

We in 2017 are privileged to be living in a laboratory to develop the next generation of post-contemporary Judaism. Internet has fundamentally changed the nature of community. Because Judaism is rooted in community, existing institutions are being torn apart, shrinking, growing, dying, and being born, as the nature of community changes.

There are three kinds of labs where new versions of Judaism are being grown and tested. Think of them as petri dishes or eco-systems. In each dish are Jews, affiliated and not, along with a variety of institutions, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, secular, social service agencies, Federations, choirs, theaters, JCC's, the gamut of the alphabet soup of Jewish organizations.

The three eco-systems are the small Jewish community, the large Jewish community, and the State of Israel. I want to focus today on Israel as the most important of these eco-systems, the place designed from the outset by the early modern Zionist movement to be a State in which the language and the pace of life move to the rhythms of Jewish living. It is a state woven with the tapestry of the Jewish calendar, resounding with the sacred texts of Judaism. Israel is a state in which for the first time in 1900 years, the principles of Torah have to grapple with the responsibility of exercising power. It is a system unlike any other community in the world and its soil has the potential to grow a type of Judaism not seen since the first century: creative and revolutionary, while at the same time authentically carrying the mantle of Biblical Israel and Rabbinical Judaism.

To be part of an eco-system you need to live and participate in that community. We are members of this system here in Grand Rapids because we care about our Jewish community. There are some here who also live and participate in a large Jewish community. But each of us can also claim at the very least a strong connection to the Israeli eco-system as well. We are not yet a part of it because we don't live there, but Israel is the only Jewish community which explicitly welcomes every person in this room and the rest of the world who is Jewish, married to a Jew, the child of a Jew or the grandchild of a Jew. Therefore, each of us is just one very small step away from being part of the Israel experiment.

Israel is an essential laboratory of Jewish life, unlike any other system in the world. We have the chance to create something there that can transform Judaism for future generations. Remember, though, that a lab experiment is only valid if it can fail. If everything succeeds, then there is something wrong with the method. Not every experiment in the Israeli eco-system succeeds, and that's what makes it a true lab for the development of a new Judaism. The governments of Israel sometimes succeed and sometimes fail; and sometimes we think they fail while another group thinks they have succeeded. There is tremendous tension in this lab because the stakes are the highest among any of the eco-systems.

My Israeli colleague Reuven Hammer wrote, regarding the current crises in relations between Israel and American Jewry, that "it is not every day that the Israeli government manages to alienate so many Jews all at once, but it is not only the alienation of American Jews which is at stake, which would be bad enough, but it is the very future of the Jewish religion that is threatened." I suggest that the reason the current crisis could be so damaging is that Israel as a laboratory for Judaism around the world only works if Israel potentially could create something that positively affects all of world Jewry. If Israel becomes a petri dish populated solely by Hareidi Orthodox, then it loses its value to most of the Jewish world.

My colleague Gerald Zelizer wrote:

“We Jews failed to live the social justice blueprint of the Bible. That is why the ancient prophets of Israel say we were exiled in the first place. Now that we have a second opportunity for Jewish sovereignty and Jewish space and Jewish power we have an opportunity to correct our first failure. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah castigated the Jewish people and attributed their exile because they exploited the poor, and established hypocritical religious practices. For that reason, they lost their land and sovereignty. Now, however, we have a second chance to implement the Bible's plan for social justice. Now we have for a second time land and sovereignty. The State of Israel gives the Jewish religion a second chance.”

Living Torah with full sovereignty and power for the first time in thousands of years is an enormous responsibility and challenge. Israel may be taking two steps forward and one step backwards at time, but we shouldn't be talking about the evils of Israel's step backwards unless we first acknowledge their tremendous progress. Acknowledge the blessing along with the curse, that's the way of Torah.

Here are some ways that Israel has transformed and recreated Judaism for the next generations:

Israel forges Jewish unity, bringing together religious and secular, liberal and conservative, native speakers of dozens of languages, to embrace a common vision. Israel is perhaps the only Jewish venue in which all of us sit together and disagree as one people.

The Israeli Defense Force, is continually learning how to use military force effectively and ethically under the most challenging of circumstances. It is developing the technology, such as the Iron Dome anti-missile system, to minimize the danger to the lives of soldiers and civilians.

Israel can transform and recreate Judaism for the next generations by:

- Learning how to take care of the land in the Sabbatical year, creating a different relationship to land.
- Learning how to create large scale communities that take Shabbat rest seriously and also maintain civic infrastructure.
- Learning how to use technology for our benefit without losing sight of the primacy of human contact.
- Learning how to integrate and welcome refugees, freedom seekers, distressed people, people looking for an intense Jewish life.
- Demonstrating that it is possible to be both fervently Jewish and democratic.
- Demonstrating that it is possible to teach Tanakh and Talmud seriously in public schools as books which contains literature, history, and religion, and as a source of struggles with morality, while celebrating the richness and diversity of Jewish tradition.
- Demonstrating that religious freedom is possible in a modern state formed to provide refuge and security as a Jewish homeland.

In Psalm 27, which we recite twice daily during the fall holy day season, we read: “one thing I ask of God – to sit in God's house all the days of my life.” The value of devoting one's life to study rather than serving in the armed forces or getting a job to support a family is one of the hotly debated issues in Israel today. Do we really want to support a society in which the highest aspiration is to sit in Yeshiva and learn all day and rely on government assistance to meet one's basic needs? Rabbi David Golinkin<sup>1</sup> suggests that the we should understand the Psalmist's

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1. Rabbi Golinkin is quoting his father Rabbi Noah Golinkin and also Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

aspiration not to sit and study all day, but rather to turn all the places we enter into the house of God. Whether we are in the supermarket, the workplace, the theater, the sports arena, or the synagogue – through our presence we infuse the place with the values of the sacred presence of God. Israel as a Jewish state is THE lab for creating a Judaism that can infuse all of these places in positive ways. We in the diaspora can carry our Judaism around with us and be a light of positive Jewish experience, but only in Israel does Judaism have the potential to influence and transform all of public life inside the state, and truly fulfill Isaiah's vision of Israel being an *or goyim*, a light among the nations.

Our part in the Israeli laboratory is to help them, through our money, visits, time, energy, or even aliyah, to maintain the conditions necessary for the experiment to continue to thrive and develop. To paraphrase the end of Psalm 27, our part is to strengthen and fortify the heart of Israel by continuing to have faith and hope that the wondrous experiment God began with Abraham will continue to thrive in the form of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. May we see the day when every place we sit will indeed be God's house, and when Israel will fully embody Isaiah's vision to be a bright shining light in the world.