

Deepening our connection to Israeli's Rabbi Stephen Wise – HHD 2016

It's Friday night, the sun is starting to set and Shabbat is about to begin. Worshippers are streaming towards the worship area, but this is definitely not your bubie's synagogue. Seats are set up facing the sea and the sun is setting over the waves. The seats are starting to fill up quickly as close to 1000 settle in. At the front, on the boardwalk on the edge of the sea, are the prayerleaders. It's hard to tell who is the Rabbi or cantor as each have a microphone and each have a different instrument; drums, guitars, flute, violin, cello, and all take turns leading the different prayers and their voices meld into beautiful harmonies. They sing the familiar kabbalat Shabbat liturgy like Lecha Dodi and Adon olam, boi kallah, Barchu and Shma, but also original music set to poetry by the likes of chaim nachman bialik. now they're singing psalms set to beatles music and louis armstrong's "it's a wonderful world". Where in the world is this?...Welcome to Shabbat in Tel Aviv. Who would have dreamt that this once secular city would become a centre of spirituality? Its ironic to say but it seems that Israel has found religion.

Now Jerusalem of course is the city of faith, she would have been getting ready for Shabbat early Friday afternoon, shops closing, people finishing work early and rushing home, the siren goes off and the city begins to rest. But in Tel Aviv, and most of the other cities spread around the country, for the past few decades since independence, Friday was similar to other days of the week, clubs and restaurants would be open, a defiantly secular counterpart to the minority religious fringes.

But what has happened recently. Spirituality has come to secular Israeli's. Beit Tefilah Yisraeli, is a startup shul that began in Tel Aviv 10 years ago by a few friends who were looking for a few prayers and a Shabbat dinner on Friday night. They couldn't find what they were looking for and so they started there own little prayer group and the crowd grew from 10 to 20 and soon over 100 people were coming regularly. They then decided to move to a larger venue and host their Shabbat on the beach, overlooking the sunset over the Mediterranean sea.

This is not a singular event. It appears that in many Israeli cities, a new religious devotion is mixing with the predominantly secular ethos. Attendance at synagogues and religious events has been growing for the past few years, and kosher restaurants are on the rise. It might reflect the influx of immigrants from traditional backgrounds making their home here, but the real reason is increased interest in religious activities among Israel's secular Jews. Today, the Tel Aviv boasts dozens of active synagogues, social, civic, and religious organizations. The participants are a mix of single young professionals, young families, immigrants and native Israelis, traditional Jews of all streams, and some who define themselves as secular.

The irony is that for centuries Jews were defined by their religious beliefs and customs yet the early Zionists who decided to move to Israel and create a modern state in the 1800's mostly left their religion behind in Europe. The old world was never a comfortable place for us Jews. we have a checkered history of being expelled, persecuted and executed in every country and every continent. This led most Jews to form close knit communities in shtetls and ghettos across Europe. But when the enlightenment and nationalism spread through the continent, the Jewish people wanted their own national homeland with a common culture, language and history. They were not prepared to wait for God to give them this new home, they wanted to go and get it themselves. This would require a new vision. These Jews were not going to sit around in their villages for the Cossacks to arrive in a pogrom striking terror into their hearts. These Zionists who picked up and journey by land and sea to Israel, were forming new type of Judaism

that did not depend on old rituals and customs. They would buy and work the land, and produce their own food. They would form militia's and learn how to fight and protect themselves. Men and women would have equal roles and wear shorts and short sleeves. Politically these Jews were more socialist, guided by a sense of communal responsibility, where everyone cared for the other and shared in the wealth of the kibbutz and moshav. God had been left behind.

This did not necessarily mean all Jews abandoned their religion as soon as they left Europe, even after the horrors of the Holocaust that caused so many Jews to question the absence of God's protection during the war. The Jews who emigrated to North America mostly brought their Judaism with them. As we assimilated into the North American society we still built synagogues and community centres. There were new expressions of Judaism - orthodox, conservative, and reform. We sought a balance between living in the modern world and also maintaining our Jewish identity. Once we were accepted into society and we had no fear of being demonized or persecuted, we realized we were free to actually go back and be more Jewish. How many famous personalities - politicians, actors, musicians and athletes - instead of hiding their Judaism actually use it to empower them. To find an ancestor who is Jewish is now considered cool! While maintaining one's status as a regular member of society, Jews are looking to be more connected to their faith, to learn more about where we come from, to celebrate the holidays or visit Israel or see a Jewish film and retain that uniqueness instead of falling into the melting pot.

Israelis didn't quite have that same arc. Israel was by default the Jewish state, but the idea was to create its own unique identity among the nations of the world. Israel would be a place with Hebrew language, and Hebrew poetry and dance and newspapers and plays and music. This was the way to be Jewish, they didn't need God and prayers. This new nation did not have time or patience for the old religious ways of the past. We wouldn't be buried in Talmud and wear black clothing and study all day. In fact it was time to be rid of all the restrictions of our past and embrace a wholly secular and modern lifestyle.

Through most of the 20th century this was the way for most Israeli's, roughly 80% adhering to a new secular Israel identity and the other 20% maintaining a religious life. Yom Kippur was a special day, a holiday to have a BBQ on the beach and ride bikes down the empty streets.

Religious life was the domain of the orthodox. In 1948 Ben Gurion decided to give the Orthodox the Ministry of the Interior, with power over marriages, divorces, funerals, conversions - all the Jewish life cycle areas. This worked for many years. When Israeli boys turned 13 they walked into the nearest synagogue for an Aliyah and the bar mitzvah was done. When Israeli's needed a funeral they found the local rabbi to officiate. The state paid the salaries for a rabbi in each town, village, settlement and area. There were chief rabbis for bigger cities and a chief Ashkenazi and Sephardic rabbi for the entire state. This was the status quo for years.

But as we see on the beaches of Tel Aviv, there has been a slow shift in the way Israelis approach their Judaism. Because whereas it seemed you had to be orthodox or nothing, now there is another way. Whether its called reform or conservative or something else, there is a search to be more connected to Judaism, to learning, to social justice, to customs and rituals - without being Orthodox. And this yearning for spirituality can be seen in the crowds on Friday night praying with guitars and modern music and sitting on the beach. It can be seen in the growth of Jewish text study groups springing up all over the country. Popular musicians use ancient middle ages Hebrew poetry set to rock music. It can be seen in the explosion in growth of non-orthodox youth groups, summer camps, preschools etc. Judaism is taught to every Israeli soldiers by non-orthodox teachers as they enter the army.

I see it at my alma mater, the Hebrew Union College of Jerusalem, the seminary for Reform Jews. In the 1960's the North American reform movement wanted a campus for rabbis to study in Israel for a year before returning to the US or Canada to lead congregations. They didn't have a lot of money but they

wanted to be in Jerusalem. After meeting with the mayor, it was decided there was a small area that no one wanted just outside the old city, the only catch was it was actually no mans land, a narrow strip that marked the border between Jordan and Israel. A place too dangerous to walk because of snipers and barbed wire and landmines. But the seminary took the land and built a school, with walls three feet deep and narrow angled windows. Well in 1967, Israel won the 6 day war and took over all of Jerusalem. That narrow strip of no mans land became the most valuable real estate in the country, just outside the gates of the old city. This simple campus that no one wanted is now expanded to one of the largest and most prestigious buildings in Jerusalem. And walking the halls are not only north American rabbinic and cantorial students, but there has been a wave of Israeli's who want to be reform rabbis. That would have been unheard of 10 years ago but this summer, 2016, HUC-JIR ordained the 100th Israeli born Reform Rabbi!!! These Rabbis are spreading out around the country, leading new synagogues, entering politics, doing b'nai mitzvah, running youth groups and showing Israeli's that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

I believe the following factors that led to this change in attitude towards Jewish life.

One is the influence of diaspora Jews who made Aliyah but came from reform/conservative backgrounds and wanted the same thing in Israel so started synagogues or made waves. They built synagogues in the bigger cities, created schools like the Leo Baeck School in Haifa, showed their neighbors the many ways in Judaism, asked for their girls to have bat mitzvah, and demanded women Rabbis and space at the Kotel in Jerusalem.

Second is the influence of Israeli shlichim, the emissaries who travel to the diaspora and work at summer camps, Jewish day schools, synagogues, foreign embassies and experienced non-orthodox Judaism and bring their experiences back home to Israel. Consider each summer thousands of young Israelis vie for the chance to work in north America, where they see liberal Judaism in action, see music at Shabbat, see men and women equal in the synagogue, hear the clarion call of social justice and ethics of our faith in action – and want to experience the same thing in the Jewish homeland.

Third I believe is the general trend in north America where Jews found that once they were comfortably assimilated into the state and didn't fear persecution and anti-Semitism they felt comfortable returning to their Jewish roots and traditions. In fact they were empowered to be more Jewish and sought to learn more about their history, language and religion. In Israel this would be the same trend but more based on the atmosphere where in Israel the first few decades Israel was just trying to survive. There were wars every few years, an unstable economy, the constant ingathering of Jews from all over the world, high inflation and ancient infrastructure. But by the 1980's Israel had proper roads and water supplies and a stable shekel and a strengthening economy. Israel is still surrounded by enemies, but a strong military and intelligence service kept major threats at bay. When Israelis felt more stable and secure they slowly began to examine the identity of an Israeli and perhaps felt there was something missing.

Finally Israeli's are seeing world trends in terms of gay rights, women's rights, social equality, and wanting to see those trends in Israel and in their Judaism but being thwarted by the orthodox monopoly on religion and trying to break that hold. Israeli's are looking to find a way to be more Jewish but in a liberal way. How can we show our love and support this new and exciting movement in Israel? I think the best way is to connect to one of these start-up congregations.

Once such start up is called Kehillat Yuval, in Gedera. Gedera is a small commuter town south of Tel Aviv. It was started by two women who spent time in America and realized how exciting Reform congregations are and wanted to start one in their home town. As they talked among friends in Gedera they realized there was a thirst for non-Orthodox Judaism. They wanted a place where women could be

leaders and found a female Reform Rabbi. Rabbi Myra Hovav is Israeli born and ordained at the Hebrew Union College Jerusalem campus. They wanted to be able to play instruments and sing beautiful melodies during worship. They want to engage in social justice as a religious community by the ethical standards of our prophets. They wanted to teach their children to love and explore Jewish texts and rituals. Kehillat Yuval is only a few years old but it has grown strong.

I visited there for Shabbat last February and saw the ruach of the singing and instruments and potluck dinner at a congregants home. I was there as part of the Conference of North American Rabbis convention and a dozen of us were bused to Gedera to see this new congregation and Rabbi Myra Hovav, for the first time in 3 years since she started as the rabbi there, was sick. And what was more amazing was how they congregation was able to lead a beautiful kabbalat Shabbat despite her absence. They hosted us afterward for dinner, a warm inviting and delicious meal.

Yuval has no permanent building and no money from the government like the orthodox synagogue in town. After much fighting and arguing they were finally grumpily given the foyer of the pre-school, within an elementary school. Its not an ideal spot for learning, for praying, for gathering. It's a nice offer but its not a real synagogue. The rabbi is so busy doing b'nai mitzvah constantly for boys and girls, still amazed that girls can do that. They do social justice projects with the Ethiopian immigrant communities who live in the area. They don't have a torah, prayerbooks, educational resources, or any paid staff beyond the rabbi. But they have ruach and a desire. Rabbi Hovav was here in Oakville in May, for Shabbat and our last day of religious school and our mitzvah day and Interfaith Walk for Peace. Next summer those who are able to get to Israel on our congregational trip will be going for Shabbat there. Rabbi Hovav and I skype weekly to keep updated and their religious school on Rosh hashana wrote our kids new years cards which should be arriving any day now.

I want to emphasize how exciting to be part of this wonderful change in Israel. Of course I hope each of you will get a chance to visit Israel and participate in one of these progressive Zionist institutions. Since its establishment, Israel has meant many things to many people: a haven from persecution, a catalyst for Jewish renewal and a place where the rhythms of civic life are Jewish rhythms. Most importantly it is our people's laboratory of Jewish ethical living, one that has seen unparalleled achievements and successes. Now is a historic opportunity to foster religious diversity and we should guide and nurture it and thereby depend our connection to the Jewish homeland and the Israeli's who live there.