# "To Everything There is a Time"

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Rabbi Stanley M. Davids is a prominent American Reform Rabbi who has made aliyah with his wife. This article appears in issue 10 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. It offers reflections on the role of Israel as a democratic State for all the Jewish people.

When Rabbi Marc Angel asked me to write an article for this issue of Conversations, an issue dedicated to a consideration of Orthodoxy and the State of Israel, I saw both challenge and opportunity.[1]

Having watched and quietly cheered on Rabbi Angel's efforts over the past several decades to help guide the world of the Orthodox rabbinate back toward its historic embrace of halakha as a dynamic, living, foundational force in Jewish life, and having established in my personal observance an approach toward praxis,[2] which some might consider post-denominational, I approached this article with a degree of trepidation, coupled with respect and anticipation. I spent several months consulting with friends and colleagues who share with me a liberal Jewish religious perspective and who have also made the sacred choice of *aliya*. These individuals are listed for informational purposes at the close of the article,[3] but none of them bear any responsibility for the thoughts that I express or the conclusions that I reach. Such thoughts and such conclusions are solely my own.

A moment in time: Several years ago, I was sitting with two colleagues in the lobby of Jerusalem's Crowne Plaza Hotel. We were tasked with putting together a tri-denominational program about life in Israel for a community event back in the United States. There we sat, drinking coffee, discussing our shared passion for the Atlanta Braves, crafting our approach to a program that would necessarily allow our religious differences to be visible. We determined that we would be honest, even as we would choose not to be confrontational. An Orthodox, a Conservative,

and a Reform rabbi, all *olim*, could publicly demonstrate our love for *Medinat Yisrael* without making our conversation a zero sum game.

One of us mused: “If only a photographer from *Yediot* could capture this moment.” Three veteran rabbis with clearly different and strongly held religious convictions, sitting together in public, were comfortably discussing a community event in which we would respectfully and honestly enter into a public dialogue. And we felt that we were doing nothing extraordinary, because we all had come from an American culture in which such encounters are not all that unusual. But in Israel, our meeting might well have warranted front page coverage simply because local expectations here have become so vastly different.

A moment in time: On Rosh haShanah5771, we attended services with our family in suburban Westchester County, New York. The rabbi of our daughter’s Reform congregation announced that just one week ago he had received a call from the rabbi of a neighboring Young Israel congregation, with a warm invitation for the two communities to come together for a shared *Tashlih* service. Later that afternoon, the two rabbis conducted a beautiful joint sacred occasion in the presence of large representations from both communities, an occasion within which *ahdut* (unity) was embraced as an aspect of*teshuvah* (repentance). We all understood that such moments did not occur regularly anywhere in the world. But the relaxed atmosphere testified eloquently to the reality that our worshiping together fit the broad parameters of that which is possible, acceptable, and even desirable within American expectations.

One of the most daunting challenges confronting many liberal Jews living in the State of Israel today is the overwhelming feeling that we share the most dismal of expectations about relationships between and among the various Jewish religious communities. Of course there are exceptions, but far too often we find negative expectations validated and reconfirmed by deeply troubling personal or public encounters. Those events unavoidably color and shape the manner in which we perceive and interact with each other; they become the fuel for self-fulfilling prophecies which cannot help but threaten the health of Israeli society and the viability of the Jewish state.

A moment in time: On the very day of our *aliya*, my wife Resa and I sat before the desk of the final *pakkid* on the second floor of the old terminal at Ben Gurion airport. Due to the intifada that still raged, we were the only *olim* being processed that day. The official, as he stamped our documents, conversationally asked Resa about her profession. She told him of her advanced degree in statistics and he nodded his head in appreciation. Then it was my turn. I told him in Hebrew that I

was a Reform rabbi. He stopped, adjusted his *kippah*, and literally spat as he said: “You are no rabbi.” Welcome home to Israel, the paradigmatic setting for the pain and beauty of Jewish life.

Even as I write this essay (in October 2010), the Knesset remains embroiled in a bitter debate over the future of MK Rotem’s conversion bill. Most of us are profoundly concerned about the fate of the religious identities of some 350,000 Russian *olim* (and now their more than 90,000 children born in Israel). The Rotem bill as originally proposed probably would have offered some small degree of relief to what I view as the obstructionism and insularity of the Chief Rabbinate and of the bloated religious establishment regarding conversion, but amendments to the bill had introduced elements that managed to outrage members of the Diaspora Jewish community, including a number of key Orthodox leaders living outside of Israel. The Rotem bill has become yet another setting within which ties among various Orthodox and Hareidi establishments and those who wield political power in the state are being used to severely disadvantage the clear majority of Israelis who choose not to see themselves as part of those establishments. Inevitably, the dangerous psychological and spiritual distancing between Diaspora Jewry and Israel is intensified.

Expectations grow ever bleaker.

Other moments in time: I stood as a witness to the Shabbat afternoon parking lot battles near the Jaffa Gate. I personally heard the racist slurs crudely hurled by some Hareidi men at uniformed Ethiopian *olim*. I seethed as young Israeli police were called grotesque epithets dredged up from out of our people’s Shoah nightmare. I marched in protest over the arrest of women who dared to treat the plaza fronting the Kotel as a national shrine open to all Israelis, rather than as an exclusionary ultra-Orthodox synagogue. I counseled my kibbutz cousin’s children who had invited me to officiate at their weddings to “do the right thing” by going to Europe first to get “legally” married, since my more than 45 years of service to the Jewish people as a rabbi mean nothing in an Israel that has chosen to trade true pluralistic democracy for political expediency and religious hegemony, principle for power and funding. I comforted a woman colleague who had been slapped across the face by a *dati* woman who sought to punish her for raising her voice during Hallel as she stood near the Kotel.

Expectations.

The descriptors (more often privately than publicly expressed) that emerge out of such declining expectations are, not surprisingly, bitter. Those descriptors, as

expressed to me by most of those with whom I consulted, include but are not limited to words and phrases such as “abomination,” “nightmare,” “anachronistic,” “ridiculous,” “moral violence,” “absurd and grotesque,” “medieval,” “*sinat hinam*,” and “extortion.” These are responses to how some of us in Israel see our lives impacted by those Orthodoxies politically empowered and fundamentally corrupted by government.

The pain is real. Many of us who lovingly and out of deep ideological conviction chose *aliya* find ourselves emotionally torn. Not one would even consider abandoning our dream of being part of our people’s national re-birth, but the price—a serious price that we had originally reckoned in terms of family separation and financial limitation—now far too often also includes emotionally draining battles against efforts to delegitimize us, to marginalize us, to exclude us from mainstream communal life.

Research and advocacy groups such as “HIDDUSH—Freedom of Religion for Israel”[4] regularly demonstrate with verifiable accuracy wide dissatisfaction among a broad spectrum of the Israeli electorate with the current status of formal and informal state/synagogue ties in Israel. Tension between so-called secular Israelis and the various Orthodox establishments in Israel are viewed by many today as the single most serious source of societal dis-ease.

A. B. Yehoshua’s writings often portray contemporary Jews as living permanently with a kind of divided personality. We Jews whose homes are in Israel are pathologically unable to be comfortable in Zion, yearning instead for the openness of a non-coercive, expansive, anonymous Diaspora. But those of us who dwell in the Diaspora are equally unable to be comfortable there, yearning instead for the richness and integrity of Jewish communal and personal life in Israel. Wherever we Jews are, there is always somewhere else where we would rather be. My personal psychological imbalance is somewhat different: I am comfortable in Israel, relishing the opportunity to live a full and wonderfully rich and satisfying Jewish life here, even as I work hard with so many others to try to disestablish the Chief Rabbinate, to separate out all formal ties linking the religious councils with government, to grant to all religious streams the right to conduct life-cycle events for those who are their adherents, and to permit and encourage those who embrace that unique phenomenon known as Israeli secularism to create their own meaningful rituals and celebrations without coercion or discrimination.

Resa and I have chosen to live in Jerusalem not just because most of the major international Reform organizations are represented here, but because our souls

feel firmly rooted and nourished by Jerusalem's air, by its history, by its promise. We have chosen to live in Jerusalem because of its endless opportunities to study with great scholars and to immerse ourselves in a richly variegated Jewish culture. But we are forced to confront daily and to struggle endlessly with those who would drain from that air the soul-sustaining oxygen of choice, who opt for coercion over conversation, who view loyalty to Torah as requiring an end to that *eilu veEilu* wrestling with text that had previously endowed the Jewish people with a vast storehouse of spiritual richness, who prefer fossilization to diversity within the halakhic process, and who have intentionally diverged from 2,000 years of religious teachers who had trusted the Jewish people in its pursuit of fidelity to the One.

One colleague pointed out that many of us are "anomalies" within Israeli society. We consider ourselves to be religious; but we are not *dati'im*. We maintain kosher homes; we observe festivals; we attend worship regularly; so we cannot be considered by others as *hilonim*. We feel that our chosen presence in Israel as citizens-by-choice is the result of a sacred act of *aliya*; but most of us are willing to support those who would cede sovereignty over parts of *Erets Yisrael*, if by so doing we insure the security and domestic well-being of *Medinat Yisrael*. Are we then religious Zionists, or are we not? Many of us are strong advocates of church/state separation in the United States, but accept the rationale calling for equitable state funding of ALL Jewish religious streams in Israel. Are we then religious liberals or conservatives? Many of us oppose what appears to be the ever-increasing Kotel-olatry that strongly interferes with our Jewish efforts (as per Heschel) to create palaces in time but not in space; yet we will battle ceaselessly against those who deny women the right to worship and to read Torah at the Kotel.

I know that all of the above means that we Israeli Jews must now struggle to create a polity that has never before existed: a truly democratic, pluralistic Jewish state strongly protective of the rights of all its minorities (including but not restricted to women, Arabs, immigrants, foreign workers, refugees, Jews by Choice, Reform and Conservative and Reconstructionist and secular/humanist Jews, gays and lesbians), infused with profound respect for and support of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Those personal inner divisions require me to strongly respect the achievements of Israel's Orthodoxies as they rebuild a world of study and observance that was almost annihilated, that has produced great Rabbis and Hakhamim such as Rav A. I. Kook and Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel, and that made certain that Israel's founders would not succeed in diminishing the presence of Shabbat and Hagim in the public sphere—even as I battle against government

funding for private Torah-based schools that refuse to teach *tokhnit haLiba* in their curriculum (the government-mandated
core secular curriculum, compliance with which impacts the degree of direct government funding for various school systems. The evolving content of this curriculum is a source of ongoing political and ideological struggle), who inculcate within their students the view that Torah law trumps civil law when it comes to national defense, who speak of those who disagree with their teachings as lacking in full Jewish identity, who regard tolerance of diversity as an intolerable sign of weakness, or who embrace *mitzvoth bein adam laMakom* to the often total exclusion of *mitzvoth bein adam leHaveiro.*

The future is not fixed, but then again neither is the past.[5] As we make those choices that will define our present and texture our future, we come to shape, understand and validate our past. As for me, I am in love with Zion, but I am most certainly not at ease with Zion. I embrace the *zekhut* of living at such a time that I might contribute to the shaping of Israeli society, to help complete the process of the rebirth of the Jewish state. It is still possible to reverse the spiraling descent of our expectations regarding relationships among all of Israel's religious streams and thus it is still possible to bring into the Israeli mainstream expectations of cooperation and mutual respect. It is still possible to strengthen the voices of the Israeli majority interested in crafting a pluralistic Jewish democracy. And it is still possible to build a Jewish homeland which will be compellingly attractive to my American grandchildren.

To everything there is a time. That time is now.

Notes

1. It is relevant to note that I am a Reform rabbi, 71 years of age, who (together with my wife and life partner, Resa) made *aliya* from Atlanta, Georgia, on February 22, 2004. Our home is in Jerusalem. Our children and grandchildren all reside within the United States. They visit us, we visit them, and among us we gratefully support video cams, Skype, magicJack and a variety of Frequent Flyer programs. Through their parents' choices, some of our grandchildren attend the Modern Orthodox Bi-Cultural Day School in

Stamford, Connecticut, while others attend the Wilshire Boulevard Temple's Reform Day School in Los Angeles. I am the immediate past president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America (ARZA) and a past chair of the National Rabbinic Cabinet of State of Israel Bonds. Currently I sit on the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency, the Hanhallah of the World Zionist Organization, and the Board of Overseers of the Jerusalem Campus of the Hebrew Union College. Resa is on the Board of ARZENU and on the Board of the Women of Reform Judaism, where she holds the Israel portfolio; she has created more than 22 affiliates of the Women of Reform Judaism in Israel over the past two years.

2. Typically, for example, I pray Erev Shabbat at Kol HaNeshama (Reform) and on Shabbat morning at Shira Hadasha (egalitarian modern Orthodox). Twice monthly I study the Sfat Emet on Shabbat before Shaharit. I am drawn to the Kotel on Tisha B'Av, but only then. I regularly study at the Shalom Hartman Institute. I cannot imagine a more personally satisfying arrangement.
3. I express my gratitude to the following colleagues and friends whose thoughtful comments were of enormous benefit to me in the writing of this article. As noted above, I bear sole and complete responsibility for all of the views expressed: Rabbi Stacey Blank; Rabbi Shelton Donnell; Rabbi Shaul Feinberg; Rabbi Stuart Geller; Rabbi Miri Gold; Terry Cohen Hendin; Rabbi Richard Hirsch; Rabbi Naamah Kelman; Rabbi Richard Kirschen; Michael Nitzan; Dr. Barry Knishkowy, Rabbi Joel Oseran; Rabbi Henry Skirball; Matthew Sperber.
4. For the sake of full disclosure, I sit on the HIDDUSH steering committee.
5. Alan Watts and others.