased by Layman's resort to adjectives like "juvenile," "offensive" and "monstrous" because inarticulate name-calling is his only weapon. Against my core argument, he is impotent. I simply compared the intermarriage rates of the three American streams and asked which is best for the Jewish future. The answer is obvious.

David Trachtenberg says I deliberately "obfuscate" the differences between Reform and Conservative when these are irrelevant. What concerned me was the similarities and their leaders' decision to collaborate against rabbis who actually live in Israel. I lump them together because they lump themselves together.

His silly charge that many Orthodox Jews park their cars furtively on the Sabbath is the true juvenilia here. Most classical Jews love the Sabbath because they don't have to drive — an inherently stressful activity. Most live in big cities near their shuls, mikve and grocery stores stocked with kosher goods. Urban dwellers overwhelmingly, they live by the car much less than other Americans.

What is more interesting is Trachtenberg's projective fantasy of childish, rebellious game-playing which reflects the Conservative approach. "What can I get away with?" For Orthodox Jews, who relish their lifestyle, there is no trying to "sneak around" the Sabbath because keeping it is such a pleasure.

I also found it bizarre that most respondents read into my words an approval of secular over Reform Jews. The distinction never occurred to me. The Reform are by definition secular Jews, which is actually an oxymoron. As that extraordinary Christian Orde Wingate said, the Jews brought the idea of G-d into the world. To be secular is to be like everyone else in faithlessness, when by his religion the Jew has always been most distinctive.

Trachtenberg demands that I explain the contradictions between Judaism and Likud policy. Why? I am not a Likudnik. This wasn't my topic.

He closes with "outrage" at what others also "thought" I wrote, *i.e.*, the "gratuitous implication that Reform Yom Kippur services are identical with Episcopalian Easter services." It is clear I was talking not about religious services but the way Jews dress.

Perhaps the point was too recondite for the unlearned Reform but, historically, the Jewish giants who preceded Einstein, Freud, Oppenheimer, etc., the Sages of the Talmud, wrestled with the importance of appearing as a Jew in public.

As a Catholic priest with his turned-around collar advertises his vocation, so an entire "kingdom of priests" does not hide theirs. I was referring to the identicality in clothing between Episcopalians and Reform Jews, not the proceedings inside their churches and temples—though, come to think of it, Reform temples do architecturally mimic Protestant churches: the placement of podia and pews, the playing of an organ, mixed seating, etc.

I find this misreading psychologically fascinating. One of the frequent characteristics of the Jewish people is the discrepancy between how an otherwise literate and intelligent individual loses about 50 points of his IQ when thinking about Jews collectively. The respondents still can't put two and two together and find some causal relationship between what they are doing and the suicide of intermarriage.

They prefer to twist. They simply do not understand that Classical Judaism separates the sexes at prayer for neither puritanical nor "sexist" motives but because the Torah is brilliantly crystal clear about human nature. It accepts that people, married or no, pre- or post-pubescent, especially the male of the species, like to look at the opposite sex and fantasize all kinds of things, which can only be distracting in a meeting hall designed to foster communion with the Creator, not fantasies of procreation.

How can a Reform Jewish man keep his mind on religion, on the two days a year he goes to his temple, when seated next to a Jewish lovely with her hemline at mid-thigh? Concentration, not sexism, is what's behind the Orthodox *mekhitza* (the partition between men and women at prayer).

Penultimately, to Arlene Kushner I confess a touch of stridency, but, forgive me, it is the month of Elul as I write, when every morning in shul, davening ends with a shofar blast meant to, as in army boot camp, WAKE YOU. UP! This people, this great American Jewish community, which gave the world so much, is in demographic Chapter 11 and going out of business. Ms. Kushner suggests that those adhering to more "right-wing" forms of

Judaism may find the strictures of Conservatism "too lenient," when I don't know what those are and don't care. I merely took note of the varying intermarriage rates between the three streams and drew conclusions. One of the three is reproducing, the other two are not.

She is right that the high rate of assimilation was my persistent theme but then, in a non-sequitur, lashes out at Israelis for not being *dati*(?) (The needle on the record player skips and the mind scuttles off in another direction.) She concludes that because most Israelis are not observant, Orthodoxy is a failure too.

Success is relative, and my argument stands. Of the three kinds of American Judaism, one is replenishing our people after what Hitler did to us, and two are not. My article was a response to the simple fact that most graduates of Reform and Conservative temples go on to marry goyim.

She imagines that Orthodox Jews prefer that people go to the beach rather than hear the shofar on Yom Kippur in a Conservative temple. This is doubly wrong and symptomatic of this enormous tragedy of ignorance.

One, it is on Rosh Hashanah that Jews are enjoined to hear the shofar (cf. Numbers 29:1 and Leviticus 23:24), not Yom Kippur. It is Rosh Hashanah, Ms. Kushner, that is Judgment Day. Blowing it on Yom Kippur, one of the happiest days of the year, is only a custom. (The Reform think the Day of Atonement is the holiest. No, it is the Sabbath, not the ultimately cleansing, liberating and unifying Day of At-One-ment.)

Two, if a Jew makes the effort to hear the shofar even at the end of the Ten Days, it is only to his credit, independent of the venue, which is another question.

Finally, Lila Gimprich reminds me of Berlin's German Jewish society ladies of the 1930s capable of closing the shutters against the increasing terror in the streets, to smile at their guests and pour some more tea. Her first two paragraphs use clichés such as "not worth reading," "the last straw" and "beyond the bounds of civilized debate" but never come close to addressing my central observation. Like Gottschalk, she flings the lie that Orthodox Jews say Reform and Conservative are not Jews. When will they cease their hysterics and stop misrepresenting what is a very simple law? A person is born a Jew because G-d made him one. No Jew has the right to disenfranchise another.

We are taught in the first verses of the Torah that G-d distinguished (*lehavdil*) between light and darkness, day and night, between the waters above and the waters below, between good and evil, essence and existence, right behavior and wrong.

Yes, Judaism is politically incorrect enough to "pass judgment" on people's actions. A Jewish doctor would be remiss in not telling a patient that smoking is bad for his personal health, and judging by the havoc "progressive" liberal Jews are wreaking, their philosophy (another Greek word) may be judged deleterious to Jewish survival. After three decades of a skyrocketing intermarriage rate, one has the right to conclude that perhaps the beliefs and practices of the mainstream community, led by Rabbis Yoffie and Schorsch, are responsible.

One imagines that at some level of cognition the five respondents do understand that Orthodoxy distinguishes between being and behavior but prefer to distort and denounce. Precisely because Orthodox Jews do consider Eric Yoffie a Jew, they are distraught at his leading his flock like lemmings to our destruction.

Gimprich accuses me of sneering. I confess to resorting to mockery and ridicule, tools of the civilized debater, as anyone who has ever seen the Oxford Union society in session, or the weekly prime minister's "Question Time" in the English House of Commons, knows. In any case, no public Orthodox person has ever approached the vulgarity of a Thomas Dine, the intermarried former head of AIPAC who avoids flying El Al because of "those people," or Eric Yoffie, with his low-class name-calling, or Madam Gimprich (not me) who uses phrases like "scurrilous garbage."

In the end, one suspects the whole brouhaha around the Conversion Law is kept hot by interested parties who use it as a smoke screen, a red (*schmalz*) herring meant to distract people from the abattoir of Jewish identity that American Reform has become, a cuisinart philosophy turning the majesty of Jewish thought into pop cultural pap and tens of thousands of its children into papists, Episcopalians, and punk rockers, not *erliche yiddin* (righteous Jews).

I scream "*Gevalt*," and Lila Gimprich is concerned with taste. •