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TORAH LISHMAH: THE INSTITUTIONS THAT TEACH JUDAISM TO SECULAR ISRAELIS

Shena B. Potter

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
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The process of exploring the growth of Jewish study in secular Israeli society was a fascinating experience. It was both intellectually stimulating and personally interesting. Before I began my study, I did not realize how much of my research would rely upon people giving generously of their time and knowledge. It was a true blessing to meet and learn from so many individuals. I am very grateful to everyone who helped me complete this thesis, each in his or her own way. Some people shared their stories. Others guided my study and suggested areas of further research. Still others offered both moral and financial support without which my work in Israel would not have been possible. I would especially like to thank:

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DIGEST

Israel is undergoing a cultural and spiritual renaissance as the twenty-first century begins. Secular Israeli Jews are actively exploring their Judaism in unprecedented numbers and in ways that are different from previous generations. This phenomenon has been referred to as a small but growing "back-to-text" movement. This thesis explores the trend among secular Israelis to study Jewish texts as a way of forging a stronger Jewish identity.

At a time when the Orthodox community is becoming more rigid, the secular community is left searching. The ever-tightening grip of Orthodox Judaism on daily life on the one hand and the protests of the anti-religious on the other have left a spiritual vacuum. Since 1989 and even more so after Prime Minister Rabin's assassination in 1995, educational initiatives have been developed in Israel to fill this void. Such activity attests to a desire for new Jewish expression.

There is a reason for this. During the early years of the establishment of the state, identity for many Israelis was formed by classical Zionist ideology. Building a nation, and serving the state and were substitutes for spiritual identification. But now, with the main goals of the Zionist dream achieved, the underlying understanding of what it means to be Jewish in Israel is no longer clear.

A number of programs address this quandary by providing educational options that meet the needs of a secular Israeli public hungry for an articulation of their Jewish identity. The institutions strive to teach Judaism through religious and secular texts and Jewish history.

This thesis examines the recent phenomenon by studying various institutions working with the needs of this growing population. Five programs have been examined through the lens of the following questions: Is this way of learning about Judaism truly a new phenomenon? Who has founded these institutions? Is the impetus primarily from Diaspora Jews working from the

outside in, or are the majority of founders Israelis? What are the curricula of the organizations? What are the similarities? What are the differences? Who attends these institutions and why? What are the underlying philosophies and principles guiding the institutions? Are the learning models patterned on any other historically Jewish educational model? What are the programs' purposes and goals? Are they achieving the articulated goals?

The five institutions are: *Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship* in Kiryat Tivon, *The Elul Center* in Jerusalem, *The Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel* in Jerusalem, *Alma Hebrew College* in Tel Aviv, and *The Kolot Center* of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. All the centers are pluralistic, and they all have strong reputations within that segment of Israeli culture involved in such study. Although one program offers an academic degree, most of the study by the institutions is offered as *Torah Lishmah*, study for its own sake of it.

The thesis is structured as follows:

The introduction presents a general history of the social influences that led to this explosion in study. Each of the intermediate chapters explores one of the five institutions in detail and asks of it the aforementioned questions. The conclusion presents the phenomenon of the institutions and such study as a whole, and examines their current significance for Israeli society.

INTRODUCTION

Historical Elements Influencing the "Return to Text" Movement in Israel

Israel is a country of contradictions. It is the intersection where numerous cultures, ideologies, and realities collide and vie for prominence. As an American Jew looking in, it is difficult to make sense of it all. In trying to explain these contradictions, Rabbi David Hartman presented this comparison: "In America, most Jews want to be Jewish at least three days of the year...most Israeli don't want even that. The Secular Zionists who founded this country...wanted to make building the nation, serving the state and flying the Israeli flag substitutes for conventional spiritual identification."[1] This quote, while addressing the issue, only scratches the surface. It is not so much that they do not *want* Jewish and spiritual identification, but many secular Israelis today question how to achieve such identification. They are unsure of how to be Jewish in this modern age. At a time when the Orthodox community is becoming more rigid, the secular community is left searching.

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a religious Israeli brought to the forefront with sickening clarity the conflict of values in Israel. The ever-tightening grip of Orthodox Judaism on daily life on the one hand and the protests of the anti-religious on the other are leaving a spiritual vacuum.

Recently, there has been a rise in the number of educational initiatives that indicate a desire for Jewish renaissance.[2] This increased activity caught my attention. There appear to be the beginnings of a movement calling for change. More established educational institutions are joining forces with more recently founded ones to meet the educational, communal, and spiritual needs of secular Israeli society. These institutions boldly state that they provide an alternative to

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[1] Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. p. 1 .

those who do not want to surrender their Jewish identity. They are trying to "spark a renaissance" based on pluralistic, humanistic and democratic values *and* Jewish traditional sources.

In twenty-first century Israel where the great experiment of a Jewish, democratic sovereign nation is a fifty-three year old reality, secular Jews are beginning to realize that they want methods of expression and ways to relate to the idea of "being Jewish" that they never before considered. They are looking for new paths, because the present options are woefully inadequate. Until this point, for many young secularists, the only way they have related to their Judaism is through negative images. The Holocaust, whose victims Zionists once dismissed as the antithesis to Israel's "new Jews", has become for an increasing percentage of the new generation the only powerful source of Jewish identity. This population lacks even minimal *positive* Jewish experiences.[3]

Every society has certain mores, myths and beliefs to which the majority of its population subscribes. These unite the society and motivate its members to achieve certain goals, and Israel is no exception. This organization of society is known as *civil religion*, according to Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya in their book entitled, *Civil Religion in Israel*.[4] Before delving into the current developments concerning Israeli civil religion and how that affects Jewish identity and self-perception, one should first understand the history of the development of civil religion in the Jewish state.

Liebman and Don-Yehiya outlined the development of four distinct civil religions in Israel from the time of the Yishuv until the late 1970's: Zionist-Socialism, Revisionist-Zionism,

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[2] Web page of PANIM: For Jewish Renaissancel in Israel. www.panim.org.il. 1999.
[3] Yossi Klein Halevi, *Jewish Identities in Post-Rabin Israel* (New York, 1998), p. 5.
[4] Liebman and Don-Yehiya, Civil Religion in Israel: *Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State*. p.ix.

Statism, and the New Civil Religion. These stages serve as reflections of the Israeli society at various periods in its history.

The early Zionists, the founders of the Yishuv and State, were reacting and rebelling against the shtetl Jew and the entire universe of Eastern European Judaism. Zionist-Socialism was the civil religion of the Yishuv. Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli journalist of American origin, states that, "Zionism brought the Jewish people home, but left Judaism in exile."[5] Zionist-Socialism consciously excised God from its symbol system. Its advocates sought substitutes for religious symbols, and they secularized the Jewish messianic conception into a sociopolitical redemption by national means. The collective replaced God, and the individual was mobilized into a collective effort, namely the establishment of an ideal society in the land of Israel.[6]

The Zionist-Socialists were radically secular, and they also created their own symbols. For example, labor was no longer just the performance of a task. It became a quasi-religious act and thus, holy work. Traditional holidays and rituals were utilized, but their incorporation was selective. This movement practically ignored Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, because they lacked a national element. Holidays such as Chanuka, Tu b'shvat, and Lag b'omer, however assumed much greater importance. The rituals to celebrate these holidays moved from the synagogue and home to public forums replete with song and dance. These new rituals were the substitute for prayer.[7] Nevertheless, a self-conscious tension existed among the Zionist-Socialists. They were too intimately associated with their religious tradition and yet too estranged from its basic values to either ignore it or systematically transform it.[8]

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[5] Klein Halevi, p.10.
[6] Leibman and Don-Yehiya. pp. 25, 29, 30-1, 38.
[7] Ibid. p. 49.
[8] Ibid. p. 81.

In response to Zionist-Socialism, another civil religion developed, Revisionist Zionism. Ze'ev Jabotinsky consciously founded this movement which had greater sympathy for religious tradition than its predecessor. Revisionist-Zionism matured without adopting the confrontational strategy that characterized Zionist-Socialism.[9]

This civil religion provided meaning and purpose for the lives of those who subscribed to it. Though not antagonistic to religion, the Revisionists never professed a love for traditional Judaism. It was a great struggle for its members to find the place of religious tradition within Revisionist ideology. Jabotinsky had a strong aversion to the religious 'ghetto Jew.' To him, religious commandments were a means to preserve the nation while in the Diaspora, but once the vision of a Jewish state was nearing establishment it was possible to do without many religious provisions. National preservation was the ultimate value to which all other values were subordinate. To Jabotinsky, national uniqueness, not religion, was the sacred treasure of the Jewish people. This civil religion ultimately did not sustain itself because aside from nationalism, Revisionist-Zionism had no other system or ideology from which to draw.[10]

With the actual founding of Israel as the Jewish state, Revisionist-Zionism, like Zionist-Socialism transformed itself into a political party, and a new dominant civil religion arose. Statism, or *Mamlachtiut*, saw itself as an extension and fulfillment of Zionist-Socialism that encompassed the entire society. David Ben-Gurion advocated Statism, which utilized traditional symbols that could be interpreted as emphasizing the centrality of the state and ignored those that could not. Statism emphasized those aspects of Judaism that originated when Jews existed as a nation in their own land, and preserved the Jewish people during their many years of exile. Any Jewish traditions which developed within the two thousand years between Babylonian exile and

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[9] Ibid. pp. 57, 70.
[10] Ibid. pp. 66, 68-70, 72.

the founding of the state were discounted. Instead, newly developing traditions took on great importance. Yom Ha'atzma'ut, for example, became a most important symbol which reflected Ben-Gurion's viewpoint and policy.[11]

As the currents of Israeli society shifted, Statism as the civil religion began to wane. Israel's existence in and of itself no longer evoked such wonder. The country entered a new stage. The Israeli army was a recognized force, and the threat of complete annihilation sat at a (relative) distance. The great waves of immigration had subsided to small ripples, and the primary goals of Statism, defending the country and the ingathering of exiles, were losing resonance.[12] Israel was becoming normalized. Problems familiar to every country such as poverty, corruption, and ethnic discrimination arose and intensified, bringing the propositions of Statism into question.

In Statism's place another civil religion arose which Liebman and Don-Yehiya simply term the New Civil Religion. The need for a symbolic system to legitimate the Jewish state and provide meaning to its Jewish identity persisted. Yet, the weaker the connection to traditional religion was, the greater the difficulty in sanctifying institutions and patterns of behavior. The New Civil Religion sought to integrate and mobilize Jewish Israeli society by grounding it in a "transcendent order" of which the Jewish people and Jewish tradition are basic elements.[13] Under the leadership of Menachem Begin, the concept of "a people that dwells alone" was deeply embedded into the New Civil Religion. Historical sites such Masada took on great symbolic importance as the modern state of Israel was seen as the victorious legacy of Masada's brave defenders.[14]

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[11] Ibid. pp.88-9, 122-3.
[12] Ibid. p 123/
[13] Ibid. pp.131-2.
[14] Ibid. pp. 43, 148-9, 165-6/

The New Civil Religion rested on three main points. It affirmed the importance of traditional Judaism as a component of Jewish identity and Jewish history. It did not demand detailed religious practice of its adherents, nor did it limit concerns to those of traditional Judaism. Most interestingly, unlike its predecessors, God had reentered the New Civil Religion, but only as a name, not as an active agent conferring legitimacy.[15]

Following the New Civil Religion, from about the middle of the 1980's until today at the beginning of the twenty-first century, new issues have gained prominence which are shaping the character of Israeli society. Many young Israelis are second and third generation sabras. There is no longer a conscious rebellion against Eastern European parochialism, for no one remembers those days. The state of Israel has been firmly established. The main goals of the Zionist dream have been achieved. Building the nation can no longer serve as the sustaining ideology. At the same time, second and third generation descendants of secular Zionists are not familiar enough with religious Judaism to pass its essential elements on to their children. Historian Robert Wistrich believes that among the secular Israeli majority, there is a "shallower knowledge" of Jewish history and culture and a greater "diminishment of Jewish distinctiveness" than ever before.[16]

The entire Zionist project was and still is an attempt to transform Judaism from a religious into a normal national existence.[17] Paul Liptz, an instructor at Hebrew Union College and Tel Aviv University, who studies social and historical trends in Israel, explains that existential questions regarding one's Jewishness for secular Israelis began during the desperation of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. "There were the pictures in the paper of the *chiloni* guy wrapped in a talit who had never worn a talit before." But once the war was over, there was no

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[15] Ibid.pp.135-37.
[16] Wistrich, "Do the Jews Have a Future?" *Commentary*. July, 1994.

need to further the search. By 1982, Israel was strong. Its inhabitants could begin to question fundamental cultural assumptions without worrying about destroying their homeland. What was termed Post-Zionism in academic circles translated itself into a non-ideological existence in general Israeli life.[18]

All the myths regarding the founding of the Jewish state became open to examination in a critical light. In this successful, secure nation, the values of self-sacrifice and the subordination of the individual to the collective were no longer deemed necessary. Rochelle Furstenberg examined this new challenge to Israeli identity. She writes that many Israelis view themselves as citizens of a democratic state in which the majority of its members just happen to be Jews.[19]

By the late 1980's and early 1990's Israel had become a middle class society. It had moved from the need to be an ideological, victimized population to a normalized one. It was Ben Gurion's dream come true. But the truth of the dream was such a shock for most members of Israeli society that they did not fully know what to do with it.

According to Paul Liptz, a strong trait of a middle class culture is that the body at large no longer makes collective decisions. Instead, it is a society where decisions are made by individuals individually. In Israel this means that some will go to study Talmud, others will not.[20] Some will choose religiosity, and others will choose other methods of Jewish identification.

Israeli middle class life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is filled with choice. Israelis are open to advances around the world. Their children pursue studies overseas; cable television, the epitome of choice, interrupts the dinner hour. This middle class is threatened

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[17] Moredechai Bar On, *Jewish Identities in Post-Rabin Israel* "Bar-On's Response." (New York, 1998), p. 17.
[18] Interview with Paul Liptz, instructor at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Univeristy. (Jerusalem, June 26, 2000).
[19] Rochelle Furstenberg, *Post-Zionism: The Challenge to Israel*. 1997, p.vi.

most not by hostile Arab neighbors, but by hints of coercion within its own ranks. The Chief Rabbinate no longer holds dominance over every life cycle event. If they so desire, secular Israelis can fly to Cyprus to marry in a civil wedding. During the 1950's, there was a national consensus. Even if, as an individual, one did not agree with a policy, he or she still adhered to it for the sake of the nation. By the 1990's such consensus had dissolved. Secular Israelis realized that holding a differing view and acting on that view would not destroy the nation.[21]

The influences and concerns of modern-day, middle class Israel are different than even those of twenty years ago. Rochelle Furstenberg suggests that the ideals of socialism and back-to-the-land romanticism are incongruous with the urban life-style, hi-tech professionalism and free market economy of today's Israel.

With Zionist fervor and commitment in decline, there is also a passive drifting away from religious Judaism. True, Israel marks time according to the Jewish calendar. Most Israelis talk and even think in Jewish categories. They recognize Shabbat as the day of rest. They speak in Hebrew and proudly refer to themselves as Jewish. In such ways they affirm Jewish peoplehood. [22] But this Jewishness is fuzzy, unconscious and unarticulated. In the same way that many descendants of Jewish immigrants to the United States have lost their Jewish culture, Israelis have become increasingly ignorant of theirs. Without a common heritage, the sense of peoplehood dissipates. Radical Post-Zionists even challenge the very notion that the Jews are a nation.[23] With recognition of such ignorance, some secular Israelis are searching for a path back toward a more conscious expression of their Judaism.

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[20] Liptz interview.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Furstenberg, p4.
[23] Meirovich, p.12.

The secular majority in Israel as a body has always been somewhat suspicious of religious coercion and guards against it. This is reflected in the Israeli educational system. Since Israel's founding the educational establishment has tilted heavily toward radical secularism. Over time, less and less emphasis has been put on the study of the history and the classical literature of the Jewish people. Today, there is a paucity of competent teachers to fill the vacancies left by the pre-state reservoir of immigrant teachers who had at least been exposed to Jewish learning.[24]

These factors fashioned secularism into an ideology that is estranged from the synagogue and Jewish university studies and culminated in a loss of Jewish identity for the average secular Israelis.[25] The motivations of their parents are not relevant to their world. A recognition of this disconnect led to a study of Israeli Jewish identity commissioned by the then minister of education Zevulun Hammer in 1991 and published in 1994 called the Shenhar Report. The Report concluded that:

> The superficial rhythms of Jewish life (Shabbat as the day off, Pesach as a national holiday) were by themselves insufficient to stave off the threat of assimilation. The real existential challenge to Jewish survival in Israel no longer emanated from external enemies but from an inability to convince the next generation of Israeli children that Jewish learning and living were relevant options in their lives. [26]

To some scholars, the Orthodox community was the root of the problem. Gerson Cohen, an historian of ancient and medieval Judaism who served as Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary and was a supporter of Conservative movement in Israel, believed that Orthodoxy was guilty of denying some 80 percent of Israeli society even some modicum of religious vocabulary, study and observance. The lack of tolerance for religious pluralism had severed many Israelis from their spiritual roots.[27] Ephraim Tabory notes that at the time of

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[24].Ibid. p.23.
[25] Quote by Ismar Schrosh in Meirovich's *Shaping of Masorti*...p. 10
[26] Meirovich, p.19.
[27] Ibid. p.21.

Israel's 50th birthday, there were clear indicators that its people had "spiritual problems of a diffuse and unclear nature."[28]

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 brought the generations old conflict between Israeli and Jewish identities to its ultimate pathological moment. Rabin was Israel's first native-born prime minister who embodied secular "Israeli-ness." The man who had attempted to fulfill Zionism's promise to normalize the Jews was murdered by someone acting in the name of the Torah. Klein Halevi states it dramatically, "The Israeli secular redeemer was killed by a Jew." The deep divide between the religious and the secular populations was brought to light. Polarizing trends worsened. On the "Jewish" side ultra-Orthodox separatists managed to penetrate the centrist communities of traditional Sephardim and religious Zionists. For those on the secular left, any expression of Jewishness became an implicit show of support of Yigal Amir.[29]

This polarization increased resentment toward Jewish tradition. But that does not mean that secular Israelis felt no need for self-expression and connection to something greater. Furstenberg insists that Israelis are searching for some personal spirituality. She cites children lighting candles after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination as one example of increasing needs for spiritual expression. Another example is that many young Israelis travel to India and Thailand after their army service.[30] They return with stories of having found a 'meaning' and 'spirituality' to life that appear to be absent in their local surroundings.

It is not the legislative policy of the religious right alone that has caused disenfranchisement from religious Judaism. For although Orthodox Judaism is not a serious

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[28] Tabory, *Reform Judaism in Israel.* 1998, p.52.
[29] Klein Halevi, pp. 2,5,7.
[30] Furstenberg, p.27

option for Jewish identification for most secular Israelis, many view non-Orthodox models of religious Judaism as inauthentic versions of the real thing.

But the desire for Jewish identification for secular Israelis remains. The 1994 Shenhar Report which specifically studied Jewish identity, expressed dismay at the poor Jewish-identity quotient of the nearly 80 percent of the student population in the non-Orthodox stream. The Commission of the Report declared a state of emergency. It called for change. Among the suggestions, it recommended emphasizing the broader cultural dimensions inherent in Judaism over and above the strictly religious components. It also emphasized the need to break the religious establishment's monopoly over defining what constitutes Judaism. Though the Report began by focusing on school-aged children, its findings clearly indicated that the adult segment of secular society was equally at risk. [31]

Since the mid 1990's, there has been an increase in attention paid to adult-centered learning across Israel. It is my belief that this is the direct result of the current spiritual malaise. It is possible that the Shenhar Report has served as the catalyst to transform a sense of concern into actual educational initiatives. This, coupled with the Rabin assassination energized forces pulling toward the cultural center where thousands of secular Israelis are studying Jewish texts in formal settings. These institutions appear dedicated to meeting an inner hunger. Yossi Klein Halevi points out that the "back-to-text" movement, which has generated considerable momentum since the mid-1990's is hardly new, but the extent and numbers of participants is unprecedented.

The significance of thousands of secular Israelis studying Jewish texts is what this thesis will explore. How such study addresses issues of Jewish identification will also be considered.

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[31] Meirovich, p.18.

The Talmud states that whoever engages in *torah lishmah*, the study of Jewish texts for its own sake, that study becomes an elixer of life. [32] Such unselfish study is a value deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness. Recently, there has been an explosion of non-Orthodox, non degree granting institutions that explore Jewish culture and heritage. Students are studying Judaism as *torah lishmah.* These institutions are trying to address the quandary of what it means to be Jewish in Israel in various ways. They offer multiple avenues toward expression of one's Jewish identity.

PANIM is a non-profit umbrella organization that best exemplifies the phenomenon of an educational movement devoted to developing Jewish identity. The organization was formed in 1999 and today boasts over one hundred affiliated organizations. It joins together institutions dedicated to promoting a Jewish renewal in Israel. As its name suggests, PANIM's goal is to support the many faces of Israeli Judaism. The organization was established as a joint initiative that responds to the "desire of a growing number of Israeli Jews for Jewish cultural and spiritual options that express their values as individuals, families, and communities." PANIM recognizes that in recent years there have been growing attempts to spark a Jewish renaissance based on societal values and Jewish sources. [33]

The following chapters will focus on *Israeli* attempts to meet the need of a secular Israeli public searching for their Judaism. Five educational institutions that fall under the umbrella of PANIM will be explored. They will be studied to discover if they have the potential to create a lasting synthesis of learning and living, religion and culture.

The institutions are similar to one another in several ways. Their courses are not offered for credit. The atmosphere is pluralistic. The targeted student population has a generally weak

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[32]Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts.* (New York, 1975.) p. 318. Quoting from Ta'anith 7a.
[33] PANIM web page.

Judaic background. Still, each organization is unique and approaches the teaching of Judaism through many paths. Students' build their Jewish identity through the study of a wide variety of Jewish sources from traditional texts to modern poetry.

This thesis will study institutions that were founded years ago and institutions that have only recently been created. It will compare the institutions by asking similar questions of each, and it will explore if this way of learning is truly new. The next five chapters will elaborate on the founders and their motivations. They will explain the institutions' curricula and introduce the reader to the teachers of and the students in these programs. The institutions' philosophy, purposes and goals will be explained. Finally, the institutions will be evaluated to see if they are truly meeting the needs of the students enrolled in their courses.

The five institutions contained in this study are:

1) **The Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship**. This center utilizes the kibbutz model and strives to make the cultural and spiritual landscape of Israeli society pluralistic and Jewish by cultivating a knowledgeable and educated leadership and public.
2) **The Elul Center**. This Jerusalem based institution was founded to create a pluralistic Jewish educational framework composed of secular and Orthodox Jews.
3) **The Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel**. This beit midrash offers a liberal alternative for serious Jewish textual study to secular and religious men and women in Jerusalem.
4) **Alma Hebrew College**. Drawing from the life of Tel Aviv, Alma promotes the study and advancement of Hebrew Culture and contemporary Jewish identity.

5) **The Kolot Center**. Kolot strives to add the missing voices, which are crucial for cultivating an Israeli leadership that will address the issues of Jewish identity and social benefit while maintaining an affinity to Jewish tradition and to the principles of pluralism.

Why is a study like this in English relevant for those reading it in the Diaspora? Because, the subject at hand is basically about Jewish self-preservation. The search for Jewish identity is not limited to secular Israelis. If anything, it is one of the common bonds shared between Israeli and Diaspora society in this age of multi-culturalism and globalism. Instead of widening the gap between the societies, awareness of such a search and the study of Jewish texts as *torah lishmah* can serve as a bridge between Israeli Jewish and Diaspora cultures.

CHAPTER 1

Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship

Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship was officially founded in 1989 with one goal: to make the cultural and spiritual landscape of Israeli society pluralistic, humanistic and Jewish by cultivating communal leaders and a public who would be steeped in Jewish knowledge and open to world-wide cultural influences. The center is located in the north of Israel, in Kiryat Tivon on the campus of Oranim Teachers College. Many of the founders and leaders of the institutions in Israel who are doing educational work with the secular population passed through the doors of Hamidrasha. The center is a veritable cradle of secular Jewish Israeli culture.

Hamidrasha began with a commitment. A group of young educators who had been studying at Oranim saw their compatriots leaving Israel or becoming baalei teshuva. This group was looking for an expression of their Judaism. The Jewish expressions of which they were aware were not broad enough to encompass their many different understandings of what it meant be Jewish. They felt detached from Jewish tradition and were concerned about what the nature of Jewish culture in Israel would be in the years to come. Would secular Israelis feel any connection to Judaism and the Jewish community beyond a commitment to one's family? These young people wanted to reshape the cultural face of Israeli society and engage in Jewish education that was meaningful in the modern day. Inspired by this desire, they developed a series of classes for themselves which individual members took turns leading. This ongoing workshop took place over the course of two years in the mid 1980's. Through these meetings, they made a personal commitment to each other to continue the process of claiming a connection

to the Jewish culture of Israel. They planned to use what happened in those workshops as their guide. [1]

The group first opened a seminar for young adults, ages 22 - 32 as part of Oranim Teacher's College. The seminar was oriented toward people who had been alienated from and deprived of their Jewish heritage and traditions and were now searching for a connection to them. The facilitators each led one workshop, which approached the question of Jewish identity from either a psychological, historical, or text-based view, and participated in the others. From its inception, Hamidrasha based its approach on interdisciplinary study. Its founders and its current leaders believed in the combination of intellectual study, emotional involvement and the group experience. Initially, three courses were offered to interested participants, most of who were teachers, as a complete program of study. Two of the workshops were content-based, one on rabbinical literature, one on Halutzim literature. The third was focused on group dynamics including an examination of the dialogue with the text, a dialogue with the self and a dialogue within the group.[2]

In 1989, Hamidrasha became its own unit, separate from Oranim, yet still housed on the campus. Hamidrasha's leaders realized that a Jewish identity crisis had existed and still exists in Israeli secular society. In addition to tremendous achievements that the fulfillment of the Zionist dream brought, it also brought with it a second and third generation of secular Israelis who are alienated from and deprived of Jewish heritage and traditions.

Moti Zeira, the executive director of Hamidrasha, brings his own experiences to the center. He is quite open about his motivations. Moti is a third generation Israeli. He has a bushy salt and pepper beard, and regularly dresses in a t-shirt, shorts and sandals. Moti could be the

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[1] Interview with Hamidrasha Executive Director, Moti Zeira. June 14, 2000. Kiriat Tivon, Israel.
[2] Interview with Benjy Maor, Director of Publicity for Hamidrasha. July2, 2000. Jerusalem, Israel.

poster child of the Kibbutz movement. His grandparents who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe were protesting against the religious, shtetl culture of their birth. Still, they had very strong Jewish and Zionist identities. Moti's parents were both born in Israel, but Moti did not sense that they gave much thought to their Jewish identity. He supposed that they were too busy trying to make a living to be concerned with the less tangible and less immediate issues concerning their identity.

For Moti, around the age 16 or 17, his unquestioning tie to his Jewish identity began to unravel. The years between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War were a time of self-examination. After the Yom Kippur War, Moti felt very ambivalent about many aspects of his life: being a soldier, Jewish culture, to go to synagogue or not. He knew that he lived in a Jewish world, but it was not enough. During this period, Moti attended courses on Judaism. Many of his fellow students were Orthodox Jews who had recently immigrated to Israel. Moti realized that he felt inferior to the Orthodox Jews there. His impression was that they felt completely Jewish even though they had not been living in Israel their entire lives, while Moti, in spite of speaking Hebrew, serving in the Israeli army, and living in the land of Israel still did not feel "Jewish enough." He recalled, "I studied in a secular school with an Orthodox teacher. I felt that I had to decide between two cultures [whether to adopt a halacha-observant lifestyle or to live as a secular Jew.] In the end, I took the Talmud *bagrut* and then forgot everything." Moti stated that, "What many Israelis feel today is what I felt at sixteen." He insists that while many secular Israelis resent it, they feel that Judaism and life cycle events are the property of the Orthodox. From his own experiences and from observations, Moti decided there was a need to help secular Israelis embrace rather than be threatened by Jewish texts.[3]

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[3] Zeira interview.

The present leaders of Hamidrasha believe that Israeli secular society faces a Jewish identity crisis. A loss of values and the collapse of tradition and ideology fuel this crisis. Hamidrasha views Judaism as a living, dynamic culture and regards Jewish texts and sources are a font of inspiration. The leaders do not, however, see such texts as authoritative. The texts are one voice in the chorus of Jewish expression and self-understanding. In an effort to be most effective, the center has focused on responding to the particular needs of the secular public that are most visible, particularly the celebration of life cycle events and marking the Jewish calendar.

All of the projects of Hamidrasha are based upon an inter-disciplinary educational approach. The combination of cognitive and affective dimensions in a group, workshop setting is the approach of all the educators and facilitators. The center integrates intellectual study, emotional involvement and group experience with subjects ranging from Literature and Talmud to the history and geography of Eretz Yisrael. At the core of all courses offered by Hamidrasha is the conviction that only continued commitment and consistency can create a knowledgeable and committed leadership. Thus, the educational process is long-term. This also gives the program and the subject of Jewish identity and culture in Israeli society a greater sense of legitimacy.[4]

Hamidrasha not only focuses on text study. Of equal value is the creation of community. The staff itself leads by example. The educators work as a chavurah, an extended community. They regularly study together, design and hold celebrations for life cycle events, and maintain the dynamic force of interactive learning.[5]

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[4] *Panim's Directory of Jewish Renaissance in Israel*(Hertzeliya: May, 2000), 11.
[5] Maor interview.

What began as a small institution with a limited curriculum of three workshops on aspects of Jewish identity has developed into a multi-faceted educational entity. The center has expanded dramatically. In 1991, about 1,200 people took part in Hamidrasha workshops. By 1999 more than 12, 000 people participated annually. Hamidrasha is also the only learning facility of its kind in the rural north of Israel. Because if its location, twenty minutes east of Haifa, the center serves people who live in rural and border settlements, kibbutzim, moshavim, and development towns and cities. Its participants range in age from pre-b'nai mitzvah to people in their forties and fifties.

The staff of Hamidrasha has also grown from twelve people in 1989 to a staff of 60 people, approximately 40 of whom are full time. Hamidrasha has greatly developed its scope in the past eleven years, warranting such a large staff. While retaining the interactive workshop structure, the center now runs several different programs, each with its own director.[6] While all the programs promote pluralistic Jewish expression and Jewish identity issues, each does have its particular area of interest and target group. Originally, all of the programs were held on the Oranim campus. Recently, Hamidrasha expanded its scope. In addition to on-campus courses, the center trains leaders at the center who then lead workshops at satellite locations throughout the north of Israel.

Several of Hamidrasha's programs deserve extended explanation.

ONGOING WORKSHOP FOR YOUNG LEADERS AND EDUCATORS

This project targets "young adults" who are defined as anyone who is 20 to 40 years old. It is the flagship program of Hamidrasha. Most participants come from secular backgrounds. Many of them have had experiences similar to that of Moti Zeira that both alienated them from

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[6] Information provided electronically by Benjy Maor. June 2000.

religious Judaism, but also heightened their curiosity and desire to confront and develop their own Jewish Israeli identity.

The main goal of the project is to provide a year long educational framework for young leaders from various sectors in Israeli society who strive to develop their Jewish Israeli identity. The curriculum consists of study and discussion of traditional as well as modern Jewish texts. Current Israeli issues and experiences are also explored. Through such study, the staff of Hamidrasha hopes to reshape contemporary Israeli society by building a young educational, social and idealistic leadership that will develop a relevant pluralistic Jewish Israeli identity. The vision is of an open Israeli society, which acknowledges its uniqueness rooted in its Jewish traditional cultural symbols and has at its base Jewish tradition and culture.

A secondary goal of this program is to develop new leaders who will facilitate other workshops offered by Hamidrasha. Each participant receives training so that he/she will be involved in specific educational projects such as leading Bar/Bat Mitzvah and holiday seminars, directing seminars for young immigrants, or simply implementing what was learned in the workshop into the community framework, however that is defined.

The entire Workshop for Young Leaders and Educators is constructed around the expertise of the teacher/facilitator leading each session. Subjects include discussions of traditional Jewish texts and sources, the pioneering Zionists, modern Israeli literature and its connection to Jewish sources. Uniquely comtemporary topics are also covered such as dilemmas confronting Israeli society, Jewish pluralism, and equal rights for all of Israel's citizens. There are also practical elements to the seminar. Some sessions are devoted to developing educational skills and raising the level of the inter-personal relationships among participants.

The workshop runs throughout the school year and meets weekly. This program for young leaders and educators was the first workshop ever run by Hamidrasha and it still serves as the basis for all the wide and varied educational programs the center offers. Participants can enroll in a one or two year program. At the end of the each year, participants receive a certificate of completion that states which courses they have taken and how many hours they have spent in communal study. The workshop has also been exported to educational institutions all over Israel. A majority of the hundreds of graduates of this program eventually choose education as their profession. Many graduates are currently involved in organizing cultural activities in their communities. This indicates that they are implementing Hamidrasha's pluralistic approach to Judaism and Jewish culture throughout Israel. Also, almost all the staff members of Hamidrasha today are graduates of this educational and inter-personal experience.

BEIT MIDRASH

Secular Israeli society is demonstrating a renewed and growing commitment to Jewish-Israeli identity and culture by willingly devoting time and energy to study and discussion. The Beit Midrash at Hamidrasha is a learning framework where experienced educators, school principals, teachers, poets, artists, members of Hamidrasha's staff and others look to deepen their knowledge and personal experience by coming together one day a week for the Beit Midrash at Hamidrasha.

This study framework combines an academic perspective and the advantages of the Beit Midrash style of study. This includes chevruta learning, combining philosophy and thought with experience and study in small groups. Instructors are top lecturers, spiritual leaders and peer teachers. The Beit Midrash runs from October to June, and participants have the option of

attending one or two days a week. Participants also choose one of six tracks within the Beit Midrash ranging from studying the weekly Torah portion, to the tension between revolt and tradition in the writings of the early Pioneers, to Women's Studies, to Modern Social and Zionist thought.[7]

NIGUN:

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by an extreme, right-wing Orthodox Jew dramatically and tragically exemplified the tensions in Israel between the secular and Orthodox populations. Hamidrasha is placing special emphasis on a program to lessen such tensions. Nigun: Beit Midrash for Furthering Pluralism, is a project of Hamidrasha that works in conjunction with elements within the religious sectors of Israel. Yossi Klein Halevi noted in his essay, "Jewish Identities in Post-Rabin Israel," " The Rabin assassination has not only strengthened polarizing forces, but also reinvigorated forces pulling toward the cultural center... those hoping to maintain creative tension between democracy and Judaism, Israeli and Jewish identities."[8] Nigun represents these centrist forces. Beit Midrash Nigun is a joint venture by two partners, Hamidrasha and Yeshivat Hakibbutz Hadati at Ma'ale Gilboa.[9]

All participants are Israeli. They identify themselves as secular, Orthodox, Reform and Conservative. All are attempting to discover and create new spiritual links that evolve from renewed confrontation with Jewish culture in its many modes of expression. Activities of the program are based upon the following principles: Education, the specialty of Hamidrasha, must be the means by which participants realize the results of the dialogue, and it is a major focus of all the activities; all meetings are based on mutual respect; they are meetings of equals where

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[7] *Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship: SeminarOranim.* Informational Brouchure in English (Kiriat Tivon, March 2000), pp. 4-7.

[8] Yossi Klein Halevi. *Jewish Identities in Post-Rabin Israel* (New York: Institute on American Jewish - Israeli Relations, American Jewish Committee, 1998), p.8.

neither side holds a monopoly on any issue, text or opinion. The project incorporates both study and interpersonal dialogue. This is being utilized in order to create a setting that will enable participants to re-examine their basic assumptions. The organizers of Nigun see such re-examination as the only way true learning takes place and that real bridges can be built to close the gap between religious and secular in Israel.[10]

The activities of Nigun are ongoing and part of a permanent framework that meets throughout the year. The designers of Nigun believe that the year-long structure is vital to creating an atmosphere where participants will openly confront the most difficult questions that are often avoided. The program of dialogue and education meets three times monthly. The emphasis is on building bridges by combining intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

Beit Midrash Nigun began in 1997. Every year the program has grown. It is now divided into five sub-groups. Three sub-groups are divided by age. Nigun Bereshit reaches out to people of post high school age. Nigun Tsa'ir is for young adults active in education (25-35), and the founding members participate in Nigun Atik which focuses on issues for senior educators. There is also a sub-group specifically for women. The fifth sub-group facilitates dialogues in communities throughout northern Israel.[11]

According to its organizers, every year Nigun reinvents itself. In the first years, study was the only element of the program. Through this study however, it was realized that group dynamics are very important. Study can lead to action. Staff members at Hamidrasha, through personal friendships formed a connection with B'nai Yeshurun congregation of Manhattan. Through visiting B'nai Yeshurun, the staff of Hamidrasha began to bring aspects of religious questioning into their studying. They realized that it was acceptable to enter into discussions on

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[9] *Hamidrasha Brochure*. p.9.
[10] Staff meeting at Hamidrasha. June 22, 2000.

the nature of God and other theological issues. This was exciting to the secular Israeli participants who wanted a spiritual connection. Also, the leader of Nigun recognized that they could not ignore the topic of religion and only study texts. This discussion of religious topics has allowed for greater connection to the liberal Orthodox participants in Nigun.[12]

It is difficult to measure the success of Nigun on a large scale, but on an individual basis, it is clear that positive change is happening. The program particularly flourishes in two areas. First, the program brings together Jews of all backgrounds to study Judaism from a variety of perspectives. For many of the secular participants, this may be the first time as adults that they actually examine Jewish texts. For Orthodox members the inter-cultural and academic perspectives present new options for ways of thinking about the text.

Second, the program facilitates the building of relationships that allow for dialogues that would have previously been unimaginable. In one case a secular participant read an open letter printed in an Israeli newspaper. The letter called for Israeli residents of the settlements in the West Bank to resist relocation if Israeli soldiers tried to move them from their homes. The letter stated that the settlers were willing to fight even their Jewish "brothers." Whoever tried to move them would be considered the enemy. The secular member of Nigun realized that one of his classmates, an Orthodox woman, had signed the open letter, agreeing with such violence. He wrote his classmate a letter, reminding her that the brother she was willing to fight is not an anonymous enemy, but her friend from Nigun with whom she has studied and debated and connected with over the past year. He explained to her the hurt he felt from her actions. At first, she ignored him, but eventually she called. When she had added her signature to that letter, she had been acquiescing to the wishes of her parents and her husband. She had not thought of the

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[11] *Hamidrasha Brochure*, p. 9.
[12] Attended Hamidrasha staff meeting, June 22, 2000.

people outside her community who would be reading the words in the newspaper. The woman explained to her classmate her conflicting loyalties. She told him that she was not prepared to write a public letter asking for her name to be removed. She did not want an open quarrel with her family. However, her classmate had made her think about her actions. She would not sign such a letter again. While the two members of Nigun still stand on different sides of the highly volatile issue of the peace process, by discussing the issue, they agreed to not add to the hatred.[13] Hamidrasha and Yeshivat Hakibbutz Hadati have built a forum for discussion and understanding that its participants hope will stem the current tide of separation and alienation.

COMMUNITY-WIDE ACTIVITIES

Hamidrasha recognizes that the family is the most important setting in which an individual's identity is formed. With this understanding, it appears that the modern, secular Israeli family is in a quandary when it comes to passing on Jewish culture through activities which have traditionally taken place within the family structure: holidays, symbols and ceremonies. For these families, the Orthodox way of celebrating holidays is not consistent with its values, but the alternatives offered by the modern mass culture of television and computers and commercialism seem vacuous.

The Hamidrasha Center is aware of Israelis' desire for cultural and spiritual expression. The center understands these needs extend to families incorporating multiple generations. Hamidrasha has raised the question: How can the secular Israeli family create a feeling of "being at home" with Jewish holidays and life cycle celebrations? The center is answering this question by creating a number of workshops and activities that speak to such needs.

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[13] Interview with "Ofer" a student of Beit Midrash Nigun. Kiriat Tivon, June 22, 2000.

These activities include annual workshops for families as well as educators and coordinators of community cultural celebrations. Seminars are held throughout the year on festivals and life cycle events. They are open to the public. Hamidrasha also provides counseling and planning for life cycle events for families and for young couples interested in celebrating *Britot, B'nei Mitzvah* and wedding ceremonies. Occasional lectures target populations involved in educational and cultural activities. Hamidrasha also offers assistance for curriculum development on the topic of holidays for schools.

These activities are part of a process, that the coordinators of Hamidrasha hope will achieve their long -term goals. The first step is to engage families and coordinators of cultural/holiday celebrations nationwide in an educational process revolving around these celebrations and then to have those people implement them within their own homes and communities. In doing so, participants will encounter the wide span of Jewish texts and sources in a way that is relevant to today's society. They will also learn about the holidays and festivals in a manner that includes historical developments as well as their symbolism and meaning. Hamidrasha hopes that ultimately greater Israeli society will examine ways of renewing life cycle ceremonies and holiday celebrations in ways that are relevant to modern community frameworks and to the individual participants.[14]

B'NAI MITZVAH PROGRAM

Ofer Beit Halachmi and Ya'ara Alef, two staff members of Hamidrasha, direct a B'nai Mitzvah program that aims to meet the needs of non-observant families with children of Bar and Bat Mitzvah age. The program began twelve years ago. It enables the participants both to learn

[14] Hamidrasha Brochure. p.12

about the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony and celebration and to confront relevant questions as part of communities, Israeli society and the Jewish people.

Typically in Israel, when the secular child reaches Bar/Bat Mitzvah age, he or she and the family want to celebrate the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. The event is generally marked by a big party for relatives and friends, yet there is little emphasis on Jewish tradition or even how this life cycle event relates to issues of identity, values, commitment and responsibility.

For boys, the celebration may include reading from the Torah, but this event is normally shared only by the immediate family. Additionally, this experience takes place in an Orthodox synagogue without awareness of a viable, liberal alternative. The experience can be awkward and emotionally difficult for a secular family who sees itself as disconnected from the Jewish religion.

There are three tracks of the B'nai Mitzvah project. All three try to confront the problem of alienation and create an openness towards and interest in further inquiry into Jewish heritage and celebration. The first track is a one year program for teachers in secular schools. These teachers generally teach children who are of Bar/Bat Mitzvah age. The goal is to familiarize the teachers with the Bar Mitzvah ceremony in order to convey this information to their students. The second track trains counselors. The counselors are usually young adults who have recently finished their army service. The counselors visit local schools and run three-day seminars for 7th graders on aspects of Jewish culture and on the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. The sessions involve both children and parents. [15]

The third track is the Family Workshop. Over the course of the academic year one of the parents of the Bar Mitzvah aged child and the child attend six group meetings. Each meeting takes place from 4 p.m. until 8 p.m. The same parent is expected to attend all the meetings. The

programs include topics ranging from the religious meaning of the ceremony to the meaning of transitioning to adulthood in modern day Israel.

Ofer Beit Halachmi, sees the need for a thorough program preceding the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as essential. He believes that today there is a vacuum of understanding. "In the time of the *Halutzim*, the secular Jewish father used to give his son a gun and send him out to defend the territory as a sign of the boy coming of age. Today, we don't even have *Halutzim* symbolism." He also explained that one and two generations ago, parents used to prepare their children to become Bar mitzvah on their own, within the home. Today, the desire still exists, but parents do not have the knowledge to share. The parents do not know what to do. They feel Jewish, but they say that they do not feel "Jewish enough." Ofer contends that, "There's not much else in Israel to make Israelis feel Jewish. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony is an opportunity to explain many Jewish things. Families do not want to waste the opportunity."[16]

Hamidrasha emphasizes the humanistic perspective while running the workshops. The six Family Workshops cover the a number of topics. The introductory meeting allows families to get to know each other as well as the facilitators. It takes place at Tzipori in the lower Galilee and offers an historical setting to begin the discussion of moral dilemmas surrounding the meeting of two different cultures (Jewish and Roman). The second workshop is entitled "Adolescence and Acceptance into the Community." It examines the transition from youth to adulthood from a physical perspective. Questions are raised regarding the appropriateness of age thirteen, as well as the role of physical change in today's society. "Change and Continuity in Jewish Tradition" is the topic of the third workshop. It addresses the tension between change and continuity. It explores Jewish history and focuses on the "Zionist Revolution" and its

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[15] Ibid. pp 16-17

relevance to current Israeli society. The fourth workshop examines the symbols of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and how or if those symbols are significant to secular Jews. The fifth workshop has a two-fold purpose. First, it explores maturity ceremonies around the world noting the similarities and differences to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Secondly, the workshop allows families to break into their individual units to create a family drashah relating to the weekly Torah portion of the family's son or daughter. The exercise encourages participants to use ancient and modern texts and to include a personal story from each young person. The final meeting invites the entire family of the Bar/Bat mitzvah age child to join together. The student and his or her family will each create a personal ceremonial journey. After participating separately in the ceremonial journey, the family reunites to discuss the experience.[17]

At the end of the year of workshops significant things have happened and not happened. The child and his/her parents have actively studied the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process and learned a great deal about it. The participants themselves have formed a community and a connection based on Jewish content. However, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony itself does not take place in conjunction with Hamidrasha. After the year, it is up to the family to then seek out a synagogue and a rabbi to actually become a Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

Feedback on the program has been overwhelmingly positive. For the 5760 year, almost 80 children and parents participated. That the program is growing 20-30% each year also attests to the fact that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah program offered by Hamidrasha must be meeting some of the secular population's needs. People from the area come to Hamidrasha asking for programs to be established in their communities and schools. Many of the participants hear of the program by word-of-mouth, but Hamidrasha also advertises in school newsletters, community newspapers

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[16] Interview with Ofer Beit Halachmi and Ya'ara Alef, Directors of Hamidrash's B'nai Mitzvah Program. Kiriat Tivon, June 22, 2000

and elsewhere. The goal of the program is to share the message that Judaism is the property of all Jews. Hamidrasha emphasizes a humanistic viewpoint. Ya'ara and Ofer are quick to add that Hamidrasha is not "post-modern," accepting every perspective, but it does explore Judaism in an open and thoughtful manner acknowledging that there are many paths to Jewish expression.[18]

FUNDING

Monetary support for Hamidrasha comes from a number of organizations. Moti Zeira remembers the beginning. "At first there was nothing, no money, just a positive attitude." It was very difficult to interest secular Israelis in financially supporting such a venture. Then the Legacy Fund from the UJA-New York Jewish Federation provided some grant money. Today a large portion of Hamidrasha's funding comes from Israel's Ministry of Education. Such funding is quite unusual for an organization advocating pluralistic Jewish expression. Moti believes this Israeli-based funding is due to two things. First, Hamidrasha is defined as an educational and cultural center. The center's strong educational reputation allows the Ministry to provide funds. Secondly, Israeli funding is provided because the program which Hamidrasha has developed is organically Israeli. It does not feel transplanted from the Diaspora.[19] Students also pay tuition to attend Hamidrasha's many workshops and courses. Funding, of course, is always a struggle. The rest of the one and half million dollar budget comes from the Jewish Agency in Israel as well as a number of private and public foundations, many of which are indeed Diaspora-based.

CONCLUSION

Through the workshops, seminars and courses as well as many others Hamidrasha strives to respond to the particular needs of the secular public and to provide meaningful opportunities

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[17] *Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Project 5758, Partnership 2000.* 1998. Publicity materials and curriculum guides.
[18] Beit Halachmi, Alef Interview.

to celebrate one's Judaism. After eleven years, the center boasts success. Hamidrasha estimates that approximately eighty percent of the graduates of its various programs remain connected in some way to the center after graduation. Many go on to receive academic degrees and teaching credentials in related fields such as Jewish Studies and the Humanities.

Hamidrasha has expanded its target populations since its early days when all the participants were young educators. Today, the center still works with teachers of all levels from elementary school to university. But, it also works with students, army aged youth, youth movements, young adults progressive rabbis, community cultural leaders, social activists, artists, families, new and old immigrants and others.

The center prides itself on its staff members. It sees this as a key to success. For the staff, Hamidrasha is more than just a regular work place. The teachers and facilitators meet outside of work for social and cultural events. Though only about half the staff comes from kibbutz backgrounds, the center draws from kibbutz ideology. It places a tremendous emphasis on cooperative management, so that the center builds on the strengths of its individuals to influence the whole. Working in teams is a central part of the Hamidrasha experience.[20]

Hamidrasha is looking to the future, and the future is action oriented. Over the past eleven years, the leaders of Hamidrasha have seen the emergence of other educational organizations committed to confronting the alienation of Israel's non-observant population to its Jewish identity and culture. In some ways, this success has brought with it new problems. The newer organizations are satisfied with how their efforts have been received, and therefore prefer to continue to study without taking what they have learned out to the greater community. Through such study, many new and renewed needs have surfaced including the desire of

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[19] Zeira interview.
[20] Maor, electronic materials.

individuals to feel a sense of belonging to a framework that gives meaning and purpose to one's life and a connection to one's culture. Hamidrasha sees that the key to confronting such challenges lies in the process of developing a relevant definition of the term community. The leaders have realized that simply opening up the world of Jewish texts and sources to the non-observant Israeli is not sufficient. The next stage for Hamidrasha is to create a Jewish way of life in education and daily life that touches the community in both formal and informal ways. This means that Hamidrasha is now developing paths of action that are a result of the study/discussion experience. Hamidrasha is striving to create an understanding that involvement in and commitment to community life is a Jewish experience[21].

Zeira notes sadly that there is a sharp separation in Israeli society between the study of *yahadut* (Judaism) and *Tikkun Olam* (caring for the community). "Our feeling is that these things belong together, *Talmud Torah* and *Tikkun Olam*."[22] Hamidrasha is now looking to that future when study and action will be fully integrated.

The young educators who founded Hamidrasha are now approaching middle age. Many of the initial group have left the Oranim campus to build new organizations relating to Jewish identity throughout Israel. But, the fire of its founders still burns at Hamidrasha, and new educators, students and participants add to its flame.

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[21] Maor, electronic materials.
[22] Zeira interview.

CHAPTER 2

THE ELUL CENTER

The Elul Center was founded in Jerusalem in 1989 in an effort to create a pluralistic Jewish educational framework composed of secular and Orthodox Jews. The 25 founding members were a group of dedicated secular and Orthodox Israelis, men and women from every stratum of Israeli society who wanted to do something about the growing rift between Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel. The group included graduates of traditional yeshivas, educators trained in the secular kibbutz movement at Oranim Teachers' College, and activists with years of experience in other institutions both in advanced Jewish and general studies. The center based its activities on the fundamental conviction that the treasures of Jewish literary works belong to all Jews regardless of belief or practice. The ability to speak about such works also belongs to every Jewish person. The intent was to create space where different people could come together for serious study from different ways of life with the understanding that both Orthodox and secular Jews have been entrusted with the legacy of the Jewish past and are equal partners in the Jewish future.

The founders understood study as one of the richest grounds upon which people could meet. The first year was spent in study. The founding members received a grant that allowed the group to try an experiment for one year. For twelve months, the group spent four days a week in serious study. During that time a study committee comprised of some of the members set the direction for year-long study based on Jewish texts. The experience was powerful and transformational. According to Melila Hellner, one of the founding members and current director of Elul's Beit Midrash, "You spend hours a week studying with someone wearing a big head covering who does not let her hair out, but you have been studying with them all year. You

cannot regard them from a flat point of view that you get from the newspaper. You are striving to understand...Rambam together. I think that is the transformational point. "[1]

The core of Elul's programs is a learning center, a beit midrash, devoted to examining the concept of *Talmud Torah* (translated as Jewish Studies) and the creation of dialogue and understanding between Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel. The content of the Beit Midrash influences all of Elul's programs, which involve the study of the principal texts of the Jewish religious and cultural tradition including study of Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, Philosophy, Zionists texts and modern Hebrew literature. Elul's members engage in a dialogue with the text and each other from which they form their own impressions and ideas. Participants say that they develop a sense of shared destiny deeper than their religious and ideological differences. Elul values diversity within learning. The program coordinators believe that a variety of approaches to text is a right and privilege of "our generation." It is something precious, not a hurdle that must be overcome.[2]

The Beit Midrash is the cornerstone of Elul's programs. Twice weekly in six-hour sessions, 40 men and women join together in study. If an observer were to enter Elul's center in the Old Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem on a Sunday or Monday morning, he or she would immediately be struck by the cacophony and seeming chaos of the place. Participants sit in chevruta, partnerships of two people. Some lounge around tables in one of the four book-lined, high ceilinged, meeting rooms of the center. Others spill out onto the patio, pacing back and forth or sitting on the Jerusalem stone walls drinking tea and discussing texts. One would see people ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their fifties. A few babies would be toddling around with bottles of juice in their hands or climbing from their mother's lap to their father's.

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[1] *Interview with Melila Hellner, Director of Elul's Beit Midrash.* (Jerusalem, June 25, 2000).
[2] *Informational brochure about Elul in English.* n.d..

One would see men wearing sandals and tzizit vigorously debating a section of Mishnah with their chevruta partner, a woman in a sleeveless shirt and shorts.

The central learning model of Elul is the chevruta, the traditional Jewish form of study. Two or three people negotiate their way through a series of texts creating private microcosms within the Beit Midrash. Approximately 80 percent of the class time at Elul's Beit Midrash is spent in chevurtah. This then leads into the large group session where all the participants share their findings with one another. The year is broken down into two-week periods. During each two-weeks, a different chevruta sets the direction of the study, choosing texts, giving guidance and running the large group session. At the beginning of the school year, students decide on a theme. Each chevruta chooses a subtopic of that theme, and brings in corresponding texts and information. Often the study material is closely tied to rabbinic texts. Students examine Rambam's Mishneh Torah as well as other rabbinic codes and commentaries. Modern poetry, history and more secular influences are also presented and discussed.

Elul places emphasis on studying Jewish texts in order to gain clarity about one's role within the greater world. Participants study the connection between the Jewish people and the text, the Jewish people and others and the Jewish people and the self. The Beit Midrash at Elul is concerned with learning the language of Jewish literature, learning the subject and then bringing in aspects of other cultures that illuminate what the participants have been studying. One year, the annual theme was Yom Kippur. Participants studied texts on themes of faith, sin and penitence, especially the *Book of Jonah* which is read in the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. They also explored Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The texts are not only linked by the theme of the struggle between men and fish. A moderator of a particular discussion emphasized that one must also look at the

intensity of the connection formed when one party in a relationship is swallowed by or consumed by the other.[3]

Elul cultivates the individual members' strengths. Ms. Hellner is quick to point out that it is the participants themselves who teach the classes and each other. Participants speak about their feelings with regard to the text and how they relate to what they are studying. Each person teaches on a subject that he or she specializes in outside of the Beit Midrash. Many participants are artists. Others are professors, kibbutz general secretaries and students. The program is approximately equally divided between secular and Orthodox participants. Most of the Orthodox participants are women. The Orthodox members bring more traditional perspectives on Tanach and rabbinic literature while the secular members bring perspectives on world literature, politics and other issues.[4]

Students comment on how much they are affected by this type of study. "We ask questions, searching for truth like, 'How do we relate to the text? Who was Rabbi Akiva? Why are his teachings important?'" The result of such questioning in an environment infused with Orthodox and Secular culture is "something in the middle." Many participants choose to study at Elul because they believe that the academic world would not be interested in addressing issues of how one relates to and feels about the text. At the same time, the world of the Orthodox yeshivah allows neither for such intercultural study, nor for the diverse spectrum of students.[5] The participants recognize that what they are doing is a very "Israeli experience." Without a thorough understanding of Hebrew, such in depth study would be impossible. Participants and program

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[3] *Eluletter*. Elul's Newsletter No. 9 (Spring 1999, Jerusalem, 5759)
[4] *Interview with Melila Hellner, Director of Elul's Beit Midrash*. (Jerusalem, June 25, 2000).
[5] *Interview at Elul, with Beit Midrash students Dina and Gilad*. (Jerusalem, June 18, 2000).

moderators alike believe that the combination of language skills and cultural awareness required would make a program like Elul inaccessible to most non-Israelis.[6]

Elul's Beit Midrash emphasizes individual expression. Its founders and current members have worked hard to develop a space for the expression of feelings and artistic creativity inspired by the study of text. For the year 5760, students chose to study the theme of birth and death. From the beginning of the year, they knew that the final three weeks would culminate with a reflection of what they have studied. Some reflected in writing, others utilized less traditional paths of expression such as song or dance. Every participant presented this reflection to the group. A great deal of thought, work and imagination went into each presentation. Students look forward to these final weeks and treat them with great respect.

For the theme of birth and death, one student choreographed a multi-media montage. He used very few words. Instead, he created a soundtrack of bird calls and nature sounds and built a set with a tombstone as the central focus. In this manner, the Beit Midrash participant was able to convey to the group his understanding of the cycle of life and death and how Jewish culture over the ages had perceived this topic. Another participant wrote a song that expressed his feelings about the course life can take filled with its disappointments and joys. Still another followed the model of text study, presenting her findings over the course of the year. Once the year has concluded, all the presentations are brought together into books and videotapes and placed in the Elul library.[7]

The directors of the Beit Midrash strive to create as heterogeneous an environment as possible. Elul's commitment to creating a pluralistic setting where both secular and Orthodox participants feel welcome and comfortable is noteworthy. Unlike other study programs where

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[6] *Interviews with various students and Melila Hellner.* (June 18, June 25, 2000).
[7] Class presentations at Elul. (Jerusalem, June 18 & 25, 2000).

participants of different backgrounds join together in study with the main goal of examining each other's similarities and differences, Elul's Beit Midrash sees this as secondary. Study of the text is primary. Elul is a place for all Israelis, but there are logistical concerns. One of the Beit Midrash's strengths is the intimacy that develops over a year of study. The number of participants must necessarily be limited. Therefore, there is a selection process. This allows for the creation of a balanced yet still diverse group of no more than 50 people. This creation of a diverse atmosphere is an extension of Elul's commitment to interdisciplinary study. Both leaders and participants emphasize that the Beit Midrash respects the different modes of Jewish expression. It does not advocate or encourage members to follow a particular path. Invariably, however, study in such an environment has a significant effect on participants.[8] One student says, "We have all affected each other, so by the end of the year, we have arrived at something that is a little bit of all of us."[9]

While the crux of Elul is the Core Beit Midrash, Elul serves as a center of pluralistic Jewish expression for the larger Israeli community. The center is well respected within Jerusalem and around Israel in part because of the variety of ways in which it reaches out to the greater community.

THE TEACHER TRAINING CENTER

One of the disturbing realities of present Israeli society is the decreasing pool of knowledgeable Jewish Studies teachers in secular public schools. A growing percentage of the teachers of these courses are Orthodox. Understandably, they are teaching secular students from an Orthodox viewpoint. Their secular students are finding little relevance of such studies to their lives or connection to the rest of their courses. The Teacher Training Center at Elul is trying to

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[8] *Elul Informational Brochure*
[9] *Interview with 'Dina'.*

change that. Using the Core Beit Midrash model that had been so successful, Elul has developed a beit midrash specifically for teachers. The program has two main goals. The first is to allow teachers to experience beit midrash learning for themselves. The second goal is to teach them how to develop batei midrash for their students. The target group is teachers in elementary and high school classrooms.

The Beit Midrash for Teachers strives to engage its participants in lively and creative dialogue with Jewish texts, and then to grant the teachers fluency in guiding others through the exegetical process. The program meets once a week at the Elul center. Similar to the Core Beit Midrash, the curriculum is not set according to a *masechet*. Rather, the program moderators develop a curriculum by theme. The teachers begin their day studying pre-selected texts on that theme.

The program emphasizes the open-ended nature of learning. The moderators of Beit Midrash for Teachers instruct through modeling. They lead the course as they want their teacher-participants to do. The moderators employ a collegial teaching style rather than a frontal, lecture style. They encourage the participants to ask questions and take part by actively guiding the discussion. The chevruta model seems to work particularly well in the Beit Midrash for Teachers. By familiarizing the teacher-participants with this mode of learning, the participants feel more comfortable bringing this method to their classrooms. Teachers who have studied at Elul have remarked that the chevrutah learning in their classrooms has helped all their young students to take an active role in learning. The teachers no longer hear only the voices of their most extroverted students.

The method presented by Elul emphasizes process rather that results. The hope is to create not so much "learned Jews" as "learning Jews." The Beit Midrash for Teachers works to help

teachers, and by extension their students, to feel at home in the process of Jewish study so that Jewish texts will resonate with their lives. The program has boasted a modest success. Alumni of the Beit Midrash for Teachers have gone on to share its methodology with their own students and colleagues by establishing batei midrash in elementary and high schools around Jerusalem.

SATELLITE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Elul Center has also expanded the breadth of its Core Beit Midrash in other ways. Many people are interested in what the Core Beit Midrash does, but are not able or willing to commit twelve hours a week to study. Others simply do not live in Jerusalem. The Elul Center wants its learning and methodology to reach as many people as possible, so it has created learning communities throughout Israel.[10]

Elul 'veterans' (alumni and members who have been participants in the Core Beit Midrash for over one year) create small scale batei midrash all over the country. Once every other week a group of approximately 15 people gathers to study Jewish texts in the Negev development town of Yerucham. Meanwhile, a similar gathering takes place in Gush Tefen in the Galilee. Still another gathering meets in a Jerusalem café. In total, there are 16 groups that are part of Elul's Learning Communities programs.

This program faces different challenges than those encountered in the more traditional classroom setting of the Core Beit Midrash. Nevertheless, the groups are always diverse, boasting, for example, a school principal, a diamond dealer, and a neurologist. The variety of backgrounds forces the group to confront issues that a moderator would never have considered by himself or herself. Consistent with Elul's basic methodology, the learning is not frontal, based instead on the chevruta model. Despite the seemingly awkward environments, over the

[10] *Helner Interview.*

course of work together, groups report that eventually they form a sort of study-oriented family.[11]

THE BEIT MIDRASH FOR ARTISTS

The founders of Elul and its current directors greatly value personal expression. They believe that visual, theatrical and musical arts provide a remarkable reflection of both the pluralism and polarization in any society, and even more so in Israeli society. Artistic expression brings into sharp relief the tensions that underlie a culture. Since its founding, the walls of the Elul center have been covered every year with paintings, poetry, song and sculpture that express the interplay between the participants and the texts they study. Additionally, Elul regularly reaches outside of its own body of students to work within the arts community bringing together a broad spectrum of artists in workshops that promote dialogue and attempt to influence the culture of Israeli art.

Elul created the Beit Midrash for Artists to provide a forum, which allows artists within the Israeli-Jewish arts community to meet and develop professionally. Every other week 15 - 20 professional artists meet with one another in a group that is moderated by a veteran of Elul who is herself a poet and painter. These meetings take place within a framework of studying classical and contemporary Jewish texts. The goal is to inspire future work and cooperation.

The sessions begin with a group meeting where the moderator introduces the materials that will be discussed. A period of chevrutah study follows. Much like the Core Beit Midrash, each session concludes with a large group discussion where the results of the chevrutah discussions are presented and analyzed. As the year progresses, the participants are encouraged to share their own interpretive works that have developed out of the communal text studies. Because of

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[11] *Elul Informational Brochure.*

the cooperative forum setting, the artists then have the opportunity to receive constructive feedback from their fellow participants.

Participants also have the opportunity to lead sessions of their own based on their particular field of knowledge or which they have found personally relevant. While many do choose texts, non-text based materials such as films, drawings and poems are also welcomed.

Elul has expanded this program by one more step. The center's commitment to the arts is clear. Recently, Elul opened a small on-site gallery so that visual projects completed by Elul students as well as community artists can now be exhibited for weeks at a time.[12]

BEIT MIDRASH FOR NEW IMMIGRANTS

The Elul center prides itself on being an institution that has its finger on the pulse of the many streams of Israeli society. There is hardly a segment of Israel that has not felt the impact of the massive immigration from the former Soviet Union. This process of immigration has increased Israel's population by 20 percent in less than ten years. The Beit Midrash for Immigrants is mainly due to the efforts of one woman, Polina Tesis, herself an Russian immigrant. Ms. Tesis, formerly a music teacher at a conservatory in Moscow, says she was lucky to have an unusually complete and successful absorption. Many others are not so fortunate.

Ms. Tesis was frustrated by the lack of adequate programming for new immigrants, so she decided to write a proposal for a new framework of education. By chance, she met Rivka Miriam a founding member of Elul. The two began to talk. In 1993, Elul began presenting a series of programs for new immigrants by offering lectures in basic Hebrew. Through this course, entitled, "Serious Talk in Simple Hebrew," participants have the opportunity to ask their lecturers questions about everything from Hebrew language to Israeli culture to dealing with the governmental bureaucracy.

Since its inception, the program has grown and diversified. Today, Elul offers three tiers of classes with varying levels of Hebrew difficulty. The group with newer immigrants focuses mainly on language, while another with more veteran participants has begun textual study that is so valued within the Elul experience. Recently, the Center even offered a new workshop for immigrants who are teachers. Also, some of the sessions have added a walking tour component when studying aspects of Jerusalem history, so that students have the opportunity to feel the "magic of the streets of Jerusalem." A majority of the immigrant-participants are highly educated. Despite the "simple" Hebrew in which it is taught, The Beit Midrash for Immigrants enjoys intellectual and lively conversations.[13]

OPEN STUDY EVENINGS

While most of Elul's programming is designed for regular participants who have made long-term commitments to study, the Center has recently opened several individual study sessions to the general public. Ten times a year, Elul offers large-scale sessions on topics related to various holidays such as Yom Hazikaron, the Yahrzeit of Yitzhak Rabin, Sukkot and Shavuot. The sessions try to provide the greater community with a taste of what Elul does through creative and interpretive workshops.

Elul targets young adults with these sessions. Participants are generally soldiers, university students, and young Orthodox women fulfilling their National Service. Each study evening includes many learning opportunities with at least one creative outlet.[14]

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[12] Ibid.
[13] *Eluletter* No.10 (Autumn 1999, Jerusalem 5760) and *Elul Informational Brochure*.
[14] *Elul Informational Brochure*.

Gilad, a veteran of the Core Beit Midrash and a leader of some of the evening sessions, explains that the response has been overwhelmingly positive. The sessions are always well attended. The goal of the one-time sessions is very different from that of the Core Beit Midrash. "You cannot go as nearly in depth into an issue." He does, however value the excitement generated at the sessions when young adults encounter Jewish text in a way that is completely new for them.[15]

POST BEIT MIDRASH STIPENDS

Elul has worked diligently to build on the positive results it has gained through all its programs and especially the Core Beit Midrash. In keeping with its innovative approach to Jewish education, the Center has looked for a way to cultivate a handful of its outstanding alumni. Elul now offers year-long fellowships with stipends to approximately six alumni a year to pursue in-depth work inspired by their study in the Core Beit Midrash. The fellows meet every three weeks to discuss their progress, and they submit monthly reports to the Center.

The work by the fellows is varied both in its approach and its goals. One fellow has developed a program on alternative methods of dispute resolution. Another fellow is writing a book about the relationship between her grandfather and his rabbi. Another, a self-declared avowed secularist married to an Orthodox woman he met at Elul, is filming a documentary about Elul.

Some Elul Fellows are actively trying to change opinions in Israeli society. Rani Elon, an Elul Fellow and teacher at the Religious Kibbutz Yeshivah, built a network of Orthodox-secular learning groups after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. All the participants are members of kibbutzim. [16] He said that the beginning was difficult. "Some of the people I approached got

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[15] *Gilad Interview.*
[16] *Eluletter No.9.*

nauseous at the very idea of mixed learning groups...One educator told me, 'I'm not interested in the religious. I deplore the religious. All I want is to teach my students a little Judaism, so they know how to respond to the religious.'" Elon, deeply disturbed by the woman's reaction, went directly to her kibbutz to speak with her. "By three in the morning we were hugging in reconciliation." Elon says he knows he cannot change all of Israeli society, but through the fellowship and his work he hopes that, "Even if there will be a civil war in Israel, the people in this group will be a pocket of peace."

THE FUTURE

Elul is now looking for ways to ensure its success into the future. In some respects, the future is already at its doorstep. The center wishes to develop its younger instructors, so that they will be leaders of tomorrow. This past year all of Elul's staff was invited and required to enroll as participants in the Core Beit Midrash for the first time. Additionally, Elul now offers professional training in educational methods for both the staff and promising candidates hand-picked from the Core Beit Midrash. This act in effect institutionalized a process that has been happening informally for years with members seeking such experiences on their own. Through these efforts, Elul hopes to develop its younger instructors into experienced professionals.[17]

The Elul Center also wants to offer creative solutions to the thorny religious issues that engulf Israel. Currently the Center is working with Kolot, an organization devoted to training lay-leaders active in Israeli business and politics in basic Jewish texts. The goal is to create a forum in which study of a particular subject will be geared toward innovative action. By integrating Jewish study and *tikkun olam*, the organizations hope to train those people who have

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[17] *Eluletter No. 10.*

a role to play in the conflicts to apply the creative solutions of their study to social and public policy issues.

One of the plans is based on the topics of death, funerals, burial and mourning. Elul and Kolot intend to bring together social workers, members of the *Chevrah Kadisha*, Interior Ministry officials and mayors of local towns. They would study together, lead sessions together and work to find creative alternatives that they could bring back to their work. The participants could then inform the public of halachic alternatives for burial in Israel. They could familiarize many Israelis with the rituals of *avelut* and *shivah*. With knowledge, the customs of mourning would be more comprehensible instead of appearing as unintelligible practices advocated by the Rabbinut. Elul sees this type of non-conventional education as one of the few viable paths to lessening cultural and religious conflict in Israel and a source of hope for the future.[18]

Elul is a non-profit organization, and funding is always a struggle. With all of its high-minded dreams and goals, the Center's first order of business is to ensure that the organization will continue to exist. Since 1989, Elul has attempted to raise its nearly million dollar budget primarily from Israeli sources, both governmental and private without complete success. Furthermore, its funders from abroad have requested that at least 50 percent of the budget be Israeli-based. It would be unrealistic however to believe that 100 percent of funding will come from Israel. The task is not easy. The concept of philanthropy and tsedakah is not highly developed in Israel. Still, every year Elul invests tremendous time and energy into raising Israeli money. The Center has been relatively successful with a significant portion of the budget

[18] *Eluletter No9.*

coming from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious affairs. Increasingly however, Elul believes such funding is at risk.[19]

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin spawned a series of organizations whose work intersects with that of Elul. While in theory Elul views this as a positive development, it means that scarce resources are now being divided among an increasing number of institutions. The 20 percent of the budget, which comes from the government is in jeopardy. The other 80 percent is comprised of donations from Israel and abroad. Since the Center's first days, the Jewish Agency and the Legacy Fund of the New York Federation have been strong financial supporters of Elul. Partnership 2000 New York-Jerusalem, the Jewish Agency for Israel, Avi Chai, the New Israel Fund, Israel Cooperative Program as well as a number of other philanthropic organizations in the United States have also contributed a great deal to Elul's success.[20]

At the beginning, the founders of Elul were unsure of the Center's long-term viability. It was unclear whether the institution might be simply a function of the small group that founded it or become something greater. From Melila Hellner's point of view, the existence of new generations of Elulites proves that the Center has succeeded as a concept. Integral to this success is maintaining a balance between Bayit and Midrash, that is, maintaining both the social and intellectual aspects of learning. Equally important, according to Hellner, is that Elul has remained non-aligned, both politically and religiously.[21] The participants and leaders of The Elul Center see their building at Rechov Bustenai #8 as a sanctuary, a place of peace within the midst a culture war where every Israeli is a soldier.[22] To them Elul is a haven from the rigid

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[19] *Eluletter No.7* (Spring 1996, Jerusalem 5756)
[20] *Eluletter No.10.*
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Eluletter No 9.*

divisions that govern life outside its walls, and it is a place that is made holy and separate by the work and study that occurs within its walls every day.

CHAPTER 3

THE PLURALISTIC BEIT MIDRASH AT BEIT SHMUEL

In October of 1995, the largest pluralistic beit midrash in Israel opened its doors and began offering a liberal alternative for serious Jewish textual study to secular and religious women and men. Each year approximately 60 adults meet twice a week in four hour sessions to gain the skills necessary to understand Talmudic texts on their own.[1]

Originally a joint venture between Hebrew Union College and the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the Pluralistic Beit Midrash is now run solely by the WUPJ whose offices are in Beit Shmuel. Classes, however take place next door on the Hebrew Union College campus in the library which is handicap accessible and offers a multitude of written resources which the students can use.

The idea for the Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel actually was formed well before 1995 while Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, the program's director, was a student at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. Concurrently, Rabbi Ariel-Joel was also studying at the Beit Midrash of the Hartman Institute, which Ariel-Joel describes as the "only pluralistic Beit Midrash in Jerusalem at that time, i.e. the only pluralistic Beit Midrash in Israel." He explained that even though the Hartman Institute was Orthodox by definition, it was quite pluralistic in attitude. Ariel-Joel was impressed by the power of learning that he saw at Hartman.

> The power of Beit Midrash study in chevruta in relating to the text, in speaking to the text, speaking to your chevrutah– it gives you this ability more than any other way of study. I did not see this skill developed even at Hebrew Union College. It was a long time dream for me to start the Beit Midrash here.

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[1] Futterman, Don. *UJA-Federation of New York Interim Evaluation Report: World Union of Progressive Judaism's Beit Midrash for Jewish Studies.* (February, 1999) p.2.

So, start a beit midrash he did.[2]

The literature describing the Pluralistic Beit Midrash lists four main goals for its students:

1) To create an atmosphere that reflects liberal Judaism's spirit of pluralism, egalitarianism and tolerance.
2) To enable the individual to study and become familiar with the cultural and religious inheritance of the Jewish people.
3) To enable the individual to develop his/her Jewish identity in a sovereign manner
4) To enable the individual to acquire Jewish knowledge and experience.[3]

After speaking with the program's director and students, the primary focus is clear. The Pluralistic Beit Midrash works to give its students the skills necessary to understand Jewish texts, particularly Talmudic texts, on their own. After two years with the program, a graduate should be able to look at a previously unseen sugyah of Talmud and be able to understand and interpret it. Additionally, Ariel-Joel wants students to become self-learners, so that after graduation they can continue study begun at the Beit Midrash on their own or in local batei midrash they establish or join.

Though Rabbi Ariel-Joel had wanted to create a serious place of study within the Reform Movement in Israel for some time, the publication of the Shenhar Report helped make his dream a reality. The Shenhar Report noted with alarm the lack of Jewish knowledge among most secular Israelis. It called for the development of an educational process based on study, criticism and dialogue, which would help Israelis internalize Jewish values from a pluralistic approach.[4] It was the responsibility of the Ministry of Education of Israel to realize the report's goals. The Ministry of Education asked the Israeli Reform Movement to think of ways to implement the Shenhar Report's recommendations. One of many programs suggested was the Pluralistic Beit Midrash.

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[2] *Interview with Rabbi David Ariel-Joel.* (Jerusalem, June 28, 2000).
[3] Leibovich, Menachem. *UJA-Federation of New York 1999 Quarterly Report.* (October 20, 1999). P.2.

Before firmly developing the beit midrash's structure, Rabbi Ariel-Joel, along with others in the WUPJ, first researched what options existed at that time for Israelis with very little background in Judaism. According to the Shenhar Report, those Israelis based their Jewish identity on ignorance and hatred instead of knowledge, and positive experience. Ariel-Joel cited as an example a relative of his who is well-educated with advanced degrees in biology and philosophy. She knows nothing about Judaism, and she does not want to know. She hates everything about Judaism and is quite upset that her son has decided to become a bar mitzvah. Ariel-Joel contends that what he has found is that his relative's story is not unique. Many Israelis feel this way. He believes there is a negative trend in Israel exemplified by the political party SHINUI. He calls SHINUI's propaganda almost anti-semitic. Originally, Ariel-Joel thought SHINUI's platform was in line with the WUPJ and the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism. He thought they would run a campaign attacking the lack of religious freedom and advocating that Israeli citizens should be able to choose their own way to be Jewish, be that Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, etc. Instead, SHINUI focused on the expensive prices for food in the supermarket. The party explained that everything is more expensive than it has to be because most of the foods are kosher. It charged religious observance with oppression and limited choices for secular Jews. With factors such as these influencing Israeli society, the founders of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash realized that, in addition to educating Jews with limited Jewish backgrounds a mission of their new program would be to help change the course of such negative and anti-Jewish trends.

At the program's inception, Rabbi Ariel-Joel worked as a representative of Beit Shmuel. (He no longer works for Beit Shmuel. He is now the Associate Director of the Israel Movement

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[4] Richard Juran and Debbie Sapir, ed. Diversity of Voices: Contemporary Jewish Issues in Their Israeli Context. "Shenhar Report" (New York, 1998) p.50.

for Progressive Judaism , but he refuses to give up the Pluralistic Beit Midrash.) He began by recruiting two classmates from his studies in Talmud at Hebrew University, Yochi Brandes and Ruchama Weiss-Goldman. The two women were the first teachers of the Beit Midrash and also helped establish the structure.

They publicized the program with the above-mentioned goals in local newspapers. Originally, Ariel-Joel expected most of the respondents to be teachers. The WUPJ had arranged with the Ministry of Education that teachers could receive credits for attending Beit Midrash classes. If a teacher earns enough Ministry-sanctioned credits, her salary increases. The founders thought that if teachers would study with them, then the Beit Midrash could influence Israeli society through its educational system. In the end, the first class was comprised of 28 students only 3 or 4 of whom were teachers. The others were there for *Torah Lishmah*. They wanted to learn for the sake of the knowledge itself. The most surprising part was at that at the end-of -the-year program no one wanted to leave. There was a great deal of pressure put on the organizers by the students to extend the program to include an advanced class. Thus, for three years the program was divided into a beginning and advanced class. Eventually a third level was opened for the most senior students and was named Minyan Vatikim. (In the synagogue setting the *minyan vatikim* is the group of older men who come to the synagogue early in the morning to pray and stay for the rest of the day to study.) The program has grown every year. For the school year 5760, 61 students participated.

STRUCTURE

As mentioned above, each year the students are divided into three levels based on skills and background. There is a Beginning class and an Advanced class which students can enter

their first year. Students from the Beginning class may continue with the Advanced class in their second year. There is also the recently formed Minyan Vatikim for the veteran students who want to continue their studies. They devote two half-days per week to study at the Beit Midrash. The format is designed to integrate with the participants' work and university schedules. Each week the students study at the Beit Midrash for a total of eight hours.

If one were to walk off King David Street and into the library of Hebrew Union College's Jerusalem campus on a Tuesday evening or Friday morning, one would be struck by sheer energy radiating from the second and third floor classrooms. Students of all ages would be greeting each other warmly before separating into one of three classrooms with books and paper in hand.

I had the opportunity to observe a Beginning level class, which was taught by Yochi Brandes. The students seated themselves around the large conference table and quieted considerably when the instructor, dressed in a short skirt and tank top, entered the room. Their respect for the instructor and their eagerness to begin were evident. Ms. Brandes began the class by taking attendance and then giving a twenty minute lecture on the subject of Sotah. The lecture incorporated not only an explanation of the material to be studied, but also some extra-rabbinical, historical information.

This format adhered to the Beit Midrash's general structure which divides the study day into four parts. Within both the Beginning and Advanced classes, the instructor gives first gives a brief introduction to the subject to be studied. Then, two hours of chavrutot discussion follow as part two of the session.

This second portion, the Chevruta discussion, allows students to develop a personal relationship with the text. Though the chevruta itself is a two-person partnership, it is common

for two and three and even four chevrutot to join together for all or part of the two-hour discussion. Using a study sheet provided by the instructor, the chevrutot read the Talmudic text line by line. In the Beginning level, the study sheet, especially at the start of the year, has very clear instructions. Each group is assigned a specific task of preparation such as researching the historical background of a specific character mentioned in the text. For the Beginners, much of the time is spent defining words to one another and trying to understand the basic argument. However, even among the novices, discussion can spill over into broader topics. What are the principles of equality between men and women? What is the relationship of secular Jews to Jewish law?[5]

The advanced chevrutot, do not spend quite as much effort on defining words. Discussions focus instead on placing the arguments of the Talmud in a universal context. This means that students may occasionally refer to thinkers as diverse as Thomas Mann and Natalia Ginzburg.[6]

On both levels, students use the library to look up sources. The instruction sheet only provides guidelines. Throughout the two hours students constantly run to the first floor to find the direct quotes related to the discussion. They bring in the Tanach. They look in the *Encyclopedia Olam HaTanach*. They use dictionaries, concordances and computer resources. The one resource forbidden is Hebrew translations of the Talmud. Such translations are considered a short-cut that weakens students' skills at decoding the text. The discussions are animated. Every student participates. Of the three students interviewed, all praised the chevruta style of learning. Bracha, a woman in her 30's appreciated that the chevruta allowed her to learn from her peers. "I love that there are people of all ages and all interests. Everyone brings

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[5] Observations from Pluralistic Beit Midrash class. (June 13, 2000).
[6] Futterman, p.20.

something interesting ."[7] The chevruta is also the specified time when students are encouraged to talk about their feelings on the text.

Following the chevrutot period, part three of the day begins: The coffee break. Each class day a different chevruta provides the snack, usually a somewhat elaborate spread of cheeses, olives and bread and drinks. This half-hour is very special. The camaraderie and community that the Beit Midrash has cultivated is most apparent during the coffee break. It is clear that this period of socializing is just as important as the hours of study though, maybe unconsciously so, to most students.

Finally, during the fourth and final section of the day, the instructor, or occasionally a student, conducts a ninety-minute lesson with the entire class level. The focus is on text analysis during both the first and last parts of the study day. Students do not discuss their opinions on the text during the lesson. They instead concentrate on the meaning and historical relevance of the passage. Rabbi Ariel-Joel stresses the focus on understanding the text. "It is very important at the beginning to make sure the students respect the text- what it is saying to them. Then, only after weeks of work they can have the privilege to talk about the relevance of the text in their daily lives." [8] One student, a veteran named Orr, makes an even stronger statement:

> Here, the Beit Midrash believes you have to know the text, not tell what you think or how you feel. We believe that you have to read, and then maybe one evening just at the end, you can talk about what you think. My class really does not like it [discussing one's feelings about the arguments within the text]. We prefer to just study the text. [9]

The school year begins the week after Sukkot and continues through mid June. The study centers on Rabbinic literature. Additionally, students study Jewish Philosophy and Bible each

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[7] Interview with Bracha, participant in the Beginning class of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. (Jerusalem, June 13, 2000).
[8] Ariel-Joel interview.
[9] Interview with Orr Kislev, participant in the Minyan Vatikim of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. (Jerusalem, June 15, 2000).

for half the year. The students access the material usually by studying pages of Talmud on given subjects. Ariel-Joel is very straightforward about the choice of topics. I want to seduce the students into loving Jewish study. So, we give them topics that are provocative and interesting."[10] Subjects studied have included: The Mitzvot of Talmud Torah; The Subject of Women; The Jewish Wedding; and The Connection between Parents and Children.[11]

Similar to other programs of its kind, the Pluralistic Beit Midrash tries to combine the advantages of university and yeshivah style study. Students study topics from two perspectives each semester. One semester they study a topic from both the Talmudic and Jewish Philosophical perspectives. The next semester, a subject is studied from the Talmudic and then Biblical viewpoints. Additionally, the introduction period gives the instructors the opportunity to couch the topics to be studied in history. The combination of historical perspective and chevrutah study with an emphasis on Rabbinic text comprehension is integral to the learning of the Beit Midrash.

FACULTY

In addition to Rabbi Ariel-Joel who directs, but does not teach, the Pluralistic Beit Midrash has five faculty members. Four of the instructors rotate between the Beginning and Advanced classes. Ruchama Weiss-Goldman and Yochi Brandes have been with the program from the start. They studied Talmud with Ariel-Joel at the Hebrew University. Moshe Meir and Shmuel Herr joined after 1997. Most recently in 1999, Rabbi Shlomo Fox, a Conservative Rabbi, was hired to teach the Minyan Vatikim. Meir is half-time. The others have full time positions. Both the director and the students have high praise for the faculty, and the faculty

[10] Ariel-Joel interview.

members have high praise for one another.[12] Orr, the student who has studied at the Beit Midrash for three years sums up the attitude. "I want to tell you, I am not sure if you will believe it, but all these teachers are great. They are the best today."[13] The teachers emphasized that they feel they are part of a team that works closely together, tends to make decisions together, and that each member's input in all the decision-making is seriously regarded.[14]

The teachers work in teams and routinely sit in on one anothers' classes to offer feedback. Based on written and oral evaluation by the students, the format was changed slightly in 1999. In response to mention of certain instructors' strengths and weaknesses, the teachers now work in two-person teams that switch at the semester. This means that the Beginners and Advanced students learn from all four of the teachers. It also allows the instructors to build on their strengths and learn from one another.

None of the instructors identifies him or herself as a Reform Jew. Both Herr and Meir are Orthodox. Rabbi Ariel-Joel explained that their identification with the WUPJ would be difficult in part because they also teach in Orthodox institutions. While identification with the Movement did not seem of primary importance, Ariel-Joel does want the faculty to identify themselves with the program.

Weiss-Goldman grew up in an Orthodox family and went on to earn her masters degree from the Conservative Movement's Machon Schechter. She is working on her Ph.D. at Hebrew University. She also directs Chidush, a for-profit company that runs programs in Jewish education for secular schools. Brandes grew up in an ultra-Orthodox family and studied in an ultra-Orthodox college. She continued her education at Bar Ilan University earning degrees in

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[11] *Hatochnit Beit Hamidrash Hapluralisti shel Beit Shmuel – Ha'igud Ha'olami L'yahadut Mitkademet.* (Jerusalem, 1997.)
[12] Futterman, p.9.
[13] Kislev interview.

Hebrew Literature and Land of Israel Studies. She also earned her masters degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The author of two popular novels, *Gmar Tov* and *Hagar*, Brandes also wrote a curriculum for TALI Bayit V'Gan School on the Jewish lifecycle. Together, Brandes and Weiss-Goldman wrote *A Guide to Jewish Weddings in Israel* which was published by *Yediot Achronot*.[15]

Ariel-Joel is convinced that his eclectic staff is the best proof possible both of the Reform Movement's commitment to teaching and to the value of pluralism. Their teaching skills are evident by the respect the students show for them and in the overwhelming enthusiasm the students have for the program.

STUDENTS

There is no fee for participation in the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. Twelve to fifteen students receive a modest monthly stipend of 450 shekels to help defray the cost of living expenses or lost income from time taken off work. Though students can receive training credits if they are teachers, none earns credits toward a degree.[16]

When Ariel-Joel first began researching batei midrash in Jerusalem to develop his program, he observed a session at Beit Midrash Elul where 30 students were gathered together studying. Ariel-Joel said to himself. "I wish that one day, we will have a beit midrash with 30 students. That would be a great success." This past year the Pluralistic Beit Midrash had 600 applicants for fewer than 60 spots. Ariel-Joel emphasized that this number is not only a testament to the strong reputation of the Beit Midrash, but also that there is a growing trend for this kind of learning.

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[14] Futterman, p.10
[15] Ibid. p.11.

The selection process is rigorous both for the applicants and the reviewers. First, applicants must complete a five-page questionnaire explaining why they want to study with the Pluralistic Beit Midrash and acknowledging that they understand they will be expected to commit to attending two four-hour sessions a week. For the 5760 school year the majority, 400, were rejected immediately as inappropriate. Approximately two hundred applicants reach the interview stage. All interviews take place during the summer with at least two of the three founding members (Brandes, Weiss-Goldman, or Ariel-Joel) conducting the interview.[17]

According to Ariel-Joel, the major criteria for acceptance are as follows:

1) Age. The Beit Midrash wants a younger profile, ideally students under 40. (This guideline is not terribly strict, for the 5760 school year students ranged however in age from 22-70.)
2) Candidates have to appear to be able to participate in small study groups. Anyone who seems unpleasant or whose personality appears inappropriate for an intense and intimate commitment is rejected.
3) Any candidate who demands a stipend as a condition for enrollment is immediately rejected.
4) Any candidate who appears to be a "permanent spiritual seeker" is directed to a more appropriate study framework. Likewise, candidates who seem to be seeking lives as professional Jewish leaders are encouraged to consider the more comprehensive rabbinical program at Hebrew Union College.[18]

Even if the Pluralistic Beit Midrash had the financial resources to expand its program, Rabbi Ariel-Joel said that it would only be interested in accepting 25-30 more of the candidates. This extreme selectivity seems to be one of the factors contributing to the ongoing success of the program and strength of the student body.

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[16] Ibid.p.1.
[17] Ariel-Joel interview.

The participants are all post-army age. They work in a variety of professions, and some are university students earning degrees in other subjects. The entering students fall into two main categories. There are those with no background in Jewish Studies or Jewish text who are seeking the keys to the 'Jewish Library.' Others enroll who have come from a strong Jewish background, usually Orthodox. They are looking for an orientation to Jewish texts different from the one they have been given. Surprisingly, even some students from Orthodox backgrounds arrive with very limited knowledge of the Jewish texts.[19]

People are drawn to the Pluralistic Beit Midrash for a number of reasons. Chaim, a man with a weathered face and graying hair and a lawyer by profession, saw an advertisement in the *Ha'aretz* Newspaper. He had studied Talmud during his time at university, but only with regard to civil law. When he read the ad he says, "It seemed perfect!" He did not know he had been looking for such a path of study, but when he saw the advertisement, he knew he wanted to be a part of the Beit Midrash. Chaim has just completed his first year in the Beginning class and plans to continue in the 5761 school year.[20]

Bracha, a woman who is also in the beginning class knew she wanted to study more about Judaism, but she did not want to be *hozeret bi'teshuvah*. A friend showed her the advertisement and provided her with additional information about the Beit Midrash. In addition to the learning, she appreciates the fellowship she has found through her studies. "There is a real sense of teamwork." She also admires the teachers who respect the students and never patronize them despite their various skill levels.[21]

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[18] Futterman, p.14.
[19] Ibid. p.15
[20] Interview with Chaim, a student of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. (Jerusalem, June 13, 2000).
[21] Bracha inteview.

Orr, age 28, was raised in an Orthodox family in the Jewish Quarter of Old City of Jerusalem. She now defines herself as secular and does not keep Mitzvot. She heard about the Pluralistic Beit Midrash from her younger brother who began his studies in 1995. When she left the Orthodox world, she felt compelled to surrender everything from her religious lifestyle. Her study at the Beit Midrash has "helped her come to terms with her strong connection to Judaism, but not as religion or Orthodoxy." She appreciates the Pluralistic Beit Midrash as a place where a person can learn without answering questions about herself or about how one lives one's life. "Nobody will ask anything if you don't want to tell... People think differently when they are in the Beit Midrash, because they are free." Orr spoke a great deal about freedom of dress. It may sound frivolous, but she is especially grateful that she can study Talmud while wearing a short skirt or sleeveless top or whatever she wants. It seems that this combination of behaviors, seen as contradictory in general Israeli society, represents her ability to be secular and still be Jewish.[22]

Rabbi Ariel-Joel mentioned another motivation, which he finds disturbing. On the application many students write that they want *klei milchamah*, weapons of war, to defend themselves against the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox claims to sole legitimacy regarding Judaism. It is with regard to this issue that Ariel-Joel cites one of the program's major successes. By his estimation most students who enter with that goal change their views. "In the end they study because they like what they are studying. When I first heard this goal and the term *klei milchamah*, I thought it was horrific. This is one of the things we are trying to change in our students."[23]

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[22] Kislev interview.
[23] Ariel-Joel interview.

OUTCOMES

A graduate of the program should have the skills necessary to understand Jewish texts, particularly Talmudic texts on their own. The goal is that after two-years of study, a student is able to take a given subject, find relevant texts in the corpus of the Talmud Babli's 22 volumes, and understand these texts. The course of study also enhances students' ability to understand and relate to biblical texts and non-Talmudic rabbinic texts such as law codes. Ruchama Weiss-Goldman praises her students. "Our students have to really know the texts so they can speak from the belly."

The Pluralistic Beit Midrash conducts ongoing and systematic internal reviews which the program takes very seriously. After the students submit written evaluations, Ariel-Joel visits the classrooms to "get *torah she b'al peh* in addition to *torah she b'chtav*." At the end of the year, the Beit Midrash also administers an exam simply for the students' own sense of accomplishment. Despite the students' claims that they do not have the ability to study a text without their professors' guidelines, the results of the exam show that each year more than 80 per cent of students are able to follow the development of an unseen *sugya* of Talmud and comprehend it at a high level.

The Pluralistic Beit Midrash also tracks its students after they graduate. More than 90 per cent of graduates continue Jewish study in the context of a program. Many of them also have begun to teach in formal and informal ways. For example, small study groups of the graduates have been formed throughout Jerusalem. As of June 2000, two graduates have enrolled in the Rabbinical program at Hebrew Union College. About eight others are working in the Reform Movement. Still more have engaged themselves in other ways that promote Jewish pluralism.[24]

CONNECTION TO REFORM JUDAISM

Outreach directed at Beit Midrash students on behalf of the Reform Movement is a sensitive issue. Except for Ariel-Joel, none of the staff has defined him/herself as Reform. Still, each teacher has been careful not to express too many individual views for fear that they would be perceived as pressure and would make students uncomfortable. Of the students interviewed, none identifies him or herself as a Reform Jew despite close ties with the Movement programs.[25] Rabbi Ariel-Joel explains this phenomenon briefly. "In the United States, Reform Jews see themselves as members of the synagogue they do not go to. In Israel, they do not see themselves as members even if they pay dues." The underlying causes for this mindset raise a set of questions about Reform Judaism in Israel that cannot begin to be addressed here. Students seem to be very grateful for the freedom to be Jewish without consciously aligning themselves with a movement.

Classes do not begin with a prayer, and study sessions clearly do not incorporate and form of religious observance. However, the Pluralistic Beit Midrash does seek to provide learning on an experiential as well as intellectual level. Every year the entire Beit Midrash community participates in a shabbaton off campus. In 1999, the group went to the Galilee. Spouses and children were also invited. Spending a Shabbat together does force students to confront the issue of prayer services, other ritual observances, and the meaning of Shabbat itself. Over the weekend away, Shabbat services are led by either faculty or students. This past year, two rabbinical students from the Jewish Renewal Movement who were enrolled at the Beit Midrash as well as a cantor from Har El Congregation led the worship.

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Futterman. p,.23.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS

The Beit Midrash also holds other activities. Before the official year begins, there is a month long program named Elul. Appropriately, it takes place during the month of Elul. Past graduates and current students meet together for study. Classes take place in the classrooms of Hebrew Union College instead of the Library. All the sources are provided, so students do not have to search for materials. Elul helps the Beit Midrash maintain a connection with graduates and allows past and present students to learn from one another. The Beit Midrash also marks the anniversary of Yitzak Rabin's assassination every year with a public ceremony. Various holidays throughout the year are open to the public. The 5760 *Tikun Leil Shavuot* boasted nearly 500 participants.[26]

In addition to the educational program, the Beit Midrash also publishes collections of responsa written by its students. Responsa are the traditional literature of "responses" to halachic inquiries generally sought from and issues by halachic experts. The students offer a number of answers in each case rather than one decisive conclusion. The publications have addressed the issues of abortion, Shabbat observance in public places in Israel, and the connections between holidays and food.

CONCLUSION

The Pluralistic Beit Midrash seems to be a continuing success. For the first three years a large amount of the funding for the program came from the UJA-Federation of New York. In an Evaluation Report by an outside company commissioned by UJA-Federation of New York, the Pluralistic Beit Midrash was described as "an excellent program, exemplary in its design and

[26] Ariel-Joel interview and various publications.

execution." [27] Each year the program receives extensive evaluations from the students, and the evaluations are overwhelmingly positive.

The UJA-Federation will only fund a program for three years, so despite the glowing report, it is no longer the main underwriter of the Beit Midrash. Because of the Beit Midrash's educational nature, the Israeli government has recently begun to provide funding.

Because of the success of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel in Jerusalem, the WUPJ is trying to replicate it in other areas. Batei midrash in Mevaseret Tzion and in Haifa (at Leo Baeck) opened in 1999. By 2001, the hope is to expand to Tel Aviv and Rishon L'tzion.

The Pluralistic Beit Midrash is only one of many programs of the World Union for Progressive Judasim. Rabbi Ariel-Joel wants the Reform Movement to develop all sorts of programs that will reach out to the Israeli public that go beyond coming to a synagogue to worship. With that said, he is very proud of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. He is proud of its students and graduates. One of the spouses attending the Beit Midrash's *Shabbaton* had been raised in an Orthodox home, but had become secular long ago. Watching the interactions that weekend, witnessing the commitment of the participants to Jewish learning, she called the Beit Midrash a *tikun* to what the Orthodox had broken. Rabbi David Ariel-Joel had a dream to create an institution of deep Jewish learning in a pluralistic environment that would cultivate a love of Judaism for Jews from all backgrounds. The Pluralistic Beit Midrash is just such a place.

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[27] Futterman, p. 1.

CHAPTER 4

ALMA HEBREW COLLEGE

It is well past midnight of Erev Shavuot on a Thursday night in June. Betzalel Yafe Street in the heart of Tel Aviv is filled with stylish, hip, twenty-somethings. They are dressed in the latest fashions. Their hair is perfect. Their perfumes and colognes are strong. The people from the street try to crowd into the courtyard of a building. It is not a new dance club or restaurant. It is Alma Hebrew College, and everyone wants to get inside. Those who cannot fit into the College stand in the street and enjoy an array of dairy delights displayed on folding tables. They choose from chocolate milk, yogurt, and cheeses of all varieties. The café across the street also bustles with activity as people sip coffee and wave to friends. Those who have made it into the building of Alma Hebrew College file into first floor classrooms or negotiate the narrow stairwell hoping to find a space on the floor of the auditorium to hear the next speaker. The nearly one thousand people have not come to Alma to see a movie star, rather they have filled this building and the street outside to celebrate the festival of Shavuot. From 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. Alma Hebrew College offers a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a custom established by the Kabbalists as a night of study to welcome the Shavuot festival. The College has arranged lectures on topics ranging from "Women in the Talmud" to "The History of Jewish Philosophy." The night will culminate with a pre-dawn concert of music and dancing.

This celebration of Erev Shavuot is one manifestation of the vision of Alma Hebrew College, a liberal arts institution established in 1996. This past Shavuot, thanks to the organization and publicity by Alma, an estimated one thousand Israelis, mostly from Tel Aviv filled the streets and publicly celebrated a Jewish holiday in a manner that was different. It was not traditional Halachic observance and it was not a Kibbutz-style agricultural holiday. To Ruth

Calderon, Alma's founder and director, *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* is an example of exactly what her institution does. Alma strives at once to learn about Hebrew culture and to influence it.

Alma Hebrew College promotes the study and advancement of Hebrew Culture and contemporary Jewish identity. The College describes itself as a "new kind of community educational center open to all who live, work and study in the Tel Aviv area."[1] It is devoted primarily to bringing secular Israelis back into touch with their Jewish cultural roots within a humanistic, multi-dimensional framework. Instead of referring to Judaism, the leaders of Alma speak about Hebrew Culture. The institution wants to foster a sense of belonging to this Hebrew culture (*tarbut ivrit*), which it defines as anything that has to do with looking at civilization through Hebrew eyes.[2] Anything that influences Israeli culture, that affects native Hebrew speakers, is considered relevant. Ruth Calderon and the faculty of Alma are working hard to create something new and different. Alma does not embrace a 'return-to-tradition' approach. Instead, it focuses on helping Israelis live more fully as Jews and world citizens. Ms. Calderon explains:

> There are all these locked rooms which we, the third generation of Israelis are going back into. But I'm not going to stay stuck in the past. It's about living in the present and doing things in the present to affect the present in a Jewish way.[3]

Though only four years old, Alma Hebrew College is an institution that has received national and international recognition from its first days as well as respect and popular support. The bulletin board in the lobby of the Center is always filled with newspaper clippings that excitedly review past events at Alma that bode well for efforts of pluralistic expression. Alon Gal, a professor at Ben Gurion University, referred to Alma as a center of open-minded

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[1] *Alma Hebrew College Informational Brochure: 1997-1998.*
[2] Interview with Ruth Calderon, Director of Alma Hebrew College. (Tel Aviv, June 29, 2000).
[3] Michael Arnold, *The Forward.* "Bringing Secular Israelis Back to their Jewish Roots." (August 9, 1998).

Judaism.[4] This is due in part to its director's previous experiences. Ruth Calderon did not develop Alma Hebrew College on a whim. In many respects this institution is a culmination of the various aspects of Ms. Calderon's accomplished life. She studied at Oranim Teachers' College in Kiryat Tivon. She was one of the founding members of Hamidrasha, which grew out of the Oranim experience. Ms. Calderon then went to Jerusalem where she co-founded the Elul Center and received her Masters degree in Talmud from the Hebrew University. While in Jerusalem, she also studied at the Hartman Institute's Beit Midrash alongside Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, the director of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel. Currently, she is pursuing her doctorate from the Hebrew University.

Ms. Calderon is aware that Alma reflects her many experiences. She has woven a bit of the kibbutz movement, the university and Jerusalem into her new institution. Ms. Calderon left Tel Aviv at the age of 20 in search of a more idealistic society. She explains that she looked to the kibbutz society. She appreciated its methods, but it was not her style. She looked to the religious society and again, she saw something beautiful, but it was not "home" for her. Finally, she went back to Tel Aviv and understood that treasure had been beneath her nose all along within the culture of Tel Aviv. She said, "Meaning is really for me in the most Tel Avivian street. "[5] After Yitzhak Rabin was murdered in 1995, Ms. Calderon felt the internal push to leave the university in Jerusalem and return to her hometown of Tel Aviv to "touch base with Jewish culture." In Jerusalem she felt she was stuck in an "either-or" environment. "The university was academic, while the Elul [Center in Rechavia] was only what you feel. I needed something that was both what you feel and what you learn."

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[4] Alon Gal, Director of the Center for Study of North American Jewry at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Notes from lecture Gal delivered at Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati, September 13, 2000).
[5] Calderon Interview.

Alma Hebrew College is divided into an Academic Studies Program and an elaborate Outreach Program. Full-time students in the Academic Studies Program can receive a fully accredited B.A. in Hebrew Culture within three or four years. This past year, in 2000, Alma also began a joint program with the Shechter Center in Jerusalem where students can now earn a Masters Degree in Jewish Studies that is conferred by both Alma and Shechter.

THE ACADEMIC STUDIES PROGRAM

Alma Hebrew College offers a full study program on Hebrew Culture which is much more intense but much smaller than its Outreach Programs. Applicants to the academic program must submit a written statement outlining their goals and a resume. Promising applicants then interview with faculty members, and each year forty students are admitted. Students may enroll for full-time or part-time programs, but all are required to take courses from a core set of courses. For example, during their first year students are required to choose two courses out of three or four offered within "Chativah Alef", on methodology. Topics include, "Research, Truth and Morality" and "Introduction to Literary Criticism." During their years at Alma students must also complete three seminar classes, an individual or group project, one hour a week with a personal tutor and eight-hours of study in the Beit Midrash.

Through its Academic Studies Program Alma is trying at once to study, and at the same time enhance scholarship and research about Hebrew culture. Also, the institution wants to expand the scope of Hebrew culture and do something new with it. To this end the faculty at Alma is a blend of artists, Jewish scholars trained in the yeshiva world, writers, academics and media personalities.[6] Together, the varied faculty and the students engage in dialogues within the classroom. Each course at Alma is team taught by two instructors. The instructors represent

[6] Directory of Jewish Renaissance in Israel. "Alma Hebrew College." Distributed by PANIM for Jewish Renaissance in Israel. (Herzliya. May, 2000). p.2.

various aspects of the yeshiva, the artisic and the academic worlds. This allows the students to approach a single subject from different viewpoints. For example, instructors Zivka Mark and Rachel Zoran teach a course entitled "The Healing Force of Literature." Zivka Mark is an expert on Hasidism and Hebrew Literature. Ms. Zoran is a poet and the coordinator of bibliotherapy studies at Haifa University.

Ms. Calderon believes strongly in Alma's inter-cultural approach:

> No one ever heard a voice out of the blue and became what he was. To better understand ourselves, [we] have to understand the other and our place among other cultures both in Israel and out of Israel, with other Jews who don't happen to live in Israel, and with others in general.[7]

Michael, age 21, has been a full-time student at Alma for two years. He was raised in an Orthodox family, but now describes himself as "very secular." He discovered Alma when he attended *the Tikkun Leil Shavuot* in 1997. He immediately appreciated Alma's approach to "Jewish culture and the Jewish Canon from a different perspective." Michael enrolled in courses so that he could "know exactly what the Orthodox know from another angle." But, he realized there is more to Alma Hebrew College than he first realized. He likes looking at culture critically and sees knowledge as a tool for understanding culture. To Michael, Hebrew Culture is everything the average person in a Hebrew speaking community might encounter, be it Jewish sources, world philosophy or daily life. He believes that he can now approach both politics as well as the Haredim with knowledge instead of ignorance. He acknowledges that Alma does have a politicized atmosphere. "There is a real left-wing bias, which is fine with me." In addition to the learning, Michael enjoys the energy and enthusiasm of Alma. He feels that Alma creates a family-like, communal atmosphere without being overbearing. It is a place where people stop in to say hello or take a book from the upstairs library. Michael likes the institution's

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[7] Ibid.

approach to learning and feels that he has been touched by it. The student concluded his comments by saying, "I came for the knowledge. I stayed for the philosophy."[8]

The Beit Midrash is the center of Alma's academic program. Each student must participate in its twice weekly four-hour sessions. The purpose of the Beit Midrash is to enable students to develop their skills of interpretation and to promote discussion. In keeping with the yeshiva tradition, students study in *chevrutot*. Under the guidance of the Beit Midrash facilitators, Ruth Calderon and Dr. Elchanan Reiner, students study and discuss combinations of texts selected from Jewish sources and general fields of literature, history and philosophy. The goal is to enhance the autonomy and creative expression of students vis-à-vis the texts.[9]

Academically, Alma works in conjunction with the Open University of Israel. Upon completion of the academic requirements students receive a bachelor of arts in Hebrew Culture from Alma and the Open University of Israel. Students also earn the Alma Certificate. This is the document in which Ruth Calderon takes great pride. "This is really the document of importance. It is not an academic certificate. It is just *torah lishmah*."[10]

OUTREACH PROGRAM

The Alma Outreach Program aims to blur the distinction between the academic world and the urban community in which it is located. As a cultural center, Alma not only studies culture, but actively participates in its very creation. Alma's Outreach Program promotes the active dialogue between scholars, students and artists of different communities and different fields of cultural activity. The Outreach Program is actually a combination of many opportunities.

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[8] Interview with Michael, student of Alma Hebrew College. (Tel Aviv, June 29, 2000).
[9] Informational Brochure 1997-1998.
[10] Calderon interview.

Courses, workshops, lectures and special events are open to the community. No formal academic background is required for the variety of offerings.

Fridays at Alma takes place once every three weeks on Friday morning. It is an open session during which current cultural, political and social issues are discussed. A panel of two or three guest lecturers presents different viewpoints on specific questions and then the subject is opened to public debate.[11]

The Open Beit Midrash develops participants' skills in textual analysis and interpretation. Jewish and non-Jewish texts from the fields of literature, philosophy and history are studied in *chevrutot*. The target participants are those who wish to influence cultural change within Israeli society such as teachers, journalists and doctoral students.[12]

Evening Courses of 15 sessions are offered one semester during the year. These courses give Israelis living in the Tel Aviv area opportunities to participate in interdisciplinary study sessions. Alma's faculty gives lectures on a number of subjects including Talmud, Holocaust and collective memory, Israeli and classical music, and mass communication in contemporary Israel.

The Jewish Life-cycle Center provides information and guidance to couples and families preparing for events such as a wedding, the birth of a child or becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. Weekend workshops explore the meaning of specific events and relate them to modern Israeli life. The "Workshop for Engaged Couples," for example, explains the symbols of the wedding ceremony and helps the bride and groom decide what sort of wedding they want and which symbols they would like to include in their ceremony. (Many of these couples opt to fly to Cyprus for a civil ceremony and then return to Israel to be married by a non-Orthodox rabbi).[13]

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[11] *Alma Informational Brochure* 1998-1999. p.17.
[12] *Informational Brochure* 1997-1998. p.11.
[13] Tami Margalit, participant in Alma's "Workshop for Engaged Couples." Email correspondence. February 2, 2001.

The Alma Cultural Forum brings together Israeli writers, artists, dramatists, and literary critics with outstanding intellectuals from the Former Soviet Union. Members of the Forum participate in a regular series of study sessions on Friday mornings based on classic Russian and Jewish texts. During the second half of the year, each member of the Forum undertakes a project in his/her chosen field that will have practical implications within the immigrant and Israeli communities.[14]

Summer workshops target primarily foreign visitors to Israel. The intensive two-week programs examine the subject of "Hebrew Culture in Context." The workshops are ususally taught in either Hebrew or English depending on the preference of the class. The Faculty of Alma give lectures and lead group discussions on a variety of topics related to this subject. I had the opportunity to participate in such a seminar in 1998. Most of my classmates were older, retired professionals from Europe and America who were regular summer visitors to Israel.

The Israel Calendar is the title given to the collection of single-evening open events. The evenings mark special dates of the Israel calendar such as Chanukah, Yom Ha-Shoah, and the yearly remembrance of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Occasionally, these evenings incorporate Israeli media and reach a country-wide audience. Channel 8 televised the Passover Seder held at Alma last year where the historic and modern meanings of the Seder were examined. The highlight of the *Israel Calendar* is the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* which has attracted an ever-growing audience.[15]

In addition to offering workshops and lectures, Alma Hebrew College publishes books, which top the *Yediot Achronot* Best Seller list. The College released a book, *Local Notes* by Dr. Ariel Hirshfield, about places of modern significance in Israel. It has also published, *For*

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[14] PANIM Directory. p.3.
[15] *Informational Brochure* 1998-1999. pp17-18.

Engaged Couples that explores various customs, food, dress and music of weddings. The book was intended to help couples discuss Reform, Conservative and Orthodox wedding customs. *For Engaged Couples* is the first in Alma's Lifecycle series. The next publication, *Receiving the Newborn: A Simchat Bat* is planned for release in late 2000.[16]

ATMOSPHERE

As an institution, Alma Hebrew College seems to put a great deal of thought into how it is perceived by the public. It projects an image of hip urban youthfulness that is at once playful, stylish, serious, and uniquely Israeli. The building located just off of Shderot Rothschild in the middle of Tel Aviv, is nestled among cafes, clothing shops and theaters. The neighborhood pulses with life and culture. Ruth Calderon very consciously tries to heighten an awareness of authentic culture that is native to Israel:

> There is a fifty year young but rich Jewish secular culture here. It is not something anti-Jewish...Opposing [American colonialism] is the option of a native, Mediterranean, authentic, grassroots Jewishness. Part of it has been here in Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria always. We belong to that much more than to the Upper West Side. It's too hot for the New York food. It is not the right life here to rest on Sunday, instead of Saturday... I feel that it is time to go back. We are living here with this sea, this food, this life, this climate. The day should be cut in the middle for some siesta. It is still time before Israelis realize that... It is important for me to plea to them not to make us just another state like Texas, but to listen to the genuine Israeli phenomenon of secular Israeli Jewishness. You can't have that though without a state. I don't want to be a rabbi, but I do want to do culture with my people.

"Doing culture" is exactly what Alma is doing. The college is a celebration of all that is Israeli and all that influences life in Israel. From the Center's point of view these influences are at once secular and at the same time Jewish precisely because they are Israeli. Even the format of Alma's informational brochures clearly tries to accentuate that which is native to Israel. The brochures are slick and professional. Some editions have pictures. One picture displays the letter "dalet' on a Macintosh computer screen. Beneath the text of another brochure are pictures

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[16] Calderon interview.

of artifacts of modern Israeli life. Articles include a *matkot* set and the torn stub from a bus ticket. Most years, the brochures have been produced both in Hebrew and English. The English version of the brochure includes captions that are both informative and humorous. The caption next to the *matkot* set reads, "Mat-kot (Racket ball). Essential equipment for the beach in Israel includes: 2 wooden rackets, 1 rubber ball, 1 dog to retrieve the ball." Next to the bus ticket stub is a reminder to keep the *cartis autobus* until the end of the ride and to "take it out of your pocket before doing laundry."[17]

The emphasis on image is one more expression of the value the members of Alma place on Hebrew culture and at the same time try to influence it. The college works diligently to establish relationships with the greater community. The televised Seder required a great deal of preparation and coordination with Channel 8 before the event took place. The hope was to reach as many people as possible through a medium (television) that was familiar. The program was more than the observance of the Passover meal. It was a look at Pesach in Israel. It presented to the country a thoughtful examination and explanation of the food, the rituals of cleaning, the connection between Passover and Spring, and the holiday's agricultural origins.[18]

For the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* Alma partnered with many diverse organizations. The back of the pamphlet advertising the upcoming event proudly announced that it would be a neighborhood event with many local organizations participating. Booths sponsored by *42 Degrees*, a magazine on contemporary culture, the Center for Homosexuals, Lesbians, Bisexuals and Heterogendered, and the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership were set up in front of the College. Pastry products were provided the popular bakery *Lechem Erez*. *Tnuva* donated the

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[17] Informational Brochure 1997-1998.

dairy products, and *HaAretz* Newspaper advertised the event. Even the details of donated food show how Alma works to influence Hebrew Culture. It grounds its activities in familiar parts of society, while at the same time publicizes affiliations that push cultural limits.

FUNDING

Alma received financial support from a variety of sources both local and foreign. For programs such a *Teacher Training*, the Ministry of Education and the Tel Aviv Municipality provide the funding. In addition to individual supporters, a great deal of the budget comes from American institutions like The Jewish Agency. The Jewish communities of Northern California have also invested a great deal. Donations from the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula and Marin and Sonoma Counties are essential. Still, Israeli support is present. The Avi Chai Foundation and the Yad Hanadiv Foundation have worked with the College from its first days.

FUTURE

The founder and director of Alma Hebrew College is very happy to with the Center. Ms. Calderon sees interest in it growing and deepening within the community. When asked about direction for the future, she replies immediately, "The future is now!" After a pause, she explains

> Alma Hebrew College is not about secular people studying religion. That is the past chapter. I have been studying Talmud for twenty years. The titles "secular" and "religious" are outdated. There is a generation now, people like me who are used to studying Jewish texts. The question now is how good the study will be.

Toward that goal, Alma is always trying to improve itself and find innovative ways to influence Hebrew culture.

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[18] Interview with Shira Shohami and Tammy Tessler - Coordinators of Alma's Outreach Program. (Tel Aviv June

A new program for the 2000-2001 academic year is *Teacher Training.* This is a program specifically designed for high school teachers. The teachers gain training credits (*gmul hishtalmut*) for their studies at Alma. In addition to courses on Hebrew Culture, Teacher Training includes special classes that develop practical skills related to education and training to those wishing to begin batei midrash in their home schools. The teachers who participate choose from all the classes on Hebrew Culture offered to Alma students. They also receive small-group tutorials where the tutor works with teachers on individual projects that they can in turn bring back to their schools.

Alma also hopes to grow its *Cultural Forum* for immigrants into an entire department of the college. This department would involve itself in the absorption of new immigrants into Hebrew-Israeli cultural life at a more equally involved and vital level than is currently present.

The College would also like to widen the scope of influence of its students on Tel Aviv society. Beginning in 1999, second and third year students started to lead sessions in local schools on the theme of Bar/Bat mitzvah. Each session raises different issues related to becoming a bar/bat mitzvah. The course discusses personal responsibility, the concept of authority and works with youths that would like to develop personal ceremonies. Overall, Alma Hebrew College wants to continue engaging as many people as possible in Hebrew Culture.

CONCLUSION

Ms. Calderon chose the name Alma because of its multiple meanings. In Aramaic, alma means 'world.' She sees Alma as referring to the world both inside the beit midrash and outside

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29, 2000 and Jerusalem, July 9, 2000).

in the community. In Spanish, alma means 'soul'. Ms. Calderon wanted to create a place where the outside world, the yeshiva world and the soul melded together.

Israel is hearing about Alma Hebrew College and feeling its presence. Over 3000 people are on the College's mailing list and attend the many Outreach events. Right now, the people most affected are the young cultural and literary elite of Tel Aviv, but its scope is growing. When I have mentioned Alma in casual conversation, especially with upwardly mobile Ashkenazi Jews, the institution's name is recognized quite often.

Ms. Calderon claims she founded Alma not so much to bridge a cultural gap as to create a home for herself. It seems that in the process, she has built a home for many who want to enrich their Jewish knowledge and celebrate Hebrew Culture.

CHAPTER 5

THE KOLOT CENTER

The Kolot Center bases its work on the assumption that as Israel enters the twenty-first century it desperately needs *tikkun olam*. On a global level the Jewish state has achieved viable economic and diplomatic power, but cultural gaps plague the country, and basic questions of identity remain unanswered. This leads to intolerance for ones fellow citizens and threatens the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. Moti Bar-Or founded Kolot in 1997 to address these issues. He recognized that Israelis have begun searching for a Jewish identity that can unite them, but he worried that the nation had not yet developed a core of lay leaders who could help citizens raise questions about communal life and social action.

Kolot strives to bring together prominent Israelis to study classical Jewish texts with the aim of applying them to today's world in order to create a Jewish language that can form the basis of a new cultural and social discourse.[1] The Center is named Kolot because it works to add the missing voices which are crucial for cultivating such an Israeli leadership that will confront issues of Jewish identity and social benefit and still maintain an affinity to Jewish tradition and to the principles of pluralism.[2]

Building organizations to affect social change is not a new venture for Moti Bar-Or. In 1989 he co-founded the Elul Center with Ruth Calderon and served as co-director for six years. Elul's motivating goal was to repair the growing rift in Israel between secular and Orthodox Israelis through study. The Kolot Center also focuses on Jewish study, but its goal is to heal Israel as whole. It denies the perception held by many secular Israelis that *tikkun olam* is a

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[1] Kolot Publicity Card. Jerusalem. nd.

concept that belongs solely to Orthodox Israel and instead proudly refers to it as the primary goal of the center.

Bar-Or knows Jewish texts. He is an ordained Orthodox rabbi, but he does not advertise his background. While grateful for his knowledge, he does not feel that he politically or socially fits others' perception of an orthodox Israeli rabbi, and he does not want such perceptions to limit Kolot's work.[3]

Kolot's director is aware that other institutions in Israel utilize text to advance cultural change. He praises those organizations, but he believes that they alone are not sufficient. From his assessment, such educational forums reach out to educators, Jerusalem-oriented people, and *kibbutznikim*, they do not penetrate mainstream, secular, Israeli society. He decided to build an institution that would attract Israelis who were established leaders in the secular world and involve them in both text study and in projects of *tikun olam* in Israel.

As Bar-Or sees it, one of the characteristics of secular Israeli society is the sense that living in Israel and speaking Hebrew are enough to provide a Jewish identity. The implications of this mindset were illustrated by an exchange between Bar-Or and Ron Huldai, then principal of the Gymnasium in Herzliya and the current mayor of Tel Aviv. The two were discussing the meetings being held between religious and secular youth in the aftermath of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. Huldai said, "It is very important that my Israeli students meet Jewish students." Immediately Huldai flushed and corrected himself. Bar-Or however noted that Huldai's slip of the tongue was not unique. He too has heard Israelis consciously or unconsciously refer to the secular population as Israelis while religious people are the Jews. This in part convinced Bar-Or

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[2] *Directory of Jewish Renaissance in Israel.* "The Kolot Center." Distributed by PANIM for Jewish Renaissance in Israel. (Herzliya, May, 2000). p. 32.
[3] *Interview with Moti Bar-Or* by telephone. (Cincinnati, November 28, 2000).

of the importance of getting secular people to study Jewish sources in order to cultivate a Jewish-secular identity that is based on one's individual interpretation of those texts.

As the state of Israel begins the 21st century, Kolot's director observes a subtle change occurring in society. For the first fifty years of the state everything was controlled, out of necessity, by the government. It influenced most sectors of life. Lately, as the country matures and the economy improves, increasing numbers of Israelis are assuming responsibilities for their communities and asking basic questions about social identity and justice.[4] Bar-Or noted this. "The regenerating state of Israel is characterized by a gentle search for Jewish identity and a growing awareness of the concepts of social justice."[5] The mission of Kolot is to connect with that change.

Kolot addresses questions such as, "Why are we in the state of Israel?" and "What is the state's role beyond mere existence?" Aside from the general social issues that the government should still manage, who will intervene to advance change? Bar-Or believes it is the individuals in this coming century who will effect movement towards a more pluralistic social perspective and create positive change within the country. Kolot wants to focus on those individuals and take them back to their Jewish sources that address those questions.[6]

Bar-Or calls the Center's format and focus 'gambles.' The Kolot Center is gambling on what the future holds for Israel. It bets that the future will not be about politicians acting as leaders. Leadership instead will be a grassroots process. Leaders will say, "The Knesset will bring about the peace process, but the other aspects of society depend on us." Kolot wants its participants to be a strong voice in that change. To that end, Kolot is a leadership development program, which emphasizes the link between study and action.

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[4] *Kolot Statement of Purpose* to UJA-Federation of New York. (November, 2000).
[5] *Voices of Kolot*. Kolot's English Newsletter. (Autumn 1999. v.1) p. 1.

The establishment of Kolot was a process that drew upon the efforts of Jewish educators, including Shlomo Fox and Melila Hellner-Eshed. Fox is the first Israeli ordained a rabbi in the Conservative movement. Hellner-Eshed is the director of the Beit Midrash at the Elul Center. Bar-Or set the tone and direction, and the others helped develop the content of the program. He based the Center on foundations established by other institutions, especially the Elul Center with which he still has close ties. Though he still values Elul's chavurah orientation and energetic approach to study, after six years with the organization his focus moved away from the concept of dialogue and meetings between secular and Orthodox populations. Bar-Or was ready to find a different population and develop a new model that was concerned less with discussion and more concerned with consciously building a stronger secular Jewish identity through the study of text. At the same time he wanted social action to play a key role. [7]

Before his seventh year at Elul, Bar-Or took a sabbatical to do research. During that time he immersed himself in the hi-tech world of Israel. He talked with many people and raised questions ranging from people's regard for Jewish study to tensions between the Orthodox and secular. He wanted to determine if in the fast-paced, computer-centered, entrepreneurial world of Israel, people were soul-searching. His research was fruitful. He determined that even the very powerful and well-known leaders of the country were concerned about these issues and wanted to do something about them. The people Bar-Or spoke with comprised a different constituency from that of the Elul Center, The Pluralistic Beit Midrash or Alma Hebrew College. These people - business people, politicians, and public figures- knew nothing of the aforementioned institutions or the work they were doing. He realized that there was a large portion of Israel that was not part of the process of Jewish renaissance, so he started meeting

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[6]. *Interview with Moti Bar-Or*, Founder and Director of The Kolot Center (Jerusalem, July, 2000).
[7] *Bar-Or Interview*

with them asking them if they would be interested in involving themselves in change. The response was positive, so Bar-Or got to work.

The challenge of working with such people interested him. He describes them as "very smart and very cynical." The population was intriguing. Bar-Or liked the business and political worlds' style and pace. This was a world where goals were set and achieved quickly. He describes the people he met as "very *tachlis* oriented." Reaching out to the secular business world allowed him to combine his love of study with a desire for action. No one else was bringing the issue of Jewish identity combined with social responsibility to such a population. Kolot was founded to do just that.

The population on which Kolot focuses is somewhat older than the young adult demographic, which is at the heart of other organizations. The participants in Kolot are more established in their careers, more prosperous and already influential in society. Unlike Alma Hebrew College, which also stresses the development of Jewish identity and the defining of Israeli culture, Kolot is leadership focused. Its vision is narrower. Also, unlike Alma, documents considered relevant for study at the Center do not include any and all works produced in Hebrew. Study is limited instead to classical Jewish texts and to defining clearly how the subject matter is relevant to daily modern life.

In order to advance its goals, Kolot focuses on three main projects: The Lay Leadership Learning Program; The Bavli Yerushalmi Project and the Kolot Beit Midrash. The participants mainly live in the Tel Aviv area. For the convenience of the staff, Kolot's administrative office is in Jerusalem, but the programs themselves take place in Tel Aviv.

THE LAY LEADERSHIP PROJECT

At the center of Kolot's activities is the Leadership Learning Project. It began in 1997 (school year 5758) when the Center opened with the hope of developing a force of Israeli leaders who would influence Jewish cultural and political life similar in form to the model in the Diaspora where lay leadership is integral to Jewish communal life.[8] The project is the most developed and extensive program within Kolot.

Every year the program selects sixty leaders, among them attorneys, high-tech and internet personnel, media experts, artists, medical doctors and psychologists who are interested in studying Jewish sources and in tying their studies to social action. The participants receive the title of Fellow. During his research Bar-Or realized sadly that there is a problem in Israeli society even among those searching for Jewish identity. Most people engaged in the study of Judaism are not active in *tikun olam*, and those who have social consciousness are not aware of the Jewish language, which encompasses this action.[9] Because of this dissonance, Kolot clearly explains to prospective participants that the program has a very pragmatic application component. He juxtaposes secular and religious language to emphasize his point. The participants will be committed to completing 'secular mitzvot;' which are carried out with a Jewish language and awareness.[10] For Bar-Or when secular people use their money, time and expertise to help those less fortunate, they are participating in *tikun olam*. When these actions grow out of the application of ideals set forth in Jewish texts, then they are doing what Kolot refers to as the 'secular mitzvot.' This means that secular Israelis are performing acts of social justice grounded in Torah.

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[8] *Kolot Informational Brochure*. (Jerusalem, nd.)
[9] *Voices of Kolot*. v.1 n.1.

In order to select participants, Kolot holds pilot evenings for the prospective members to give them a taste of the project. The four-hour evening includes an explanation of the philosophy of the Center, two hours of study, and an hour of discussion. Only one third of the people who apply to the Lay Leadership Project are accepted. About half of the prospective members have heard about the program and seek out Kolot . The other half is contacted by Kolot on the suggestion of alumni of the program and invited to attend a pilot evening. While this method for cultivating applicants has been successful so far, Kolot would like to diversify its applicant pool. In April 2001 Kolot plans to begin advertising the Lay Leadership Project in Israeli newspapers.

For the 5761 school year, the program selected 150 participants (forty new members and 110 continuing people) to be involved in one of eight different subgroups. In addition to his work at Elul, Bar-Or has also instructed courses at American leadership programs of the Wexner Heritage Foundation and Clal. He was very inspired by these Diaspora programs and drew heavily upon them for inspiration. He believes that good things are happening in the Jewish communities in North America and that Israelis can learn a great deal from their North American counterparts.

Bar-Or has combined his rabbinical studies with his experiences of teaching in America and a pluralistic perspective to create a well-rounded institution. He draws on the model of North American Jewish leadership programs while recognizing the differences between American Jewish society and Israeli Jewish society.

> I don't think that today in Israel there is any established secular Judaism that can say this is what we do or what we believe...We don't have the same community structure that you do. Here, it is a much more individual process. I don't think [acts of social action] will take place through the synagogues.[11]

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[10] *Kolot Statement of Purpose*
[11] *Bar-Or Interview*, (Jerusalem July 2, 2000.)

The Fellows enroll in the leadership program for two-years. Based on the Wexner Heritage model, the Fellows' study is fully funded. The idea is that if the Center invests in people, the investment will return to the community after the two years of study are completed. Bar-Or explains, " This [model] is something I learned from the Wexner program. I finally accepted that major financial subsidies are necessary."

He also set new directions for the Kolot program. "Wexner and Clal are much more into *torah lishmah*. I'm more into committing my Fellows to work and projects." The Fellows commit themselves to starting projects. After two years approximately thirty per cent of the Fellows had actually started their projects. The Lay Leadership Program also focuses on continually improving the connection between the text and study.

Many well-known Israelis have been or are currently Kolot Fellows. Karmi Gilon, the former head of Israeli intelligence is a member. Anat Gov, a playwright, and Dedi Zucker, a former member of Knesset, are among the Program's stars for their integral roles in creating and running, Soadim, a charitable organization, which operates a soup kitchen in Tel Aviv.

The Lay Leaderhip Program meets ten months out of the year on Sunday nights from 8:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. The first-year follows a standard course of study on a series of topics chosen by the Kolot Center. For the 5761 school year, the areas studied are: Fraud and Deception; Tzedakah; the Foreigner in Your Midst; Family and Work. The second-year of study is more flexible, based on the Fellows' interests. Interspersed throughout the year are also two-day seminars on topics such as Debate and Fanaticism, Passover and an end-of-year program. The Kolot community comes together at other times as well to commemorate the day of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and to study together in a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.

Kolot concentrates on building a course of study that is very relevant to Israeli society. Bar-Or believes that exploring topics such as the tension between the work cycle and the family cycle or Israelis' attitudes toward minorities and comparing them to the rabbinical Jewish concepts of these subjects is the most direct way to connect Israelis to Jewish text. He cites examples:

> After they [the Fellows] study Jewish attitudes toward minorities, lawyers get involved with foreign workers who are abused horribly in this country. The study leads them toward reality. Now they see their instinct has a 2000 year tradition, and those who did not have the instinct for social justice - this may lead them to it.[12]

For many fellows, the study is truly epiphanic. Shmuel Merchav, a strategic coach for executives and management, is currently a second-year fellow. While he is familiar with most of the texts studied, for Shmuel, studying at Kolot is quite a different experience. He appreciates that in Kolot the teacher is not the center of the discussion. Rather, the teacher is a mediator who assists the class in having structured discussions. He feels empowered by meeting with a group of intellectual adults. Moreover, he is fascinated by the varied voices articulated in his group and by the interpretations from those who meet the texts for the first time. He also has valued his own development:

> I had built up much resentment towards Judaism when I saw how Jews treat Palestinians, foreign laborers, etc. When we studied the topic of 'the attitude toward the outsider,' and I learned about the Torah approach, I worked out much of my unresolved anger. I realized that the modern Jewish establishment never studied these laws, or is simply not putting them into action. [13]

Other Fellows have had different reactions. Bar-Or referred to a "major person" in the fellowship, who after two-years in the program raised his hand to voice a frustration. The Fellow said that after two years he had expected to be more at ease with the *Haredim*. Instead, he is much angrier. This led to a discussion within the group that brought out that they feel the *Haredi*

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[12] *Bar-Or Interview.*

community represents Judaism falsely. The Fellows realized that the media also portrays Judaism to the public in a tragic way.

Kolot's objective is not to frustrate its students but to channel their learning and energy into tangible projects. Bar-Or acknowledges the strengths of this population. "They know action better than any of our teachers." He values the ways in which the fellows focus on the nuances of their study and translate them to daily life. His greatest source of pride is when the Fellows begin to see volunteer work as a very basic obligation of the Covenant between "the land and the people" and when they do social action with a Jewish understanding.

The Soadim Foundation, the result of the Fellows' study of texts relating to the pivotal role of *tzedakah* in Jewish tradition, is funded mainly by Israeli individuals who commit to making donations on a monthly basis. Over 200 people per day in the Tel Aviv area receive warm and nourishing meals from this Kolot social project. In addition to food, top hairdressers donate their time once a week and give women free hairdressing. This understanding of *tzedakah* grew out of a study of a Talmudic text, which explained that *tzedakah* is more than giving money or food, it is giving intimacy.

Recently, Kolot's Lay Leadership Project partnered with the Ma'ayanot organization which is working to develop traditional and tolerant Sephardic Judaism as an authentic form of Jewish identity. Fifteen Kolot-Ma'ayanot Fellows strive to add Jewish literature composed in Islamic countries to the general Israeli school curriculum. The Fellows also assist in social action projects in development towns and impoverished neighborhoods. [14] This program, led by Fellow Yaffa Motil, a communications consultant, envisions this as an alternative to the institutions run by SHAS, Israel's Sephardic political party.

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[13] Voices of Kolot. (Autumn 2000) v.2 n.2. p.4.
[14] Ibid. p. 1

Through the Lay Leadership Program, Kolot hopes to develop something sustainable. A number of Fellows are already taking active roles in administrative and strategic development of Israel's non-profit sector. The dream is that Kolot Fellows will become Jewish leaders in society, that they will preach this pluralistic view of Judaism, that they will be more involved in mitzvot and that they will continue with their individual 'psychological changes' that began during their time with the Center.

BAVLI-YERUSHALMI PROJECT

Another goal of Kolot is to enhance the relationship between Jews of Israel and Jews of the Diaspora. The Center has initiated a new approach to active, mutually-enriching dialogue that explores the differences and similarities between Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jews through the study of Jewish sources. Since its inception, the connection has been between Israel and America. Through the Bavli-Yerushalmi program, Kolot has tried to develop a contemporary application of the model of the interaction between the ancient Diaspora community of Bavel and their fellow scholars in Jerusalem. In this modern day version the program has established batei midrash in New York and Jerusalem. The study centers have become partners that choose joint themes to be learned, critiqued and interpreted in the respective locations in a combination of English and Hebrew. The Bavli-Yerushalmi Project appreciates the need to hear the diverse voices within the Jewish world in order to arrive at a greater and more complex unity. The New York study group meets regularly and shares accounts of each session via email with the

Jerusalem group. The Jerusalem group does the same. Twice yearly the groups meet in person in retreats held in Israel and America. [15]

The program is directed by Melila Hellner-Eshed. For the closing meeting of the 5760 session, forty participants ranging in age from their 20's to their late 50's gathered in the Jewish-Arab village of Neve Shalom. Over the course of four days, the group hiked and studied in the Judaean Desert as the culmination of the year's study theme of going out of Egypt and receiving the Torah. Following each year of study, the program produces a compilation of summaries of both groups, which is called *The Book of Esther*. It is designed with the texts studied surrounded by the Yerushalmi interpretation on one side, faced on the opposite page by the Bavli version.[16]

The Autumn of 2000 saw the expansion of the Bavli-Yerushalmi program to another Diaspora community. The previous April Melila Hellner and Moti Bar-Or visited a group of Jewish professionals in Warsaw, Poland. The Kolot organizers were impressed by the "intense striving of the Polish Jews to combine the study of text with the search for Jewish identity and its expression."[17] The Warsaw Jewish Community Board set at the top of its agenda the goals of reversing the high rate of assimilation and developing Jewish educational resources.[18] They turned to the Bavli-Yerushalmi group to respond to that need. A seminar of the three groups (New York, Jerusalem, and Warsaw) was held in Biesko-Biala, Poland in July, 2000.

Hellner-Eshed explains that for some time the original groups had been ready for outreach. Over the course of three years, the two groups had developed a shared sense of unity. They had come to view themselves as a task force that was ready to take upon itself the responsibility for the next mission. The adoption of the Polish group was a natural development

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[15] *The Warsaw Community 2000: Seminar Proposal.* (The Kolot Center, Jerusalem 2000)
[16] *Voice of Kolot.* 1999. p.2.
[17] Voice of Kolot. 2000 p. 2.
[18] *The Warsaw Community 2000: Seminar Proposal.*

and continuation of their studies. The addition of the Warsaw group has deepened the entire program's inquiry into the Bavli-Yerushalmi model. Questions such as 'What is the purpose of dialogue between various Jewish communities?' and 'Does the location influence the contents and working model of any seminar?' were raised and are, as of this writing, still being explored. During the 5761 school year, Bavli-Yerushalmi members from New York and Jerusalem will make regular visits to the Warsaw Chavurah. Together they will study Jewish rituals and search for relevant expressions in their daily lives.[19]

The Bavli-Yerushalmi Project also hopes to expand to other parts of the Israel and North American communities. Currently, the program's organizers are attempting to form new Bavli-Yerushalmi groups in Boston-Haifa and Cleveland-Beit Shean.

BEIT MIDRASH FOR TORAH AND TIKKUN OLAM

The Beit Midrash for Torah and Tikkun Olam is the third leg of the Kolot Center. It is the smallest program of the Center, but it is the aspect of the Kolot which consciously tries to establish the philosophical direction of the organization. Every week fifteen Orthodox and secular scholars meet. They engage in a philosophical discourse to determine those pillars of contemporary Jewish culture essential for modern Jews to know and study. The scholars explore study options and the application of different topics. As the group approached the year 5761, which according to Jewish law is a sabbatical year, it studied the mitzvah of *shmita*. *Shmita* is a central element in the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The Kolot Beit Midrash sought the significance of this covenant in a non-agricultural world exploring the essence of contemporary *shmita*. It considered the consequences of shmita vis-à-vis one's acquired

[19] *The Voice of Kolot*. 2000. p.2.

possessions. Participants asked themselves, "How can we maintain our 'life in the fast lane' and possessive nature in a non-oppressed way and simply 'let go'?" [20]

FUNDING

The budget of Kolot was $820,000 for 1999. This amount is expected to increase each year. Financing the workings of the Kolot Center is not easy. Director, Moti Bar-Or spends a great deal of time travelling extensively throughout North America to provide funding. It is an exhausting and occasionally disheartening part of the job. The Avi Chai foundation, which is Israeli based but directed by an immigrant from America, and the UJA-Federation of New York are strong funders of Kolot. The Israel Cooperative Program and the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund also offer financial support. Bar-Or is very committed to finding Israeli backers for service-oriented programs. Still, he does not think that Kolot should be the main recipient of such support. Within the whole arena of giving, Kolot would be last on the list. Bar-Or believes the process of giving will begin with Israelis donating money to the obvious needs, such as organizations which provide vital social services of offering food, clothing and shelter. Only later will more complicated concepts like Jewish education and pluralism even become a focus. But Bar-Or is ready for the challenge. "Israel has money, and people are not giving out that money. There has to be a change here." [21]

MISCELLANEOUS PROGRAMS

The crisis in Israel that erupted in September of 2000 causing violent clashes between Palestinians and Israelis has had an impact on Kolot. The Center has tried to react to the situation as an institution and provide forums for Israelis to process the events tearing the country apart. The division is not only between the two peoples. Divisions and pain run deep

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[20] Ibid. p. 3.
[21] Bar-Or Interview.

amongst Israelis themselves. The Kolot Fellows of the Lay Leadership Program were searching for a spiritual meaning during the crisis. Therefore, Shlomo Fox, Kolot's director of education responded. The second year Fellows will spend the year studying topics that relate directly to recent events, specifically Jewish attitudes toward minorities.

Additionally, Kolot has begun a Saturday dialogue series. The first session on December 2, 2000 was a dialogue between novelist David Grossman and politically right-leaning members of Kolot. The parties debated the issue of whether the concept of "Covenant" still existed in Israeli society, or if political divisions had superseded the notion.

FUTURE PLANS

Each of the Lay Leadership Fellows is required to develop a "pilot project." This project is that particular fellow's conception of an actual application of what has been studied. Many of the pilot projects are intended to work with Kolot to create something new. The annual newsletter lists some of the intended projects. Work has begun on a number of such projects. Under the direction of Ron Lubash, a Kolot Fellow and CEO of Lehman Brothers Israel, Kolot hopes to create a Friday morning study group comprised of senior executives from the business community, specifically from the Asia House Commercial Center in Tel Aviv. [22] A team of Fellows directed by Shlomo Fox will examine the application of Kolot's most recent topics for use in other frameworks, including adult education and schools. At present they have begun to work with the Keshet High School curriculum program towards this goal.

When asked about his own plans for the future of the Kolot Center, without blinking an eye Moti Bar-Or refers to his research on establishing accreditation for Israeli "secular rabbis." With further explanation Bar-Or's clarifies his vision. He is currently researching and creating

an intensive multi-year study program that would certify individuals as professional Jewish communal leaders. The graduates would be de facto "secular rabbis," meaning they would be professionals who fulfill roles similar to those of the American rabbi. Based on examples in North America, Bar-Or wants to create an Israeli equivalent for Jewish communal leadership that would integrate scholarly knowledge with the leadership abilities and creativity needed in the new Israeli society. Kolot has partnered with experienced educators including Rabbi Dov Berkovitz, Melila Hellner-Eshed, and Ari Elon as well as organizations that share the Center's vision. If all work continues as planned, the program will begin accepting students in September 2001.

Moti Bar-Or is a man who thinks big. From his training as an Orthodox rabbi to his establishment of the Elul Center, he is also a man with a deep regard for the necessity of Jewish study and knowledge. Bar-Or cannot sit still. He wants to shake up Israeli society. He has lost his patience with *torah lishmah*. The Kolot Center is his expression of his larger vision. The Center wants all study linked to positive, transformational action. The present Jewish renaissance is something that is reaching only a fraction of the general society. Kolot hopes to capitalize on the awakening of the Jewish soul within secular Israelis and make it an integral part of main-stream Israel . The Center places itself on the fast track to effecting change. It seeks out those people who are already making change in other ways. By focusing on an older, more established population in Israeli society, by boldly demanding that it become socially responsible and Jewishly aware, Kolot is indeed aiding the Jewish renaissance in Israel. And judging by the many participants who anxiously ask to be allowed to study for another year at Kolot after their programs conclude. Doing good in a Jewish context is value that Israeli society is ready to embrace.

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[22] *Voices of Kolot*. 1999. p.3.

CONCLUSIONS

At the dawn of the 21st century, Israelis are speaking of a Jewish cultural and spiritual renaissance. Over the past decade the number of institutions concerned with connecting secular Israelis to Judaism has increased dramatically. Today, over 100 organizations exist in Israel committed to addressing concerns regarding the quality of Jewish culture and religion in the Jewish State.[1] In the past decade, Jewish educators and leaders have begun to refer to the "Return to Text" movement. This is one of the terms used to describe a recognizable trend of secular interest in Jewish text study at a level unprecedented in modern Israeli history. This thesis explored five of the institutions involved in such work. The founders of those institutions have committed themselves and their organizations to impacting the Jewish character of the state of Israel. They want secular Israelis to interact with Jewish sources and claim ownership of those sources. They want their students to feel entitled, even as secular, and non-halalchic Jews to study, so that they can draw their own conclusions. Underlying this desire, they want to connect Israelis who may have felt disenfranchised in the past to Judaism. The definition of what is Jewish is as unique as each institution. The commitment to Jewish exploration in modern Israeli society is the tie that binds them.

After examining five organizations with an underlying common goal, many questions remain. How effective are these organizations? Are the needs of secular Israelis being met? What is their sustainability in the future? Are some more effective than others? Where is the line between Jewish study and Jewish observance? With these questions in mind, how do the organizers and participants continue to commit themselves to Jewish learning yet remain unconcerned with participating in any form of religious expression? What does the future hold

for these institutions and this "renaissance" as a whole especially in light of the crisis and threat to Israeli national security since September 2000?

Before answering the above questions, one must look back at the factors leading to such an explosion of interest and institutions related to adult, secular Jewish study.

The Shenhar Report on Jewish Education, commissioned in 1991, was presented in 1994 to the Ministry of Education. The Report noted that the Shenhar Committee's work took place as two major historical developments unfolded that created key spiritual challenges for Israeli society. 1991 saw great waves of immigration from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. At the same time, Israel was deeply invested in hammering out peace negotiations. The challenges were: 1) absorbing immigrants and consolidating their Israeli identity by strengthening their Jewish roots in order to foster a sense of belonging and partnership; 2) creating a personal and social culture and a value system that was not based on a battle for survival and subsistence within a reality of war but on free choice, dialogue and creative living in an open world.[2]

The *Shenhar Report* began by looking at the Israeli secular school system but soon expanded to looking at society as a whole. The Report identified a change. Since the 1970's the religious population of Israel had become more militant, while the less-observant population had been profoundly influenced by Western culture. This new insight into Israeli society, confirmed by the *Shenhar Report,* concerned many Israelis and fueled fears about the implications for Jewish identity as well as the future of social cohesion in the Jewish State.[3]

Ultimately, the Report expressed grave concern over the decline in status of Jewish studies at all levels of education. It recommended that responsibility for Jewish education must no longer reside only in the schools. Israeli society at large must also assume responsibility for

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[1] *PANIM for Jewish Renaissance in Israel: Directory of Jewish Renaissance in Israel,* (Herzliya: May 2000). p. 1.
[2] Juran and Sapir, ed. *Diversity of Voices.* p. 47.

nurturing the Jewish identity of its young people. Furthermore, the study recognized that attention must not be limited to school age children, but that Israelis of all ages, including adults, were also in need of formal Jewish education. This shifting of responsibility from the secular school system to the wider secular society opened the doors to all sorts of experimentation.

With regard to the five institutions in this thesis, the *Shenhar Report* did not plant the seeds of the ideas of change. Rather, it officially identified a problem in Israeli culture and presented a vision of the Jewish character of Israel for the 21st century. It legitimized the work of such institutions relating to secular Israelis and the study of Judaism. Additionally, the publication of the Report eased cultural barriers allowing new organizations to develop and older organizations to flourish.

The next factor leading to the present cultural Israeli renaissance was the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Orthodox Jew who cited biblical texts as justification for his actions. The shocking act of violence at once polarized and united segments of Israel. For some, the assassination proved in no uncertain terms that Israeli society was being torn apart and divided into "camps" of religious and secular. The assassination galvanized such concerned citizens to engage in dialogue with one another and search for bridges of unification and mutual understanding. Many ad hoc dialogue groups were established. Some have since disappeared, while others such as the *Nigun* project of Hamidrasha is still engaged in dialogue six years after Rabin's death. Similarly, the members of the Elul Beit Midrash emphasize unity between the religious and secular populations of Jerusalem in a quest for mutual understanding, and one of the Elul Fellows established a group specifically for that purpose.

For other secular Israelis, the assassination was a wake-up call. It seemed that all ownership of Jewish texts had been forfeited to the Orthodox who had used Jewish texts as an

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[3] Ibid. p.46.

ultimate act of betrayal against the Jewish people. For the more combative secular Israelis, many began Jewish study in order to attain *clei milchamah*, tools of war, to use in the ever more treacherous cultural battlefield of Israeli society. Another aspect of this impetus was people who desired Jewish knowledge so that it could never again be used against them. The founders of the five institutions each noted that a portion of their students was certainly *initially* drawn to study by hopes of attaining *clei milchama*. These leaders also realized, however that they could hook the students through this goal and then hopefully open their minds to the more peaceful concept of *Torah lishmah*.

One final factor that influenced the forming of the new Jewish renaissance is more subtle and tied in part to the first factor. Israel is growing into an ever more stable country. The peace process brought with it prosperity unknown before in the State. Such prosperity in turn helped foster the growth of a substantial Israeli middle class. This heightened the value placed on individual choices and personal autonomy. The shift in attitude bodes well for Jewish pluralism. Middle class secular Israelis are becoming aware of options in Judaism. Jewish study in non-Orthodox institutions is one expression of this awareness of choice and appreciation of pluralism.[4]

The five institutions studied have certain similarities. Their main target population is between the ages of 21-40. The majority of participants is Ashkenazi and middle to upper middle class. The participants generally do not define themselves as religious, but are not avowedly secular either. Understanding that "secular" is a loaded term, the institutions' target populations fit into the description of "secular" as understood by the *Shenhar Report* for the purposes of its study: Members of the secular population are free of any binding commitment to

[4] Interview with Paul Liptz, Instructor at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University. Jerusalem, June 2000.

Jewish law, revelation, faith in God, or divine origins of the Torah; socially, they are open to a variety of outlooks, to democratic life and have an affinity to world culture; this population also has a conscious perception of changing times and historical change; and they view Judaism as a national, pluralistic culture in formation.[5]

Each of the organizations studied is also distinctly Israeli. Aliza Kline who oversees the funding distributed to the organizations by the UJA-Federation of New York notes that the organizations' success and importance lie in the fact that although they are primarily funded by North American Jewry, they are all founded by, directed by and utilized by Israelis. [6]

All five organizations also celebrate Jewish learning in a non-orthodox, pluralistic environment. They are not religiously affiliated, but rather focus on study as part of the culture of being Jewish. To some extent or another all do place emphasis on the *beit midrash* style of learning and model at least a portion of their educational programs on the discussion-centered, *chavurah* style of classical Judaism.

Despite their fundamental similarities, the institutions studied in this thesis are each unique. They have developed and employ different means to engage in Jewish study. Each also has developed its own culture that advances its specific blend of values and priorities. They can be compared to one another to some extent. In studying the organizations, during my visit with each, I would be convinced that that particular organization had *the* correct method. I would be sure that the work of the next would pale in comparison. Instead, I discovered that each organization pursued its own path based on location, culture, and the strengths of its leadership.

Hamidrasha at Oranim Teachers College in Kiriat Tivon Israel is the oldest and most established institution to address issues of Jewish study in a non-academic environment. It

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[5] Juran and Sapir, ed. *Diversity of Voices*. p. 47.

formed as a separate entity from Oranim in 1989, but its founders had been studying as a group for a few years before that. The founders of Hamidrasha boldly endeavored to reshape the cultural face of Israeli society by offering a series of classes on text study and Jewish leadership. Hamidrasha grew out of the kibbutz movement, and the organization still retains some kibbutz ideology by striving to create its own example of an idealistic community. Instructors at the center are required to enroll as participants for at least a year before assuming roles of leadership in order internalize the values and sense of community created at Hamidrasha. The Center serves as a hub of pluralistic Jewish learning and expression for northern Israel. Outside of Haifa where the Leo Baeck Institute offers some of pluralistic study options, Hamidrasha is the only organization of its kind in the area.

The organization's strengths are its strong commitment to developing community, developing Jewish leaders, and reaching out to a population that would otherwise be absent from the cultural renaissance. Its emphasis on the workshop/beit midrash model that encourages discussion and group learning has served as the foundation for organizations that have come after it. Also, Hamidrasha is noteworthy for the number of Jewish leaders who were first exposed to Jewish leadership through their study and work with the Center. Not only its current director, Moti Zeira, but also Melila Hellner of Elul and Ruth Calderon of Alma are Hamidrasha alumni.

The Elul Center in Jerusalem is also a veteran in the field of Jewish study. Its strengths are also its area of uniqueness. Elul emphasizes individual creativity as the means to engage in dialogue with Jewish sources. Within its pluralistic approach, one of Elul's priorities is interaction between Orthodox and secular Israelis. Study of Jewish sources was the means designated by which such interaction would take place. Participating in the Elul Beit Midrash

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[6] Interview with Aliza Kline, Program Executive for the Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal: UJA-Federation of New York. New York, New York. December 17, 2000.

requires a large time commitment, twelve hours a week, the largest asked by the five organizations. Elul is not for everyone. It emphasizes personal interpretation of texts and encourages intense self-expression through creative means. However, for those with whom the methods of Elul resonate, the results are powerful. In the City of Peace where tensions run extremely high between the Orthodox and secular and tempers are short, Elul provides a forum for developing understanding and mutual respect.

The Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel is newer to the Jewish study world of Jerusalem than Elul, and it is about as different as can be while still working towards similar goals of Jewish learning and empowerment. The Pluralistic Beit Midrash emphasizes Jewish text study. It is not interested in self-expression or personal opinions related to the text. The priority is to give students an opportunity for in-depth study of classical Jewish texts in a non-Orthodox environment. With that said, similar to Elul and Hamidrasha, community is a very important aspect of the Pluralistic Beit Midrash. There is less emphasis on actively changing Israeli society. Very few of the students are practicing Orthodox Jews. There *is* hope to influence Israeli society by educating teachers of Jewish studies in a new approach. Unlike Hamidrasha, changing the cultural face of Israel is not the galvanizing impetus behind the PBM. The emphasis on community is more focused within the institution itself. The students of the PBM have formed a community, which fosters learning in a non-Orthodox atmosphere. The PBM is noteworthy for encouraging contact with alumni, and inviting them to return each year for a month of study with current students.

The far-reaching scope of the PBM is not clear. New study groups based on its model have formed in different parts of the country, but as a whole, though receiving glowing reviews by its funders and having ten times as many applicants as available spaces annually, as an

organization it is not very well-known throughout Israel. This may be due in part to its relative newness and partly due to its more internal focus.

Alma Hebrew College is almost a movement unto itself. It has developed the idea of Hebrew Culture and shaped the study of it into a way of life by offering courses on life cycle events, staging cultural celebrations, and integrating the center into the Tel Aviv cultural atmosphere. Alma has firmly rooted itself in not just the Israeli social landscape, but more importantly in the "Mediterranean culture" of Tel Aviv. It is unclear if Alma were transplanted to a different Israeli city whether it could survive. Within Tel Aviv, however, the organization flourishes. Through its celebration of what is unique to Israel, it pushes the boundaries of what is considered Hebrew Culture. With its provocative and varied course offerings, its university-like curriculum and its glitzy community outreach activities, Alma Hebrew College speaks to the heart of the Ashkenazi, 20-something, Tel Avivian. It invites this population into a discussion and study of what makes each of them Jewish and Israeli and helps them celebrate it.

Of the institutions studied, Kolot differs most from the others. First, its population is older and more established. Secondly, the atmosphere of the organization is much more business-like. While many of the organizations mentioned *tikkun olam* as an ideal towards which they strive, Kolot has designated communal service and social community improvement as its primary focus. The study of Torah and Jewish texts is the means by which Kolot works toward its stated goal. The Center, based in Jerusalem, reaches out to Israelis throughout Israel, especially Tel Aviv. Kolot is also the most Diaspora-focused of the five institutions. Although only three years old, the Center has already established working ties with Jewish leaders in North America and Poland. Kolot does not look to these communities solely as funding sources, but rather bases the relationships with them on Jewish learning and the sharing of ideas.

One of the more difficult concepts to grasp as an American rabbinical student researching Israeli organizations that teach pluralistic Judaism is understanding how these organizations embrace learning so warmly, yet do not engage in anything resembling religious practice. Unlike North American Jewry, where Jewish study tends to be closely linked to religious practice, in non-Orthodox Israel lines seem distinctly drawn. For example, Hamidrasha's *b'nai mitzvah* program teaches a year-long preparation course, yet for the actual bar mitzvah ceremony families are on their own to find a rabbi and a synagogue. The leaders of the *b'nai mitzvah* program see no conflict here. They give students and families the knowledge, but they take no responsibility for religious ritual associated with becoming a *bar mitzvah*. Similarly, studying topics of the Torah all night on the evening of *Shavuot* is not considered a religious observance by the organizers of, or participants in, the event at Alma Hebrew College. Rather, the gathering is a celebration of Hebrew culture occasioned by the springtime festival. The organizers would never consider holding *maariv* or *shacharit* services at the beginning and end of the public study session.

According to the respected 1993 *Guttman Report on Beliefs Observances and Social Interactions among Israeli Jews*, religious observance in Israel can be measured as on a continuum. It is not a dichotomy. However, American perceptions of what is religious observance differ greatly from Israeli perceptions. The study surveyed 2,400 Hebrew speaking Israelis and found that two-thirds of the population in some manner engage in ritual practices such as those that mark *Shabbat* eve. A closer look, however, concluded that it is the Ashkenazi intellectuals who comprise the majority of those defined as "adamant non-believers." Those Ashkenazi intellectuals may indeed perform nominal Jewish rituals, but they ascribe to such

practices only superstitious or cultural meaning.[7] The aforementioned organizations draw students from that pool of highly educated, worldly, and often Ashkenazi, secular Israelis

That which I originally deemed a weakness of the organizations in this thesis, the fact that they specifically target the intellectual, middle to upper-middle class Ashkenazim, may actually be one of their greatest strengths. These institutions present Judaism in a pluralistic, humanistic manner. They deal directly with the population that is at once most disenfranchised from their Jewish heritage and at the same time most powerful in general Israeli society. They address these Jews who view Jewish ritual, at best, as simply a cultural activity. In Israel, religion is increasingly politicized. To those most removed from religious life, any mention of religion conjures up visions of Yigal Amir and Shas. Such visions are baneful to most secular Ashkenazim. Therefore, though very different from the Western perspective, it is nonetheless understandable how and why these organizations can present Jewish learning as completely separate from religious observance.

The fine but distinctly drawn line between learning and religion exemplifies how fragile and combustible the new Jewish renaissance is. There are reasons to hold great hope for its promise and also fear for its sustainability into the future. According to Meir Yoffie of Panim, this interest in Jewish learning still remains on the fringes of Israeli society, but inroads are being made.[8]

There are encouraging signs. Most institutions are expanding their target populations to work with people of all ages from youth to the elderly and from many walks of life. As institutions become more established they are able to assess their work and redirect when necessary. The Pluralistic Beit Midrash is such an example. Originally, it planned on working

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[7] ed. Juran and Sapir. Diversity of Voices. p. 37.
[8] Interview with Meir Yoffie, Director of PANIM for Jewish Renaissance in Israel. Herzliya, Israel. June, 2000.

with teachers taking classes to increase their salary, and instead now reaches Jerusalemites working in all sorts of fields. Many of the institutions have expanded their programs by establishing satellite study groups that share the learning and philosophy of the individual institution with people in remote areas of Israel. Local Israeli funding is increasing, but slowly. More promising is the growing awareness of such organizations as evidenced by the steadily increasing enrollment in various programs.

The biggest challenge presently facing the organizations teaching Judaism to secular Israelis is the violent conflict with the Palestinians and the faltering peace process. Though it may sound overly dramatic, Israelis are again concerned with questions of basic survival. Since September 2000, there has not been as much time or emotional energy for self-reflection on abstract topics of one's Jewishness or the need to study text as in the past. Hamidrasha, in the north, is acutely aware of this. According to Ofer Bet-Halachmi who directs the B'nai Mitzvah program, attendance at the study sessions has been spotty lately. "People stay at home. They are not willing to travel through the north at night just for a class."[9] Likewise, other organizations have had to redirect their study programs to respond to ethical and political questions raised by the current conflict.

In general too, the institutions are still plagued by chronic obstacles of cultural resistance. One participant at a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* expressed disappointment in himself and others. He was frustrated that he and his friends might only attend two or three such events each year, and that is the extent of their Jewish learning. For him, that was not showing a commitment to one's Jewish roots. He wondered aloud if it was worthwhile attending infrequently, and he acknowledged weariness of explaining his motiviations for study to others.[10]

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[9] Bet-Halachmi phone interview. Cincinnati, Ohio. December, 15, 2000.
[10] Interview with Or Gerlitz, participant in Alma's outreach programs. Tel Aviv, July 2000.

Funding also remains an issue for all the organizations doing such work. The primary sponsor of most of the programs, the UJA-Federation of New York , provides money for three years. After that, regardless of a program's success or failure, institutions are on their own. Moti Zeira of Kolot finds raising new money his biggest challenge and time commitment.

In conclusion, although this new Jewish renaissance is not large-scale, reaching at most estimated 50, 000 Israelis, it is making a difference.[11] Ten years ago, most secular Israeli adults had but one context within which to express their Judaism through study and that was in an Orthodox environment. Now a variety of choices exists for such endeavors. One can choose to study tractates of Talmud with his/her Orthodox neighbor, or one can explore the celebration of the Jewish life cycle through interpretive dance. Israel does not exist in a vacuum. As communication among different cultures is made easier and swifter with electronics, the Israeli secular public is responding. Some are choosing to go to India to explore their spirituality. Others are embracing capitalistic, American values. But some are taking time out of the consumer-oriented, Western-dominated daily lives to reconnect to their Jewish roots. They are discovering the uniqueness of being Jewish and Israeli. At the same time, they are finding a resonance for that knowledge within a reality that is influenced by current events from around the world. The founders Hamidrasha, Elul, The Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel, Alma Hebrew College, and Kolot took visions of pluralistic Judaism and transformed them into reality. Through their diligent ground-breaking work, they have created opportunities for learning and exploration that are impacting the culture and character of Jewish Israel.

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[11] *Meir Yoffie interview.*

Time Line of Events

1989

- Hamidrasha opens at Oranim Teachers College
- Elul Center founded in Jerusalem by Moti Bar-Or and Ruth Calderon

1991

- *Shenhar Report* commissioned
- Hamidrasha reaches 1,200 participants through its programs

1993

- Elul begins "Serious Talk in Simple Hebrew" series for new immigrants

1994

- *Shenhar Report* presented to Israel's Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Education asks WUPJ and IMPJ to think of ways to implement the *Shenhar Report's* recommendations.

1995

- (October) Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel founded by Rabbi David Ariel-Joel with 28 participants.
- (November) Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin assassinated by an Orthodox Israeli
- Stunned by recent events, Ruth Calderon leaves Jerusalem and returns to Tel Aviv

1996

- Elul's programming expands to Tel Aviv
- Alma Hebrew College founded by Ruth Calderon in Tel Aviv
- (December) Elul expands its building to classrooms on the second floor
- Moti Bar-Or takes a sabbatical from Elul

1997

- Alma holds its first annual Tikkun Leil Shavuot
- Moti Bar-Or founds Kolot and begins the Lay Leadership Learning Project
- Hamidrasha opens the Nigun Program for Furthering Pluralism as a response to Prime Minister Rabin's assassination
- The Pluralistic Beit Midrash adds Moshe Meir and Shmuel Herr to its teaching staff

1998

- Hamidrasha offers the B'nai Mitzvah project to families in Northern Israel
- Elul opens its Program for Advanced Studies

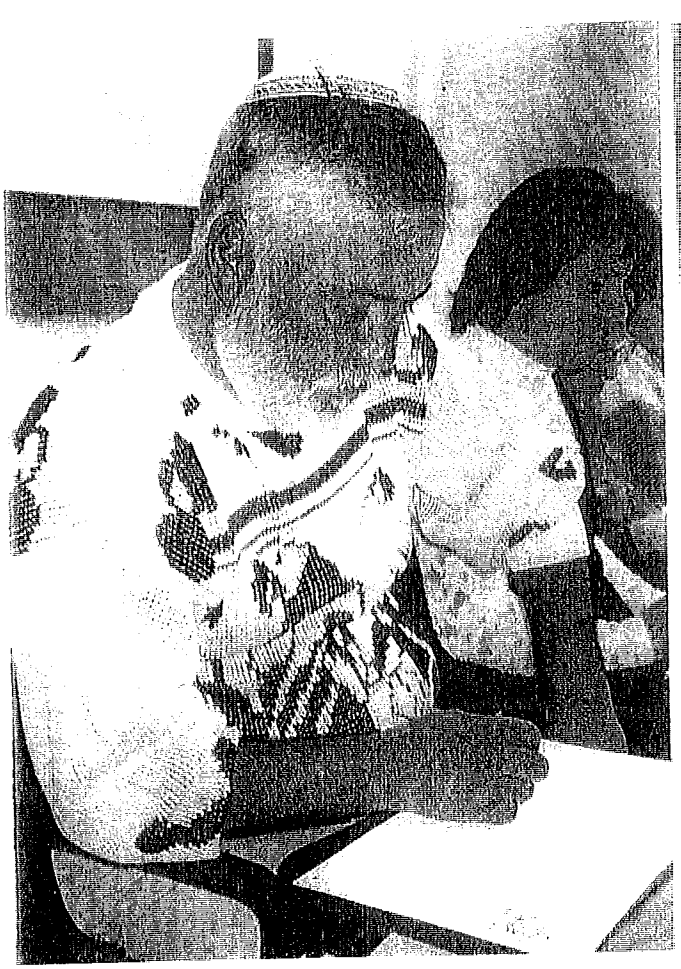
1999

- Hamidrasha reaches 1,200 participants within a single year

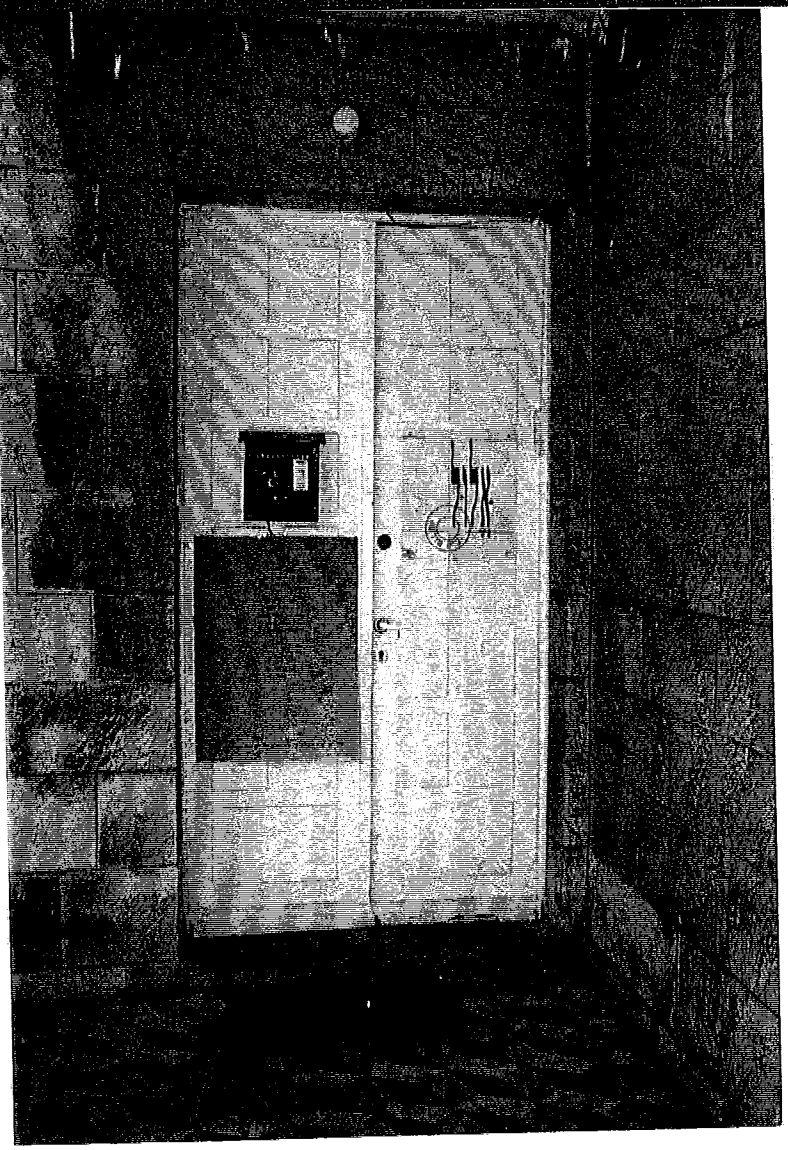
- Elul leaders lead a study session in America for the Lincoln Square Congregation and B'nai Jesherun
- The Pluralistic Beit Midrash hires Rabbi Shlomo Fox to teach the *minyan vatikim* and opens satellite batei midrash in Mevassert Tzion and Haifa

2000

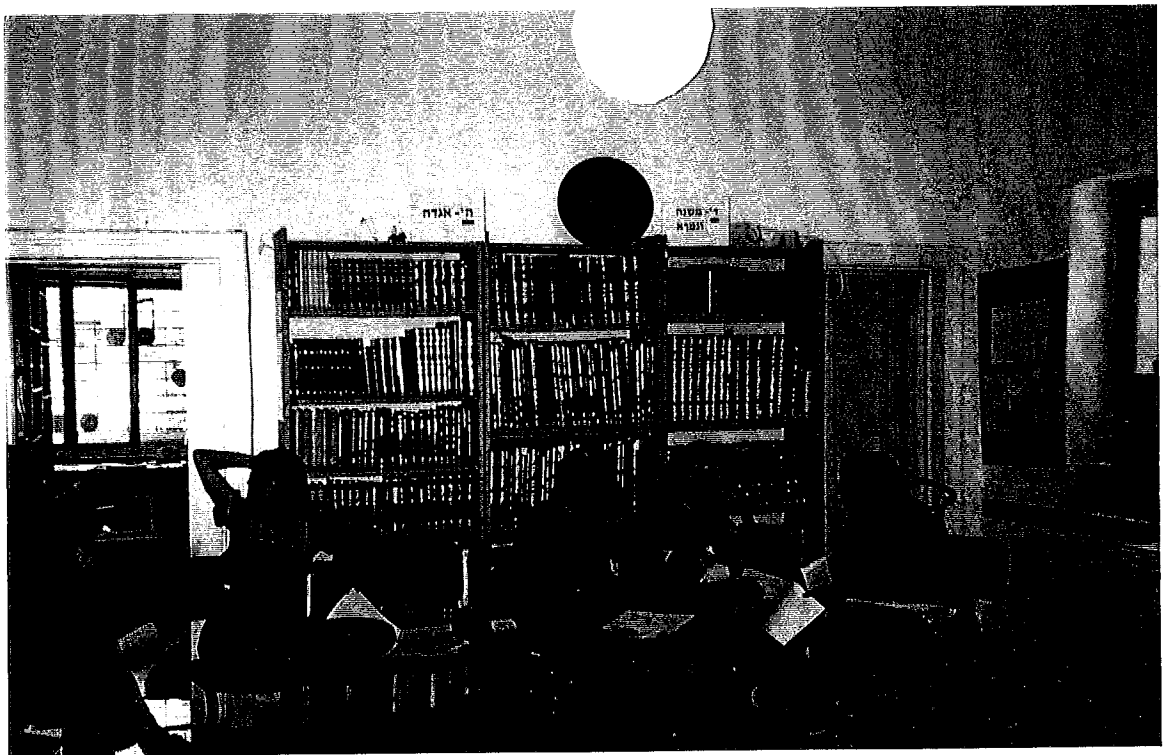
- Alma Hebrew College partners with the Schechter Institute through which students can earn a Masters degree in Jewish studies
- (Fall) The Pluralistic Beit Midrash fields 600 applicants for 60 openings and sends two of its graduates to Hebrew Union College for rabbinical studies
- Kolot's *Bavli-Yerushalmi* Project expanded to include Warsaw, Poland
- Kolot's Lay Leadership Program reaches 150 participants



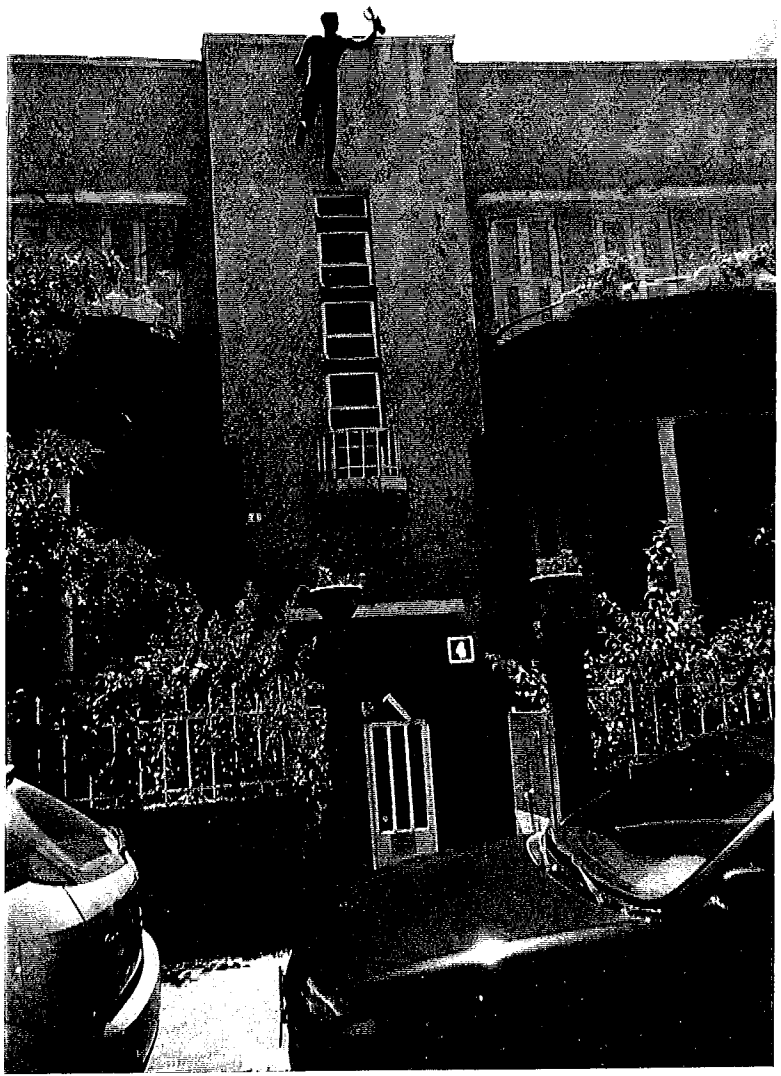
Hamidrasha Center for Study and Fellowship



The Elul Center



Hebrew Union College Library which hosted the study sessions for the Pluralistic Beit Midrash at Beit Shmuel



Alma Hebrew College

The Kolot Center - administrative office

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