

Rabbi's Reflections: "The Problem of Judaism in America"

"The more things change, the more they remain the same." A. B. Yehoshua, the great Israeli author, tells Diaspora Jews, "Those who do not live in Israel and do not participate in the daily decisions that are made there and that are entirely Jewish, do not have a Jewish identity of any significance." Israel's Chief Rabbinate, in ruling that most Orthodox conversions in the USA do not qualify in Israel, is also telling us that we do not count. The Chief Rabbinate even quoted the famous verse from Isaiah 2:3, "For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (*Ki mi-Zion tetze Torah, u-d'var...mirushalayim*). Both assume that only what happens in Israel matters. Since more Jews live in Israel than any other country, it is cause for thought.

Unfortunately, both are fundamentally wrong. Each resurrects the old Zionist argument pushing for *aliyah*, immigration to Israel from a dangerous Diaspora, by saying that someone who wants to live a truly Jewish life can only do so in Israel. Yehoshua's secularism ignores any religion, forget a traditional one. Yet without the Zionism of traditional Judaism, Zionism itself would not exist, nor would the Jews. Nor does he have any argument for the historical or moral connection to the land that only Judaism provides. Natan Sharansky points out that both Yehoshua and Yasser Arafat (and his successors), by removing the religious component, separate Israel's right to exist from Israel's fact of existence, and that without the right to exist, the fact will not matter down the road. The Chief Rabbinate wants to create a religious rule that overturns all Jewish development over the last 2500 years which spurred the plurality of opinion and action within an understood unity of Jews that has existed over this whole time.

Benjamin Balint sees a reverse paternalism operating as well, that Israelis are tired of relying on US financial and political support. He sees the opinions of A.B. Yehoshua and the Chief Rabbinate as "fundamentalisms, both schooling American Jews in the most elemental questions of Jewish identity, and both looking to Israel as the last and best word on Jewishness itself." He also points out that both misunderstand the USA.

Each is also trying to win over the Israeli majority as well, and the Israelis are dividing. We in the USA might actually provide an alternative, which actually scares each, as each wants to rule and to sweep the other into the dustbin of history.

In 1907, Israel Friedlaender, Professor of Bible at the newly reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary of America, wrote an article with the above title trying to find a third way between the sunny past and rosy future of the optimists of the 250th anniversary of Jews in the USA, and the pessimists who saw the coarsening of life and learning and feared the Jewish survival here amidst the seduction of freedom and popular culture. Friedlaender saw the USA as the next center of Judaism, but questioned its creativity and longevity. He picked the model of Jews living in medieval Islamic lands as the closest model to Jews in the USA "to participate in the life and culture around them and yet remain Jewish." He saw no future in the view of Judaism as religion and creed, nor in a return to the ghettos of Europe. Judaism in the USA must include belief, thought and deed. It must tug at the emotions, appeal to the mind,

and assure the spirit. It must include music and philosophy, poetry and philology, Hasidism and Rabbinism, belief and law. We need variety to ensure vitality. We must partner freedom to Judaism in order to survive. (The lyrical peroration was reprinted many times.)

Israel will stultify mentally, stagnate religiously, and die physically if either Yehoshua or the Chief Rabbinate win. So too will it here in the USA if we cannot find the happy medium that Friedlaender hoped to provide in his sketch.