

Israel in the Synagogue

Dr. Samuel Heilman, Professor of Jewish Studies and Sociology, City University of New York

Israel in Our Lives is a project sponsored by
The CRB Foundation,
The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education
Department of Jewish Education and Culture in the Diaspora,
and
The Charles R. Bronfman Centre for the Israel Experience: Mifgashim.
In cooperation with
Jewish Education Service of North America and
Israel Experience, Inc.

Israel In Our Lives Online was funded in part through a generous grant from the Joint Program for Jewish Education of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Ministry of Education and Culture of the State of Israel.

The editors would like to thank all the authors, advisors, and consultants of the Israel In Our Lives series— educational leaders who have brought their considerable insights and talents to bear on this project. In addition to those already mentioned in these pages, we extend our appreciation to those who helped in shaping the project concept: Dr. Zvi Bekerman, Gidon Elad, Dr. Cecile Jordan, Rachel Korazim, Clive Lessem, Caren Levine, Dr. Zev Mankowitz, Dr. Eliezer Marcus, & Susan Rodenstein.

Part 1

While no one would suggest that the synagogue and Israel are duplicates of one another - and indeed the differences between them are legion - they have in this generation increasingly represented (especially for North American Jewry) two important, parallel symbols of Jewish identity. This is because both are special "places" in which being a Jew constitutes an essential pre-requisite, perhaps even a sine qua non, for affiliation. Additionally, both are places where one expects to find Jews in the overwhelming majority and in charge, where Jewish concerns are paramount, and where Hebrew is spoken. As such, both are locations to which people may and often do go when they wish either to express or experience some aspect of their Jewish identity.

For North American Jews, the synagogue is often a kind of local Jewish address while Israel is a sort of national/tribal one. Moreover, attachment to and information about the national/tribal address is often first generated at the local one. Thus, the synagogue may be the entry point of Israel into the lives of many Jews.

The Israel that first enters the Jewish consciousness is usually an overwhelmingly mythic one. Shaped initially by biblical narratives and liturgical references, the earliest images of Israel are those of heavenly Jerusalem, a divinely promised land, conquered by kings and guided by prophets, the heritage of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the land flowing with milk and honey. Later, laminated on top of this set of essentially religious conceptions, come the Zionist myths of pioneering halutzim, adventurers and idealists who drained the swamps of Degania and built Tel Aviv atop the sand dunes, heroes of battles who fell while protecting settlements from marauding fellahin who would push the Jewish people into the sea. Finally, added to these mythic images is a shaped consciousness of Israel as the place of the struggling and often poorer Jewish brothers and sisters who are building a fledgling state, the children of Israel trying to make it against the sons of Ishmael in a world that - if it could - would have all the Jews dead.

Against these mental images, the real Israel is often hard to find, a lingering void or misrepresentation in the minds of many Diaspora Jews, even those who, via their synagogue affiliations, might be expected to harbor an attachment to it. The real Israel does not emerge in many Jews' consciousness, if it is perceived and understood at all, until much later. Indeed, whether or not it does depends often on how Israel is presented to the people in the synagogue community, and no less on who does the presenting.

Part 2

By examining the synagogue setting one can discover not only the structure and character of what exists but also an inkling of what, with some adjustment, could be there as well. Hence this paper seeks not only to describe the former but also to point to the latter.

For the most part, because synagogues in America are divided denominationally - into the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements - many of the synagogue-based Israel

programs reflect those denominational variations. These include programs sponsored by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ), the (Orthodox) National Council of Young Israel (NCYI) as well as the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America (UOJCA), and the (Reform) Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). Each denomination also runs programs through their associated youth movements.

Many of the denominations sponsor a variety of Israel-related programs. The USCJ for example, lists support networks for people who want to integrate their Conservative Judaism and the process of aliyah; a Center for Conservative Judaism in Jerusalem that helps arrange a bar/bat mitzvah in Israel; a mid-winter seminar in Israel designed as an extension to the UJA winter student mission wherein "students discover the beauty of Shabbat in Israel, tour Jerusalem in our own unique fashion and study with scholars from the Conservative Movement;" "Israel pilgrimages" for groups from teenage to adult; regional activities on aliyah organized throughout the year, and a national conference held in the spring. The UAHC reports approximately 800 different educational projects at its affiliated synagogues*. Through the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the Reform movement is actively involved in developing liberal Judaism in Israel. Orthodox programs are no less numerous.

A sampling of the current options reveals that:

- * there is much duplication in the approaches used
- * certain approaches are more popular and frequently used than others, and
- * the differences among the movements are less matters of form and more of content and style, emphasis and frequency.

Indeed, some observers have complained that while the philosophical and ideological distinctions separating the movements are quite real, these are not generally adequately reflected in synagogue-based Israel programs, which often end up more as vehicles for sustaining membership numbers and denominational affiliation than as expressions of substantive philosophical and denominational differences as they relate to Israel.

A major shortcoming of the plethora of synagogue-based Israel education options - many of which claim to expose participants to the history and contemporary realities of Judaism and Israelis - is their discontinuity with one another. Firstly, the various elements of Israel education in any given synagogue tend to remain unintegrated. Hence, emphases shift and understanding blurs. As a result, the Israel that emerges from such an unintegrated approach is inchoate. It remains foreign spiritually and culturally, "over there" and not part of a Jew's "here and now."

In addition, even when a congregation tries to organize and integrate its Israel programs as part of an ongoing master plan (something some have done, for example, as part of the Jerusalem 3000 celebrations), its plan is often undermined because of competing and sometimes contradictory programs from other community sources. The lack of coordination across congregational lines, or with such institutions as the local university's Jewish studies program, Jewish Community Center, or Federation, may lead to everything from burn-out in community interest to conflicting claims on time or competing educational presentations.

Finally, it must be noted that some synagogues may see Israel programs - and even Israel itself - as competition that can draw the interest of some Jews away from the synagogue, to say nothing of their economic and time resources. North American Jews, particularly those who emphasize the ethnic and cultural aspects of Judaism over the religious and ritual ones, who put a lot of energy into their attachments to Israel, will sometimes have little left to give to the synagogue. Synagogues and their leadership who perceive matters thus, can only "tolerate" Israel within the synagogue context, as a synagogue activity carried out commonly under the aegis of the congregation and/or the rabbi.

Perhaps the first references to Israel encountered in the synagogue occur in the context of prayer. Six hundred and fifty-six times is the city of Jerusalem mentioned in Scripture, and scores more in liturgy. References to the exile and return to Israel constitute the heart of many of the prayers. Although many of these references have been removed or downplayed in the Reform and Reconstructionist liturgy, and modified in the Conservative, the connection to Israel has never been completely obliterated, and ample references to Israel remain in prayers. Indeed, it is difficult to separate much of public Jewish worship from a concern with the ongoing attachment to Israel both as the heartland and homeland of the Jewish people as well as an expression of their eternity. In effect, for many synagogue Jews, worship is the means by which Israel is raised in their consciousness and brought close to the core of their being as Jews. This connection between Judaism and Israel has served as one of the motivating forces behind Zionism and continues to give Israel religious meaning for significant numbers of Jews.

In the years since travel to and settlement in the land of Israel became possible, there have been (pre-eminently traditional) Jews who perceived a faithful fulfillment of their religion as entailing an obligation to, at the very least, make a pilgrimage there and, maximally, to end their "exile" by making a home in Israel. This sense of religious obligation often arises for the first time and gestates in Jewish consciousness in the synagogue.

Short of such feelings, there are still many symbolic attachments to Israel that are part of American synagogue life. Today many, if not most, synagogues fly the Israeli flag in their sanctuaries, recite prayers for the safety and wisdom of its leaders as part of the Sabbath and holiday services, and (more recently) also special prayers for the welfare of the Israel Defense Forces or the protection of those missing or held hostage. Around the time of the Rabin assassination, memorial services (with eulogies and mass recitations of kaddish) were almost universal. After several of the recent terrorist bombings, such prayers were also common.

In addition, in the last several years, significant numbers of synagogues (mostly Orthodox and some Conservative, with a sprinkling of others) have begun to distribute flyers or bulletins that provide news about and from Israel. Many of these are printed versions of worldwide web pages generated by Israel-oriented list servers. Distributed in the synagogue or to the membership, these serve to raise consciousness and give American Jews a feeling of being continuously linked to Israel.

All these expressions of course serve to create and nurture a spiritual, quasi-familial bond between synagogue worshippers and Israel. In a sense, they move Israel into the synagogue community, linking the local and the tribal/national, creating a social and psychological union between worshipper and the

idea of Israel. (There are limitations here; the Israel that emerges through religious sensibilities is trapped in a spiritual idealization or a sacred paradigm - more easily "visualized" through one's imagination than via the reality of a secular, normal, "McDonaldized" Israel.)

It is therefore not surprising to discover that large numbers of American synagogues declare that a connection to Israel is part of their "mission." Thus, for example, a Reform congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, asserts in its mission statement: "The State of Israel remains a special focus of our love and concern"* while a congregation in the western United States explains that because of its denominational affiliation with the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, it is naturally "Zionist" and supportive of Israel.

As the single most common point of local intersection between individual American Jews and the Jewish community, the synagogue has also become a locus of Jewish education, especially (though not exclusively) for its young. While the basic purpose of this education has often been defined as enabling full-fledged participation in Jewish religious life, a main component of that education became the teaching of Hebrew (a key reason why such synagogue schools sometimes referred to as "talmud-torahs" also came to be called "Hebrew schools"). The ostensible purpose of Hebrew literacy was to enable students to read and comprehend prayers and Scriptures, but as large numbers of Jews moved away from praying exclusively in Hebrew and translations of liturgy and Scripture became an accepted part of prayer books and Bibles, new reasons for learning Hebrew were sought in many synagogue schools. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, Hebrew learning was often perceived as enabling communication with Israelis. Given the resources and time invested in the learning, this goal is unrealistic. The teaching of Hebrew in synagogues, however, became justified in the minds of some (both staff and students) as a way of insuring that American Jews would be sufficiently fluent in the language to be in touch with Israel. For the most part, this goal has not been achieved by synagogue-based educational programs. The Hebrew learned in Hebrew school does not actually equip one to read an Israeli newspaper or even to carry on a simple conversation with a native speaker, much less to feel a common linguistic bond with the Israeli community.

Nevertheless, over the years, Hebrew learning - and in particular modern Hebrew, as spoken in Israel - has served as a recurring adult education activity in many synagogues. Ulpanim or intensive language instruction, mini-courses, and a host of other types of instruction have been a mainstay of many programs, though also with minimal success. For the most part, they enable some rudimentary Hebrew liturgical literacy.

There have been some modest successes in synagogue Hebrew study. These often come as part of an ongoing program, coupled with extended travel to Israel. This, for example, is the reasoning behind the affiliation of a number of synagogues with the International Summer Ulpan for Adults 1996 ("Hashanah Ivrit Be'Israel") a program meant to "incorporate intensive Hebrew studies along with the Israel Experience," which will allow for "learning, speaking, singing, sight-seeing, writing, dancing, having fun, meeting Israelis - all these in Hebrew, appropriate to the level of Hebrew of the participant, from absolute beginners to advanced."

Sometimes ulpan study is connected to support of Israeli institutions and life. For example, Salt Lake City's Reconstructionist Jewish Congregation combined its ulpan with "support [for] a broad variety of humanitarian, cultural, and political organizations in Israel."*

Israel, however, has not been the grounds for learning only Hebrew. A number of synagogues have used Israel as a subject area for education. A roster of courses in the synagogue commonly includes units on: the history of Zionism, the history of Israel, Israel and the Arabs, Israeli literature (often book reviews or translations), and Israeli dancing. This year, in line with the Jerusalem 3000 celebrations, large numbers of synagogues have also included educational efforts that present some aspect of Jerusalem.

The synagogue courses on history, politics, culture, and Zionism do not enable the graduates to enter into common discourse with Israelis for whom these subjects are the lifeblood of their national existence and consciousness. And even the most ambitious slide-show tours of Jerusalem or discussions of its history do not make it real in the way that living there can and does.

While "courses" may be multi-sessioned, they are usually presented as a one-time lecture or demonstration given by some "expert," (either the rabbi, a visiting academic or some guest from Israel). For example, a California Conservative congregation this year focused its April pre-kindergarten B'Yachad workshops around the theme of Israel Independence Day. Another Conservative congregation in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania invited a visiting academic to speak on the topic, "Jerusalem: Whose Is It?" Five metropolitan New York area Conservative synagogues joined together to invite the treasurer of the Masorti Movement in Israel (and a former American) to talk about "New Political Realities: Threats and Opportunities for Conservative Judaism." And in the Midwest, a Conservative congregation offered an endowed lecture by the Midwest Consul General of Israel. And a Reconstructionist congregation in Connecticut offered a mini-course with noted Israeli author, Batya Gur.

While it is difficult to measure the success of such educational efforts, there is a cumulative effect on those who are exposed to more than one talk or course. The key is in fostering a powerful desire to attend these classes and lectures. The most effective of these are talks which are woven into the fabric of synagogue community life, where the desire to attend is not only intellectual, but an extension of one's ties to the community.

In tightly-knit communities, scholar-in-residence programs which focus on Israel tend to be the most successful. They bring out the most participants, and can explore a subject in depth when the speakers are competent.

Many trips to Israel are generated via the synagogue connection. Currently three categories of such journeys are most common: the congregational mission; the bar/bat mitzvah tour; the summer youth group teen-trip. In all three, the purposes are broadly educational, spiritual, cultural, and tribal.

The Congregational Mission

This trip is customarily led by the rabbi or cantor who gathers a relatively small group of members (usually no more than can fit into a single bus in Israel) who join him or her on a journey of anywhere

from two to four weeks. Cynically, one might suggest that the motivating factor for such a trip is a free ticket for the leader, but in many, if not most, cases the trip is stimulated by a desire to foster and share ties with Israel. While the manifest purpose of the trip is to learn more about or get closer to Israel, sometimes the latent incentive is social and economic - a chance to go away with friends on a relatively inexpensive charter trip. In effect, this trip often represents the culmination of conscious-raising about Israel and its importance as part of the Jewish experience. As part of a synagogue group, participants effectively combine their feelings of closeness to their fellow congregants with a developing attachment to Israel. Many, if not most, of the participants on such trips may be taking their first tour of Israel, but this is by no means always the case. For example, a New Jersey congregation promotes a "1996 Heritage Pilgrimage" led by the rabbi, and relatively inexpensive, that "will feature special Jerusalem experiences (great for repeaters and "first timers") that are designed around the celebrations of Jerusalem 3000" in which "special tours and dignitaries are being lined up to provide a sense of life in Jerusalem today."*

Each of the denominations sponsors a variety of such trips, yet it is commonly the congregation that acts as the connecting link between the sponsored trips and the individual. Members of USCJ congregations this year have been invited to "participate in Jerusalem 3000 celebrations by joining a United Synagogue trip to Israel." Offered are monthly or 14-17 day tours, with "guaranteed departure dates, flexible deluxe hotel packages, and ten days of intensive sight-seeing led by a government-licensed tour guide."

Although participants in programs like this one come away feeling they have learned a great deal about Israel by seeing it in situ rather than merely reading about it or viewing it in film, their experience of Israel actually occurs, in large measure, within the context and framework of their synagogue life. Often the group moves around relatively sealed off from the "real" Israel. That is, they stay together in hotels, travel together in buses, and speak to one another far more than to Israelis. Those Israelis they do encounter are especially "lined up," and therefore often encountered out of context. As a result, the "pilgrim/travelers" may return home with fond memories of Israel and knowledge of it beyond anything they have had before, but their strongest attachments may actually be with their fellow travelers. The Israel to which synagogue members are introduced and encounter is often a kind of "virtual Israel." By this I mean that the reality of Israel is perceived through the cultural context of the American travelers and mediated through their tourist situation so that what emerges is only a version, a virtual image, of its reality. They see the tableau of Israel through the hotel and bus window, through the special perspective of their guide, group, and leader.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Tour

The bar and bat mitzvah are more than a rite of passage marking puberty. They have, in much of the North American Diaspora, also become an important vehicle for both celebrating and recalling family and Jewish connections. That is, it is not enough for the celebrant to mark the day; the extended family, and to an extent the Jewish community, must now be involved as well. In the latter context, Israel can and does play a larger part. As reported in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey of American Jewry, the bar mitzvah appears to have withstood the general erosion of tradition among American Jews during this century. Not only that, but the rise of the popularity of the bat mitzvah has brought young women to this Jewish experience at nearly the same rate as young men. Indeed, in a recent survey of

North American Conservative synagogues, bar and bat mitzvahs were a near constant at Sabbath services with 37 per cent of congregations reporting 25 to 50 a year, and 13 percent an average of one every week.

The ceremony is commonly more than just a one-time celebration. Rather it represents the culmination of an extended period of study and congregational affiliation. In fact, many synagogues not only require the bar/bat mitzvah youngster to be enrolled in some form of general Jewish education; they also demand that the celebrant and family attend synagogue on some sort of regular (and therefore more intensive) basis in the year leading up to the actual bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. In short, then, the bar/bat mitzvah has become a pretext and an occasion for publicly experiencing a heightened sense of being Jewish.

Not surprisingly, therefore, many Jews have increasingly chosen to enhance the occasion not simply with a local synagogue celebration but also with a family tour to Israel, thus combining family, Judaism, community, and Israel in a single experience. This trip, coinciding roughly with the child's Jewish coming of age, becomes an opportunity for the entire family to immerse itself in the Israel experience, which is subsumed by the religious and socio-cultural passage. In other words, the symbolic passage also becomes a geographic and cultural one. Often the synagogue itself will organize the bar/bat mitzvah tour for a cohort of celebrants and their families, using this occasion to enhance ties to the universal and the local Jewish addresses and communities. The trip may also amplify family connections, especially when siblings and grandparents join the celebrants and their parents.

For many, particularly the youngsters themselves, this trip is oftentimes their first direct encounter with an overwhelmingly Jewish society and culture. It may arouse real interest in Hebrew, Jewish history, religion, and Zionism. It may entail visits to more synagogues and sites of religious significance than the participants have ever seen in their lives. It may expose them to details of Jewish history and a variety of Jewish cultural and ethnic styles that were previously unknown to them. Very often, some sort of religious ceremony becomes an important focal point of the trip (frequently in Jerusalem and often at the Western Wall). This event further connects the Israel experience with religion and Jewish coming of age. One key outcome of these trips is an aroused identification with Jews and Israel, a nascent sense of tribalism.

For the youngsters themselves, the tour may plant seeds of desire for another trip and greater exposure to Israel (as well as to matters Jewish). In effect, the bar/bat mitzvah tour weaves Israel into the web of concerns that connect congregation, family, Judaism, and Jewish belonging.

To be sure, the Israel trip often becomes less a journey of discovery about Israel and more an expression of the teen-age traveler's desire to learn something about him or herself. Put differently, rather than serving as a window on the living and breathing Israel, the trip mirrors the personal concerns of the traveler. While it can be both of these at the same time, much depends upon the precise itinerary and who is guiding one through it, as well as who else is along for the ride. Nowhere is this more the case than in the summer teen youth group trips.

The Summer Youth Group Israel Teen-Trip

Many of the synagogue sponsored teen trips are organized around ongoing membership in a local synagogue chapter of a national (or international) youth group. Membership in the local chapter of National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY, Orthodox), United Synagogue Youth (USY, Conservative), National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY, Reform) may entitle a youngster to participate in an Israel trip sponsored through the organization. The trip is an opportunity for him or her to join other local youth in a larger organizational gathering in Israel.

Each of these organizations sponsors a variety of trips. NFTY, a division of the UAHC sponsors: The NFTY Israel Academy which combines touring the country with a week of kibbutz living and some sort of interaction with Israeli teens; the NFTY Israel Safari which includes touring and visiting Israeli's nature centers; the NFTY archeological dig; the NFTY Mitzvah Corps which combines touring with communal work; the NFTY Ulpan which links touring with Hebrew study; and the NFTY Arts Program which allows participants to experience Israel through internships with artists.

The Conservative United Synagogue Youth organization sponsors Nativ, now based in Jerusalem and at Kibbutz Sa'ad in the Negev; USY High, based at the Alexander Muss High School Campus in Hod HaSharon; and the Neshama program, for students from a Solomon Schechter High School. Etgar USY, subtitled "The Ultimate Israel Challenge," is a new program for USY teens who have already been to Israel with Israel Pilgrimage and, seeking something more, "want to experience Israel as the Israelis do." Highlights include two weeks living in Jerusalem, ten days living and hiking in the Negev, engaging in local volunteer work, and attending intensive Hebrew language classes. For USY-affiliated teens, there is also the Heroism and Hope Italy/Israel Pilgrimage which includes three days of touring in Italy and then a simulation of the sea voyage by Jewish underground leaders and Holocaust survivors who were part of the "illegal" immigration to Palestine in the 1940s. (Other groups have also embraced this model, most prominently Young Judea). The week in Italy and aboard the ship is spent with members of other Jewish youth groups from North America, while the final five weeks are spent in Israel as a separate Pilgrimage group.

Ramah is another Conservative Movement organization, affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, which sponsors a variety of Israel programs. Examples include Tichon Ramah Yerushalayim, a semester-long program combining high school study with educational tours of Jerusalem and trips throughout Israel; Ramah Israel Institute runs short term trips for school and family groups; six to eight week summer programs take place under the auspices of Ramah Seminar; Ramah Senior Educational Experience links travel and study for students in grade 12; and Tochnit Aviv is a six-month travel and study opportunity for post-high school students.

The Orthodox National Council of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) offers: the Israel Summer Seminar, a month-long tour; Israel Summer Kollel, a summer learning program for high school boys, based in Jerusalem. Though the emphasis is clearly on learning, the Kollel includes sports and trips. There is also Michlelet NCSY, a parallel Torah study and recreation program for high school girls, located in the Neveh Yerushalayim site in Jerusalem. There is even the Yachad Israel Tour for the developmentally disabled.

In other cases, synagogues may advertise trips that are sponsored by a (inter)national but non-denominational Jewish organization or by a private enterprise that brings together unrelated individuals, like those sponsored and managed by Young Judea (an affiliate of Hadassah), Nesiya, or Masada. The synagogue serves as a kind of agent between the individual and the group. For example, a Connecticut congregation sends out a notice urging those completing their junior year of high school to take such a summer trip, while helping them find subsidies via the local Jewish Federation.

Of 105 sponsors of teen trips to Israel listed in 1996 by the CRB Foundation, five are synagogue sponsored: NCSY, NCYI (National Council of Young Israel), NFTY, USY, and Ramah (U.S. & Canada). These programs account for a very high percentage of all Israel Experience participants. In practice, synagogue-based programs vary less in substance and more in the populations from which they draw their participants and staff. Nevertheless, it may be difficult for the observer to distinguish at first glance one denominational group from another, because all of them have a kind of American-teen-on-summer-vacation common denominator.

Not uncommonly, the returning teen is asked to report to the congregation about the trip. This report - sometimes a written letter in the synagogue bulletin, at other times a talk given to the congregation, or even informal communication - is meant to display enthusiasm and demonstrate the knowledge about Israel that the traveler has gained. This exercise may give the congregation a sense of its "success" in passing on Jewish identity and a feeling of attachment to Israel. It may also serve to stimulate other teens (or pre-teens) to go to and learn about Israel, or even motivate parents and related adults to travel to and learn about Israel. It sometimes happens that youngsters go on a teen trip for an entire summer (five to seven weeks) while their parents simultaneously visit Israel for a shorter visit (approximately two weeks) during which their "orbits" cross with their children's.

While these trips aim, as earlier suggested, to provide a direct encounter with Israel's society and culture, they more often than not leave Israel on the other side of a cultural divide. This is even true for those intensive summer teen trips like Etgar whose ostensible purpose is to immerse youngsters in Israel. * As the following remark by an Israeli counselor reveals, the nature of the contact is anything but simple. "I see their summer as an Israel experience where Jewish kids will get to know Israel at a very basic level but feel that they personally now have a contact with it." This was good, as she went on to explain, because normally "they see Israel at home in America as something very foreign to them, something very far away. But when they come here and they meet one guy that sold them earrings . . . when it becomes something very personal that they've gone through, I think they feel after six weeks that they know Israel and they feel close to it." And yet, as she admitted, these American youngsters did not really know Israel. "I don't believe they really know Israel or that it's possible to know Israel in six weeks. Because of their age, the situation they're in, and the way the program is built, it's quite a shallow knowing of Israel."

The Year in Israel

Related to the above-mentioned trips is the more ambitious year in Israel - an extended sojourn in Israel. Strictly speaking, these trips are not directly related to synagogue life, but those who choose

them are commonly actively affiliated with synagogues, and often return from their year abroad with a deeper commitment to the synagogue and Jewish community.

While members of Orthodox synagogues are among the most likely to take these trips - which commonly take place between high school graduation and entry into college - a growing number of non-Orthodox Jews have made such a year-course part of their personal Jewish curriculum. The Orthodox generally spend this year in either a yeshiva (the men) or a seminary (the women), but a number of other options exist for people from other movements, including institutions like the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, the World Union of Jewish Students Center in Arad, the Young Judaea Year Course, or the NFTY Eisendrath International Exchange Program which offers a semester in the Muss High School in Israel, GADNA experiences, visits to Israeli families and a kibbutz experience, or the UAHC College and Kibbutz program which offers college students a combination of kibbutz work, social action, and education.

For the synagogue, the presence of members (or their children) in Israel represents an ongoing connection to the Jewish state and society. As such it personalizes and heightens awareness of what is going on there - from the concrete conditions of life to the overarching political realities. It also may serve as an occasion for trips to Israel on the part of family members to visit the sojourner. (In fact, such mid-year trips have created another "high season" for Israel travel: The Hanukkah/intersession break.) In some cases, dispatches sent back by the sojourners are read aloud in the synagogue, published in the bulletin or in the local newspaper, and commented upon by the rabbi or members and may thereby serve as an ongoing, and in some ways, vicarious Israel experience for those to whom these dispatches are addressed. During the last year, with its series of bomb blasts, assassinations, and elections, these sorts of communications have been an important source of Israel education in many synagogues.

Although the year in Israel has the potential for getting beyond a shallow knowledge of Israel, the participants in such programs often remain in enclaves of sojourners like themselves and thus do not encounter Israel and Israelis. The very fact that they may return to their Diaspora communities and synagogues without a working knowledge of Hebrew, or familiarization with Israeli political and cultural life, is often the most powerful evidence of the limits of their Israel education.

Probably more than any single lecture or presentation, rabbis' sermons serve as a means for educating Jews about Israel, its role and meaning in their lives. "Israel is something that rabbis preach on, and that's serious," as Rabbi Robert Abramson of the USCJ put it (interview). In some cases, the Israel about which the rabbis speak is a projection of biblical and religious imagery, the incarnation of the sacred texts. Other times, rabbis speak about contemporary Israel, and particularly its political and economic needs. The fact that they invoke both these visions of Israel in their sermons sometimes results in a confusion of various realities. Hence political and religious concerns may become so intertwined as to seem inseparable. This has particularly become the case in recent years as Israel goes through the complex and often wrenching peace process.

The rabbi (or some other congregational leader) may use the synagogue bulletin or newsletter for communicating with the membership. These written messages frequently make reference to or serve as

a vehicle for some rudimentary education about Israel. A local publication may also reprint or excerpt articles about Israel which have appeared elsewhere. Increasingly, these are also being posted on the worldwide web. The cyberspace newsletter has been successfully developed, for example, at Or Hadash, a Reconstructionist congregation in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania and at Beth Tikvah, an Orthodox congregation in Montreal.

Frequently attached to sermons (or bulletin items) are fund-raising appeals for Israel or Israel-based organizations. The success of such appeals depends on the rabbi (or surrogate) successfully educating the congregation about that for which the funds are being solicited. Thus often synergistically, the success of this "education" can be measured by the response to the appeal. Synagogue based Israel bond appeals, for example, have for years operated this way.

Information about Israel gleaned via the rabbi's sermon is of course limited both by the format of the presentation and the perspectives of the speaker. While many rabbis have a more intimate and comprehensive understanding of Israel than their congregants (due to the fact that virtually all rabbinical training now requires extensive study and living in Israel), they nevertheless are limited in what they can communicate from a pulpit within the synagogue context.

Many synagogues institute so-called "cultural programs" as part of their organized efforts to offer a purpose, other than prayer, to their assembly. Meant for the edification of the congregation, these are usually singular events - a weekend scholar-in-residence or a talk by a visiting lecturer with some special expertise - or they may occasionally be part of a mini-series. In a sense, these programs transform the synagogue into a place for some sort of Jewish growth. A common focus of these programs, although by no means the only, or even the primary, one has been Israel. This is especially the case around the time of Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) and, since 1967, Yom Yerushalayim (the anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem). It may also occur when events in Israel stimulate international attention (e.g., the recent assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the terrorist bombings, election campaigns, changes in the basic religious/secular status quo). The programming may take the form of lectures, or sometimes debates, particularly around political positions in Israel. In this format, information is furnished or points of view offered, giving the participants a chance to expand and explore their understanding of Israel and attitudes toward it.

But cultural programs on Israel are not always centered on words. Other synagogue programs may include a film (or series of films) from Israel. They may likewise include an "Israel night," when Middle Eastern foods are prepared and shared, Hebrew songs sung, or Israeli folk dances taught. In all these, the aim is to "acquire" an informed, cultural attachment to the Jewish state and homeland.

There are also community wide programs sponsored through the auspices of the synagogue. Thus a Manalapan, New Jersey congregation played a leading role in sponsoring what it called "Israel Expo '96." This included activities on the worldwide web that connected New Jersey Jews and Israeli institutions, and provided virtual opportunities for voice and cyber interactivity.

Cultural programs, like the songs and dances, are also limited. To quote the Psalmist: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the song . . . upon foreign soil?" (137:3-4) Something rings false in the effort to replicate the elements of one culture while inhabiting another. The accents are always foreign.

The "importation" of Israelis as emissaries into the synagogue may serve as a vehicle for Israel education. Often times, Israelis serve as staff in the Hebrew schools. Unfortunately, these Israelis are usually expatriates whose presence in the synagogue community can provide a negative model of people who did not choose to live in Israel. Hence the information they have to offer may carry with it some bleak perspective on Israel and its capacity to provide a positive Jewish experience.

In contrast to these expatriates are those who act as temporary emissaries. A particularly creative and innovative program of this sort is the USCJ Project Arevim, which USCJ member synagogues may access through their USY shaliach (another emissary). The program brings an Israeli young adult, generally after he or she has completed active army service, to the community to serve as, or with, the synagogue youth advisor. Arevim can also create a variety of cultural, educational, and religious programs for the host synagogue and Jewish community. The community is not required to pay the arevim a salary, but must cover the cost of their housing, meals, utilities, spending money, local transportation, health insurance, and round trip airfare from and to Israel. The community must also provide an appropriate working budget for the assignment and perhaps a bonus or gift on completion of the assignment. The meals, transportation, and housing can be provided by a host family or families. Arevim serve for a minimum of one and a maximum of two years. The young men and women are selected for their knowledge of Judaism and Zionism, commitment to Jewish education, ability to relate to others, and skills in reaching out and involving others in Jewish life. They undergo training and are supervised by the host synagogue as well as by U S Y shlichim. Arevim assigned to Conservative synagogues will either have a Masorti background or be completely willing to teach and live by the standards appropriate to service in the Conservative Movement. A synagogue that has part-time USY and Kadima advisors but not a full-time youth director would be the perfect candidate for Project Arevim. It may also be practical to utilize the areiv in the religious school, JCC, or neighboring synagogues, all of which may help reduce the cost of the areiv to the synagogue's youth budget.

Although not nearly as developed and organized, a number of B'nai Akiva emissaries have been working in a similar capacity at a few American Orthodox synagogues. Primarily acting to arouse interest in religious Zionism, they also serve as youth leaders and as informal educators. In addition to teaching Orthodox youth about Israel, they try to generate thoughts of aliya.

Conclusion

When one asks most American Jews today about their understanding of what being Jewish means, the surprise is how difficult a question it is for them to answer. So successful have Jews become in penetrating and becoming part of contemporary life and culture that many can no longer clearly articulate what it is that sets them apart from the other religious and cultural groups around them. But in the search for some expression of who and what a Jew is, two words commonly emerge: synagogue

and Israel. Jews go to the synagogue, and Jews have a special attachment to Israel. These remain the last anchors of Jewish identity and meaning to which we as a people can still connect before being pulled away from one another by the centrifugal forces of contemporary existence in open and beckoning societies. The synagogue and Israel remain places where we can still find ourselves in an environment where being a Jew is a key to entry, where the dominant culture is Jewish, and where Jewish behavior is the prevailing norm. It is therefore fitting and important that these two remain connected, in practice and in programming, and that the connection be continually enhanced.