**Vision**

The State of Israel will represent an inclusive Judaism appealing to a broader population

**Background**

The State of Israel is one of the only countries in the Western world where religion and state are not separated. This reality has two facets. The first is positive: the Jewish people have aspired and yearned for a Jewish state for hundreds of years, and the State of Israel preserves the character of the Jewish people. In the State of Israel, the official weekly day of rest is Saturday, the Sabbath, and Jewish holidays are observed in educational facilities and in the public sphere. Israel’s schoolchildren are aware of their Jewish heritage.

Nevertheless, whenever religion is involved in a system with limited resources, friction is inevitable. Limited public resources and limited funds necessitate choices on allocation and management. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, and even before, these issues of Jewish identity created friction between different segments of the population in many areas of life: closing roads in religious neighborhoods, closing recreational and leisure businesses, halting public transportation on Saturdays and so on.

There is a wide range of approaches to dealing with the conflicts described above. On one end is the approach that says Israel should be like other Western countries, with no Jewish characteristics at all. Each individual can choose how to express his or her Jewish identity. The state need not teach Jewish issues, it needs not preserve the character of the Sabbath as the day of rest, and should have no say in the determination of Jewish characteristics. On the other end of the spectrum, is the approach embodied by the ultra-Orthodox community, which envisions only one form of Judaism. Only an Orthodox Jew, living by the most stringent dictates of Jewish law, is truly Jewish; any deviation is not an option. In between these two extremes, there are many – and varied – opinions.

Tzohar believes that the State of Israel should have a role in defining what makes the state Jewish and believes that the Jewish character of the state is important. However, we believe in wider and more inclusive definitions of this character. We believe that the central mission of bridging different publics will be successful only if each demographic sector manages to treat others in a more inclusive manner. This will happen if the fundamental principles of each sector are not violated, while concessions are made on other, less substantial, issues. While many organizations deal with similar issues, they tend to be overly specific and sectorial. When a liberal organization, for example, calls for openness from all sectors, it is perceived as biased and incapable of promoting such goals.

One way to advance such openness among different sectors is by utilizing rabbinical powers. Rabbis are naturally perceived to be holders of clear, conservative views. They are seen as incapable of stepping outside the frame that defines them because they are committed to Torah and the Jewish commandments. Therefore only rabbis who can represent a wider perspective are capable of promoting such openness among different sectors and can have the widest influence.

Tzohar

Tzohar was established 22 years ago, after the assassination of late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, with the goal of bridging the gaps and healing the wounds that existed between the different sectors of Israel’s population, and of becoming a partner in forging the Jewish character of the State of Israel.

Over the years, Tzohar has earned an excellent reputation, acting on two levels. A. Personal meetings with thousands of people every year. B. Active participation in the public discourse of the State of Israel in the fields of Judaism and the interface of religion and state. According to several surveys, the organization is well known to the public and some 70% of Israelis are familiar with Tzohar and its work.

This, therefore, is the correct organization for promoting the trend we are discussing.

**The activity of the Tzohar organization in different spheres of life**

**Communications**

Tzohar rabbis have, over the years, become highly demanded by the media which often seeks to listen to their outlook. These views are expressed on many issues.

These include the relation of religion and state, issues of ethics and issues relating to Jewish life as a yearly routine and as a way of life.

On these issues, the Tzohar rabbis have become the sane voice that succeeds in taking into account the needs of all sectors while maintaining a proper equilibrium.

**Knesset**

One of the places where the limits of the public conduct of the government are determined is the Knesset. The voices heard in the Knesset include all the loud voices of all extremes segments of society. Sadly, one of the issues often used as a tool by different members of Knesset is the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. Far too often, the leaders of the state let the ultra-Orthodox population dictate issues of religion and state so that the issues they hold dear – such as government, security and the economy – will be handled as they wish. The citizens of Israel pay the price.

Tzohar has a department in the Knesset acting to find the points of dispute and to form wide support around them, so that the State of Israel becomes a place where forces join around Judaism, instead of being a place where Judaism is perceived as divisive and interfering.

**The cycle of life**

One of the decision every Jewish person in Israel needs to make is whether his family, including children and other relatives, commemorate Jewish events or neglect them. Sometimes the disagreements around issues of Judaism and its rituals in the State of Israel reach a point where people prefer to abandon Jewish tradition in anger. Many young couples seeking to get married choose, deliberately, to eschew the rabbinate because they wish to distance themselves from any rabbinical, Jewish element. Tzohar has proven over the years that Jewish rituals can be observed without giving up one’s worldview and identity. Couples that are married by Tzohar rabbis are allowed to meet with their officiating rabbi, can develop a relationship with him, and can conduct an open and honest dialogue on different issues.

Children of Bar Mitzvah age meet with tutors who accept the boys as they are, with no wish to change them. They contain their journey and are proud to see the steps they are making. With this, the boys get to conduct Jewish rituals that connect them with Jewish tradition while being proud of who they are.

**Learning Torah**

In Israel, Torah is studied in depth by religious Jews while non-religious Jews are hardly exposed to any Jewish source texts. This phenomenon creates a situation where non-religious Jews lack the tools necessary to study the Torah.

Tzohar conducts several Torah study events. What is unique about these study groups, however, is that they are fully egalitarian. Religious and non-religious people teach each other Torah and experience the sources of Judaism in a non-mediated manner. This happens on every Shavuot, when dozens of study groups convene, on every Yom Kippur, when religious and non-religious Jews study together after the joint prayer, and throughout different communities led by Tzohar rabbis, where egalitarian Torah study takes place.

We believe this activity, if it is expanded, will allow many Jews to experience Judaism in a more positive light, will require the State of Israel recognize the rights of more Jews, and will put Judaism in its rightful place, as a religion which is unifying and inclusive – not divisive.