**Israelization Trends in the Reform Movement:**

**Typology of positioning in the face of exclusion and the struggle for public recognition**

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**Abstract**

In recent years, the Israeli Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism has been on the rise. Fifty congregations and initiatives operate from the north to the south of the country, offering *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Welcoming the Sabbath) services, holiday and life cycle ceremonies, study houses, conversion courses, pre-army programs and more. Despite its increased presence in Israeli life, the movement is still known by the general public mainly for its struggle to achieve equal status and official recognition, and the term “Reform Jew” still carries a derogatory connotation among many sectors of the population.

In this article, I will describe the major crossroads in the Israeli Reform Movement’s journey of finding a place for itself today; the arenas in which it operates; with whom it negotiates, and how this local process is differentiated from its sister movement in North America. Although this discussion focuses on one movement among a marketplace of religious identities in Israel, it can shed a broader light on religion-state relations and on changes in the Jewish world in general.

**\*Key words**: united struggles, public recognition, Israel, ritual, the Reform Movement

**Introduction**

Israeli sociological and anthropological research on religious communities and houses of worship is limited, despite the central place of religion in shaping Israeli society. The subject has won more attention in recent years, but findings are still minimal, even more so regarding the Israeli Reform Movement. The absence of academic research reflects its exclusion from the public domain and from the political arena.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Ephraim Tabory was the first to conduct a sociological study devoted to the Reform Movement. He claimed that sociology and not theology was the primary influence on the development of the Reform Movement in North America. The American principle of separation of church and state, against the backdrop of the development of social protest movements and education for liberal values and freedom of and from religion, contributed to the movement’s establishment (Tabory 2004). He also noted in his study the intention to preserve the American community model - not only providing a place to conduct prayers, but a multi-purpose place for a broad variety of educational and cultural activities. He believed that Israel could serve as a testing ground for Reform Judaism as a religious movement, since Israelis are not subject to social pressures or inner compulsion to join a congregation for the sake of Jewish identity (ibid). Other studies attempted to explain the movement’s non-acceptance in the Jewish state (Cohen and Susser 2010); point to its inherently American nature (Zaban 2016); propose an organizational model that would explain its activities (Leibel-Hess 2016); examine a statistical cross-section of the community’s members in Israel or present their own demographic analysis in the shadow of a discriminatory policy (Yuzgof-Orbach 2017; Feferman 2018).

In general, it is evident that Jewish sovereignty itself is a challenge for the Reform and other non-orthodox movements that object to traditional, *halacha*-based ideas. The non-acceptance of the Reform Movement by the Israeli public reflects the strength of the rabbinic monopoly and the structuring of Jewish identity in Israel, which is taken for granted, in contrast to the designing of Jewish identities and communities that occurs in Diaspora communities (Cohen and Susser 2010).

The Israeli Reform Movement is often analyzed using tools developed in studies conducted on the American Reform movement, along with the adoption of their conclusions. Must an understanding of the movement necessarily pass through Manhattan or Los Angelos? I think not. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the American roots of the Israeli movement and its reciprocal relations to the parent community. However, it is identification of the local characteristics that will help us to discover the uniqueness of the Israeli movement compared to its North American sister. Looking to previous, often irrelevant chapters in the American movement’s history, such as its early anti-Zionist stance, will not aid in explaining the present non-acceptance of the Reform Movement by the Israeli public.

In this discussion, based on interviews I have conducted in recent years with Reform leaders, and analysis of primary sources, I will attempt to shed some light on the dynamic negotiations between the Reform Movement and the Israeli public. In contrast to previous researchers, I identify three central processes that describe how the movement is finding a place for itself in Israel: (1) Grassroots development and cultivation of congregations and encouragement of their growth; (2) Composition of liturgy appropriate to the Israeli population; (3) Forging collaborations with groups suffering from exclusion and discrimination. I believe that this mapping illuminates the way in which the movement’s leadership, community rabbis in the field, read the unique socio-political reality in Israel and operate in the context of an ongoing institutional struggle, in a dynamic political and ethno-cultural environment.

Various reasons have been proposed to explain the exclusion of the movement, the main one being that it is a religious movement that rejects *halacha* (Jewish law) as an obligatory authority. Despite its adoption of the Zionist vision[[2]](#footnote-2) - expressed in the establishment of congregations in Israel, financial donations and encouragement of aliyah - Reform congregations are still perceived as aliens in the Israeli public sphere. As a liberal religion based on gender equality, Reform Judaism is perceived as foreign, threatening, a non-authentic form of Judaism. The movement’s headquarters, the Hebrew Union College, and the Reform Center for Religion and State (which serves as the legal and public arm of the movement) are seen as an enclave of American Judaism in the heart of Israel’s capital.

In recent decades, the movement has made headlines as its attempts to change the religion-state relationship have gained momentum. The issues include the struggle against the orthodox monopoly, conversion, prayer arrangements at the *Kotel* (Western Wall), the *mikveh* (ritual bath) law, and other burning core issues. Alongside this growing activism, the communities are facing continuing expressions of exclusion: Reform congregations do not get government funding, some of them are not eligible for a permanent building, and at times they are not allowed to hold activities in public areas. Israeli Reform rabbis (male and female) suffer from delegitimization and lack of official status by law; there have even been some reports of violent incidents. In January 2019, vandals broke into the *Natan Ya* Reform congregation in Netanya and destroyed equipment and, in November 2016, hate graffiti was sprayed on the walls of the *Raanan* synagogue in the city of Raanana.

Hurd asserts that the intervention of the state in religious affairs for the purpose of promoting religious tolerance and protection of minorities has the opposite of the intended effect. State supervision and regulation serves to perpetuate the separation between the various religious communities and increases tension and dissension in society (Hurd 2017). This intensifies the friction between the official state-supported religious groups and groups supported by independent sources, and underlines the need for official recognition of the Reform community כדי לצבור הון פוליטי וטובין ציבוריים (Louër 2008; Wuthnow 1998b). This need is particularly likely to erupt in a state in which there is a monopoly on the religious market, as in Israel.

I will begin with a discussion of the place of contemporary religious communities and the changes that have occurred in recent years. In the post-modern era, the individual is at the center and the community is often perceived as a place that facilitates give and take. The reform communities are working to position themselves as liberal religious arenas that can provide for a variety of identity needs.

Next, I will examine whether the theory is consonant with the reality, by exploring the movement’s activities and how they further its goal of integrating into Israeli society and selling itself as a viable Jewish religious option. I will identify a new model for community development, textual changes in liturgy, and collaborations with other groups confronting exclusion and institutional discrimination. This is not a discussion of the history of the Reform Movement in Israel, but rather a sociological-anthropological discourse about the movement’s struggles to fit in, and an examination of the various power relations at work in the ethno-national arena.

**Changes in contemporary religious communities**

Sociologists, anthropologists and historians view the community as a social agency that enables the individual to express his religious identity through the establishment of common practices that build identity and shape the relationships among members of the community. According to the traditional definition, a community is a social system whose members share a common identity. The communal environment is a place where the individual can win recognition and develop an independent identity (Taylor 1994). The need for this kind of space derives from the fact that the individual’s self-definition is formed in the presence of others and by virtue of their social recognition of him (Modood 1998: 382).

In the post-modern era, the concept of community has undergone enormous changes: from a territorial community to an online community in which its members never meet each other. In some cases, individuals are brought together by unifying ideas that motivate them to act as a community, even though they may have little or nothing in common. Indeed, Cohen asserted that a community should be perceived not as a social enterprise but rather as a symbolic system (Cohen 2013). Nonetheless, the symbolic aspect is not enough; it is important to examine the actions of the community’s members, the borders and relationships between them, their feelings of belonging or of alienation, and the collaborations they forge with other groups (Delanty 1998). The community no longer functions as an organic body that the individual is born into and belongs to; it is, rather, an arena for searching out experience.

Religious movements and communities have always faced external influences that threaten to break down their traditional structure, undermine the authority of their leadership, and challenge the commitment of their members to fulfill their obligations (Heelas, Martin, and Morris 1998). This is all the more true today, in the reality of the global village. In recent decades, sociological research indicates the formation of new patterns of individual religious life, moving away from the authority of tradition and giving preference to personal religious experience over a communal one. Religion is part of the free and open market of ideologies in which it is but one of many options (Hervieu-Léger 1998; Wuthnow 1998a).

Thus, religious communities are becoming arenas for satisfying the changing needs and desires of their members, particularly of the non-observant.[[3]](#footnote-3) According to the American sociologist Robert Wuthnow (ibid.), who studied the development of spiritual and religious perceptions, participation in communal religious practices expresses a journey of inner search and reinforces the individual’s identity negotiation. The American anthropologist James Bielo found that the leisure activities of Evangelical communities contributed to improving the status of needy communities (Bielo 2011), and studying Biblia helped develop community cohesiveness (Bielo 2009). He concluded that contemporary religious communities should be viewed as providers of changing needs, on an intellectual-cultural as well as experiential plane.

In a similar vein, Ammerman and Farnsley (1997) stated that the way to understand the mechanism of a religious community is to view it as a social network. They focused on new patterns of community mechanisms and identified the ways in which communities connect in a common geographic space. In their view, despite online platforms and advanced technologies, community members form bonds that connect the religious community with other groups in the public sphere; thus membership in a community is an outgrowth of the ties between groups and local identities. Membership is a political choice that reveals a network of relationships entailing diverse connections, coalition as well as opposition ones, and reflects the balance of power between the community and the individual. This power relationship illuminates the processes of regulation and supervision and reveals the influence of the state on the shaping of the communal order.

We see that contemporary religious and spiritual communities provide new meanings, change the rules for joining and leaving them, and carve new paths to access tradition. Religion does not stand on its own, but intermingles with other determiners of identity: gender, ethnicity, nationalism, and so forth. This premise dovetails with the liberal ideology of the Reform Movement, which seeks to open its doors to those who historically have been excluded from the Jewish community, such as women and LGBTQ.

Based on these studies, I will show how the Reform Movement is identifying this social reality via communal activity that offers a religious form appropriate to emerging needs and in this way is establishing its socio-political place in Israeli society.

**To be a free community in our land?!**

For thousands of years, the community was an important element of Jewish life. The establishment of the State of Israel challenged this institution. Now the state - the community par excellence - controlled all of the different services. A many-branched bureaucracy filled the role of the voluntary, interpersonal organizational system that characterized the Jewish communities of the Diaspora (Ben-Yosef 2001). The change went beyond merely functional. Although the Zionist enterprise defined itself as secular, in fact, its national institutions reflected the influence of the Jewish religion. According to Ilem (2000), Zionist secularism needed Jewish tradition and symbols to reinforce the collective memory and to create a national identity.

In this way, the state became the source for supervising identity, and religious authority was placed in the hands of an ultra-orthodox (*haredi*) monopoly. The rabbinical establishment became the sole authority on civil subjects such as education and conversion, and religious issues such as the Sabbath and kashruth (dietary laws) (Rosen-Tzvi 2011:48). With sovereign Jewish existence assured, efforts could be devoted to other areas - for instance, reconciling Judaism and modern life style.

Since the establishment of the state, the relationship between the state and the society has changed in ways which have challenged the foundations of Jewish identity and the feeling of belonging to a collective. The “melting pot” policy and the accompanying meta-narrative of one Judaism have been revealed as a fabrication. State institutions had, and still have, difficulty fulfilling the mental need for belonging, a defined identity, and meaning (Ben-Yosef 2001). The changes in the relationship between the state and society impaired the ability of the state to construct a monolithic ethno-national identity and threatened the stability of dichotomous categories - religious vs. secular (Fisher 2015; Shinhav 2008). Against this backdrop, the elements of Jewish identity are becoming increasingly blurred, and the characteristics of the community as well as its importance are being reexamined.

The structuring of Jewish identity in Israel retains *halacha* as the sole source of authority, even at the cost of opposition to it (Shinhav, ibid.) Religiosity and secularism cannot be understood divorced from history and specific contexts. Application and categorization of these concepts is to a great extent arbitrary, conducted in the context of power relations among groups. Within these identity concepts lies a contingent, random foundation connected to certain historical circumstances and unequal relationships among the social groups that produce them. The sharp division between religious and secular led to a collaboration to repress other groups and to prevent the development of new identities that were viewed as marginal and unworthy of a place in the public arena (Yona and Goodman 2004:22). Despite the affinity for a Jewish collective in a common space, Jewish identities in Israel are constructed in different ways and subject to splits between sub-communities and spaces (Ben-Haim & Ben-Raphael 2007).

In this reality, the Reform Movement has difficulty influencing the local politics of identity and looks to the secular population as a natural target. However, even the secular Israeli identity is not founded on the general secular values of liberalism and universalism but rather on *halacha* (Goodman & Fisher 2004). The genealogy of the adjective “secular” reveals that the concept of secularism is defined within the [semantic field] of religion; we understand the term “secular” by contrasting it to its opposite: “sacred.” While secularism does not have an intrinsic, universal definition, one should not look at it in all of its facets as something that is merely **not** religion (Fisher 2015:23). Furthermore, the secular state’s recognition of the authority of *halacha* and its anchoring in law turns secularism into the default identity and not an independent category of identity (Yadgar & Liebman 2006).

The secular identity depends on empathy for the historical and cultural biography of the Jewish people. This identity does not oppose the religious world, but chooses to relate to it with controversy, dialogue and argument, which are also dependent on knowledge of Jewish culture and identification with the Jewish past (Zucker 1999: 11-12). According to Biale, the Jewish secular tradition has its own unique character, with pre-modern roots (Biale 2011: 28). The secular position posits that the pluralism of the past serves as justification for the present pluralism. The uniqueness of the Israeli version is reminiscent of an encompassing approach that not only ignores differences and distinctions within the concepts themselves and their history, but also inhibits the ability to distinguish characteristics of a certain process of secularization, or a certain expression of secularization, and to comprehend them in a phenomenological way (ibid.). The Reform Movement sees the Israeli secular public as a likely target population and frequently contends with the complex Israeli secular identity. Accordingly, as a religious movement, it appears to challenge pure secularism, while at the same time fighting against overt and covert orthodox perceptions.

Against this complex background, the accelerating spread of non-halachic religious communities in Israel, including Reform and Conservative, is not taking place in a vacuum. The communities are striving for official, public recognition and their struggle is rooted in the liberal discourse and the gradual transition from the politics of universalism - in which each individual in a society deserves equal rights - to a multi-cultural outlook based on recognition of the Other.

**Model for founding new communities: “And you shall spread out (*Ufaratzta*) to the West and to the East, to the North and to the South” (Genesis 28:14)**

In 2012, the Reform Movement launched its flagship program for communal development - *Ufaratzta*. Its objective was to strengthen the Jewish pluralistic identity of Israeli society through establishing reform communities throughout the country, with an emphasis on areas in which liberal religious services were absent. An additional goal was to forge collaborations with the local authorities, educational institutions and organizations active in Jewish renewal. This plan proposed three models of community development.

* Independent community: an urban community led jointly by a rabbi and a coordinator. Examples are *Hashahar* in Even Yehuda and *Yovel* in Gedera.
* A regional community serving a number of kibbutzim: a pluralistic Jewish center serving a large rural area. A part-time rabbi and in most cases a part-time manager would coordinate activities on a regional and a kibbutz level, including training local cultural leaders.
* Satellite community: internal initiatives by communities interested in expanding their activities to adjacent communities. An example of this is *Halev* in the center of Tel Aviv, belonging to the Daniel Centers. This community is used to pool resources for the movement and for the mother community.

After a decade, we can say that the *Ufaratzta* program has been a success. Already in 2018, reform enterprises from north to south numbered 50, twice the number recorded during first decade of this century. The movement’s headquarters gave support not only to communities headed by volunteers, but also to communities led by rabbis (male and female). Except in rare cases, the movement continued to support communities lacking a professional leadership. Anna Kislansky, CEO of the Reform Movement, states with satisfaction that the program has proven itself, but much work remains to be done:

We planned an incubation period of seven years, until the communities could stand on their own, but in fact it took longer, due to a lack of continuity in the employment of the rabbis and other reasons. However, in all of the communities, we saw a process of establishment with our support and budgeting that gradually stabilized. The community was registered as a non-profit, began to find independent sources of income, and slowly got underway. Some of the communities receive massive support from the movement, 70 to 85 percent. Others have made great progress, receiving less support, similar to the veteran communities.

It takes time; the *Ufaratzta* communities in Rosh Pina or Kiryat Shmona (in the northern periphery) cannot be compared to the *Ufaratzta* congregation in Jerusalem’s Kiryat Hayovel neighborhood. I would not expect the Rosh Pina community, which is very important to the area’s towns and settlements, to coduct the same number of life cycle ceremonies that I expect from the communities in Tel Aviv or Holon (in the center of the country). Although Rosh Pina has only 3,000 inhabitants, it is very important to us ideologically, because of the discourse with residents of the periphery. Each case must be evaluated on its own merits (Kislansky 2021).

Against this backdrop, members of the Reform Movement are working on a new strategic plan. This time, the goal is not towards country-wide expansion, but investment in existing infrastructures; that is, reinforcing emerging communities. At the same time, Kislansky stresses that this does not mean ceasing to build new communities and to identify opportunities in the field. However, at the present time, the main thrust is to cultivate what is. Kislansky continues:

If the congregation in Kfar Yona doesn’t have a rabbi, but there are meaningful conditions and a real need for liberal religious services, then we will try to invest there, instead of running to open another congregation somewhere else. If there is a request to establish a community in Benyamina, then I say to them: ‘there’s a congregation in Zichron Yaakov (not far from Benyamina).’ We are willing to come from time to time and conduct Kabbalat Shabbat prayers there, but we won’t rush to build another community. And if we do, Hadera comes first. There are places that we have targeted for the future, such as Ashdod. In the meantime, we are waiting for the conditions to ripen (ibid.).

From Kislansky’s words, it is apparent that the movement’s central focus is not on expansion, but on maintaining what already exists, including support of the communal rabbinic leadership and regional activities. This method of developing local leadership works from the bottom up and is not a copy-paste of the organizational model common in Reform communities in America, which is based on rabbis employed in particular congregations and not serving a region. This could explain the movement’s investment in training Israeli rabbis. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of rabbis (male and female) ordained by the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Jerusalem, and quite a few of the program’s graduates are Sabras. Thus the organizational strategy of the Israeli movement as well as the origin of its rabbis undercuts the prevalent view among the Israeli public that identifies the movement and its leaders as American. Mira Hovav, rabbi of the *Ramot Shalom* congregation in Beer Sheva, expressed it as follows:

At first, they hear ‘female rabbi’ and they think that some Jessica, with a huge kipa on her head and a colorful tallis, is coming to make them a summer camp. Then they see that I’m not some outsider, I’m one of them, a Sabra. I can say that, in the end, it connects people to me (Hovav 2015).

Hovav’s words demonstrate the influence of the rabbi’s identity and status on the congregation’s feelings of connectedness, perhaps especially in a community often perceived as ‘different’ in the market of Jewish (Orthodox) identities in Israel. In the Jewish arena, shaking off the American image is an advantage, in contrast to other areas and contexts - leisure culture, for example, or fashion - where adopting an American style is accepted as natural and desirable.

**From “Next year in Jerusalem” to “Next year on the balcony”**

The Reform communities offer their members an encounter with the Jewish world and Jewish literature, Kabbalat Shabbat prayer services, and rituals and ceremonies to mark Jewish holidays and life cycle events. Presenting to the Israeli public a form of Judaism not based on familiar Orthodox values is an ongoing challenge demanding breaking down norms and known religious outlooks. This is reflected in the development of made-in-Israel Reform liturgy. The big difference in Reform ceremonies and texts is not only that they are in Hebrew and performed by Israeli rabbis, but that they derive from the heart of Israeli culture, imbibed with mother’s milk. The decision to include passages from Hana Senesh, Naomi Shemer, Natan Alterman or Yehuda Amihai in the prayer book, alongside verses from the Psalms, demonstrates the attempt to combine Jewish tradition with native Israeli literature.

This is not really a new phenomenon. When Central European Jews immigrated to North America and joined Reform congregations there, they incorporated new melodies and songs into the Kabbalat Shabbat prayers (Kilgman 2001: 93; Schiller 1992). Incorporating songs into the prayer service[[4]](#footnote-4) fulfills an important social function, building a feeling of solidarity, and has symbolic significance, especially for a non-religious congregation (Long 2001: 91). So, what are the ideological motivations and considerations behind the choice of Hebrew texts and songs to be incorporated into the ceremonies and prayers of Reform congregations? Is the Israeli Reform *siddur* (prayerbook) particularly suited to the Israeli reality, and how does it differ from the American one?

Mira Raz, the past rabbi of the Ruth Daniel Congregation in Jaffa, explained to the congregants at a Kabbalat Shabbat service that I attended in 2015: “The phrase ‘to perfect/repair the world under G-d’s kingship’ is taken from the prayer ‘*Aleinu Leshabeah*.’ Not all of us grew up knowing this prayer, but we did know Erik Einstein’s song ‘*You and I*.” It’s the same concept.”

Mira Hovav, rabbi of *Ramot Shalom* in Beer Sheva, also notes the place of Israeli culture in communal prayer:

The members of my congregation were raised on Naomi Shemer. They ask me to include certain songs in the Kabbalat Shabbat service, and then I know that I passed the entrance exam […] I remember at the end of the *Neila* service on Yom Kiippur, when I started singing ‘Next year…,’ I expected everyone to continue with ‘in a rebuilt Jerusalem’ (from the Passover Haggada) but they suddenly sang ‘Next year we will sit on the balcony and count migrating birds’ (from a Naomi Shemer song). That’s what they’re familiar with, Ehud Manor and Nurit Hirsh. That’s the proof of their Israeliness (Hovav 2015).

These rabbis stress that mediation is necessary to make the Reform prayers accessible to the Israeli public; their comments reveal the fluid, dynamic nature of the Reform liturgy. It is a political choice that places the individual and his background at the center of the religious experience. The choice of a song by Einstein and not John Lennon demonstrates the victory of the Sabra over the Exile.

 **Insert: liturgical poem from the 16th C**

One of the prominent features of Reform Judaism’s goal of Israelization can be seen in the new Reform siddur, *Tefilat HaAdam* (Prayer of Man) (Marx and Lisitsa 2021). The siddur contains many traditional prayers alongside Israeli songs and Hebrew poetry, liturgical poems and melodies from the Middle Ages, and from the Ladino and Middle East traditions. This editorial decision reflects the desire to offer prayers that appeal to the broad Israeli public, including Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, who will find in it tunes from their grandparents (who in all probability were not Reform). Rabbi Dalia Marx, one of the editors of the siddur and a liturgy researcher, describes the work of combining liturgy, society and culture:

Pluralism in Jewish prayer was not born with the Reform Movement. The invention of the printing press led to the establishment of fixed texts for the prayers, but … It is true that the movement’s changes come from a conscious desire to shape the prayers. We are a link in the chain of the generations. The new Reform siddur contains traditional prayers as well as additional texts from the writings of Jewish authors over the generations. For us, the editors, taking long-hidden writings from the Qumran/Dead Sea scrolls, the Cairo Geniza, or forgotten prayers from ancient Israel was a genuine Zionist act. It is practically impossible to include everything, but one of our guiding principles was that the siddur should be Israeli, encompassing all streams and ethnic groups in Israeli society. It is no secret that the Jewish liberal project and Jewish renewal were originally Ashkenazi movements, but we live in the modern state of Israel and here the public is not only Ashkenazi. For this reason, it was important to us to give expression to all of the various ethnic groups - in the choice of liturgical poems, for instance - so that anyone entering our gates would feel exposed to something new (Marx 2021).

Furthermore, the physical space in which the Reform prayers take place, whether a permanent or temporary space, is a factor in the מערכת ההסלמה and the image of religious worship.[[5]](#footnote-5) Sociologists and anthropologists assign importance to the space in which ritual is conducted, particularly in light of the increase in religious practices taking place in the past decade in the public arena, such as Kabbalat Shabbat services organized by Jewish renewal groups (Azulay and Tabory 2008: 126; Neeman 2011). There are many examples of Reform ceremonies that take place in outdoor urban spaces: *Tashlich* on the banks of the Yarkon River (Ben-Lulu 2021), Kabbalat Shabbat in Raanana Park or Jaffa Port, Kabbalat Shabbat at the gay center in Tel Aviv (Idem 2019), *Simchat Torah* celebrations in city centers (Ben-Lulu 2020; Ben-Lulu 2021: 11), bar mitzvah ceremonies at the Western Wall, and more. Events such as these offer an opportunity to showcase Reform Judaism and make a political statement in the public arena. Thus, dancing on *Simchat Torah* in the middle of Jaffa’s Jerusalem Blvd. or conducting Kabbalat Shabbat services in the city park presents Reform Judaism as an indivisible part of the urban scene and the political activity that takes place there.

Kabbalat Shabbat services and Jewish holiday rituals are not the only events in the Reform communities to undergo Israelization; it is happening in life cycle ceremonies as well. The Reform Movement recognized that these events are strategically important in reinforcing the supreme value of the family in Israeli society (Ben-Lulu 2021). Connecting to tradition via the performance of life cycle ceremonies empowers the individual by giving them the feeling that they are part of something much broader (Goldberg 2003). In an atmosphere of disgust with the rabbinic establishment and the culture of conspicuous consumption, Reform rabbis are performing equality wedding ceremonies as an alternative to the traditional marriage ceremony, and holding bat mitzvah (coming of age for girls) workshops instead of trendy parties (Ben-Lulu 2020). Rabbi Hovav addresses radical as opposed to liberal voices on the issue of a bat mitzva publicly “going up” to recite the Torah blessings in Reform congregations:

Girls do not have an obligation to go up to the Torah like boys do; there isn’t only one way to mark a bat mitzvah. The ‘You and I’ project negates the idea that going up to the Torah is the necessary and only element. Quite a few girls refuse from the outset to go up to the Torah, but want to mark this exciting age in accordance with Jewish tradition. Participating in the workshop is not considered less than going up to the Torah; it’s simply another option that our community offers to those girls who want it. It has nothing to do with whether, at the end of the process, a girl proclaims herself as Reform or not; what is important is that she can stand opposite the boys in her class who have passed bar mitzvah and present a liberal Jewish world (Hovav 2015).

**Insert: Flyer about Reform bat mitzvah project**

The rich choice of life cycle ceremonies offered by the Reform communities invites the Israeli public to connect with tradition at life’s junctions, out of respect for the liberal values in which they believe, not out of a sense of obligation to proclaim a definitive Jewish identity. Often “one-time consumers” of life cycle ceremonies do not become regular members of the community; however, the movement’s objective is not to show demographic growth in the number of Israelis who identify as Reform Jews. It does include cultivating ‘ambassadors’ who support the movement from without, showing a different side of Reform Judaism.

**An agent for strengthening marginalized groups**

In recent decades, the concept “civil society” has been interpreted as “realization of the individual’s freedoms,” encompassing the effort to neutralize the power of the state and the regime’s authority. In Israel, the development of the civil society, together with the weakening of nationalist fervor and the expansion of neo-liberal influences, has highlighted processes for testing the balance of power between the citizen and the state (Peled and Ofir 2001). Identity politics in all its varieties - ethnicity, gender, religion and more - is a fertile ground that allows different groups to unite as organizations, unified communities, and to demand rights and public recognition.

As part of this trend, the Reform Movement acts in concert with prominent social organizations, among them the Association for Citizens’ Rights, the Association for LGBTQ Equality, Rabbis for Human Rights, *Tag Meir* *(translator’s note: enlightenment, a play-on-words of Tag Mehir, which means ‘price tag’)*, aid societies for the benefit of migrants, the Coalition Against Racism, Bfree Israel, and more. The main public thrust of the movement today is the Third Sector, not the corridors of the Knesset. While, for the first time, a reform rabbi - Gilad Kariv, former CEO of the Reform Movement - did win a Knesset seat in the last elections, he did not run as a representative of an independent Reform party, but rather as a member of the Labor Party.

It is my belief that the collaboration with other groups struggling for recognition in the public sphere is based not only on a Jewish-liberal ideology that views equality as a religious value that includes the right of all to live without prejudice or oppression. In light of the Reform Movement’s own struggle against delegitimization and exclusion, locating and supporting marginalized groups can be seen as a political move. Collaborating with identity groups and other communities to advance a common civil struggle is a source of power. One of these collaborations is with the Israeli LGBTQ community (Ben-Lulu 2018; Ben-Lulu 2019). Some activities worthy of mention are: the fight to win the support of the Jerusalem municipality for an open house dedicated to gay pride and tolerance, aid in organizing a Gay Pride Parade in Jerusalem, preparing a petition for the right of gay men to adopt, and representing LGBTQ who have suffered exclusion and violence.

Efrat Rotem, who served as the rabbi of *Halev* (‘the Heart’) congregation in central Tel Aviv, and who is a lesbian herself, believes that the Reform community has an obligation to provide a safe space and acceptance of the life journey of those whose identity has been shut up and smothered in a closet. In her view, this is a double mission: the LGBTQ’s task to chart a path that enriches the choice and acceptance of different identities; and the task of the community in general, and the Reform Movement in particular, to provide an embracing religious option:

In the Reform Movement, there is no contradiction between being LGBTQ and a deep, sincere and contemporary expression of our Judaism. The Reform Movement marries lesbians and homosexuals, ordains LGBTQ as rabbis, and primarily needs LGBTQ to teach it about themselves (Rotem 2015)).

**Insert: flyer concerning Reform support for LGBT rights**

The Reform Center for Religion and State is the central body in the Israeli Reform Movement that forges collaborations with civil society organizations, including legal representation. Until the summer of 2021, the head of the Center was Rabbi Noa Satath, a proclaimed lesbian and human rights activist. The Reform Center (formerly known as the Center for Jewish Pluralism), which was founded in 1987, is committed to the values of pluralism, equality, religious tolerance and freedom of religion. The Center advocates for the promotion of public policy and legislation on topics it wishes to influence, actively working to influence Israeli public opinion and motivate the public to action.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In recent years, the Center’s achievements in core issues have been reported in the media, notably the fight against exclusion, exclusion of women, racism, incitement and the struggle to ensure equal rights for all streams of Judaism (Erez-Likhovsky and Shapira-Rosenberg 2014, Carmi 2015). Satath wrote:

Just as the Jewish world is not complete without prayer and study, it is also incomplete without efforts for social justice. It is part of our ideology. Our tradition can be very oppressive; but that encourages us to think about our obligation to broadcast a liberal Jewish voice in a reality of inequality. For instance, we are united with *Haredi* (ultra-orthodox) women who turn to us in their fight against exclusion. arHHWe are also engaged continuously in promoting the civil rights of Palestinian (*sic*) Israelis and, of course, every manifestation of racial incitement. These are fruitful processes for both sides (Satath 2021).

Satath is describing a [queer] political strategy of joining forces, according to which, groups suffering from oppression and exclusion should develop empathy for each other and support each other in order to free themselves (Collins 2019). Despite the fact that, when it comes to the crunch, this approach often fails, remaining in the realm of theory, collaborations forged by the Center with various bodies and communities fighting for equality do help in branding the movement as a viable alternative in the religious sphere in Israel. It also places the movement on the dove side of the political map, even without an outright declaration as such.

New immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who often face Russophobia in Israeli society and whose Judaism is called into question by the rabbinic establishment (Kravel-Tove 2017), are welcomed by Reform Movement communities in Israel. Rabbi Gregory Kotler, Director responsible for Russian-speaking communities in the movement’s headquarters, explains why these immigrants throng to the Reform communities, especially those who arrived after the year 2000: ‘The people coming to these communities want to be Israelized, inter alia, by participation in the Reform community:’

The Russian immigrants were part of Jewish life before they came to Israel, and they are looking for a Jewish life in Israel that suits their life style and who they are. Reform Judaism allows them to connect to Judaism without giving up their cultural heritage or their Russian identity; they can combine the two. For instance, in our congregations in Haifa and in Ramat Gan, we conduct prayers and classes in Hebrew and in Russian. People can listen and learn in their own language. And it’s not only the language; it’s cultural codes, a meeting of identities; for example, we mark the Russian New Year by singing *Adon Olam* to the tune of a well-known Russian song.

There is another reason for the collaboration between the movement and the Russian community, relating to the issue of their Jewishness. Many Russian immigrants come from mixed families, in which one parent isn’t Jewish, or not 100% Jewish, and the orthodox establishment doubts their Jewishness. So, they come to us, and we don’t check at the door whether a person is Jewish according to his mother or his father; everyone can feel that they belong. If someone decides to convert, the option is open, but it is not obligatory. One of the reasons they come to us is to become Israelis, not just Jews; our communities are accessible and accepting, no pressure, no demand to give up their identity, just being with a group of equals (Kotler 2021).

What comes across clearly from Kotler’s words is the extent to which immigrants from the FSU are caught in the tension between integration and segregation, due to negotiations with the Sabra that produce overt and covert signs of rejection and alienation (Lerner 2011; Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder 2007). The Reform Movement identified the positioning of the immigrants and tries to fill the void and provide them with a religious, spiritual and social answer. The Reform community recognizes their need to preserve the cultural style familiar to them from Eastern Europe and makes adjustments in the language or other cultural elements of its religious activities. The immigrants see the movement as an agent of absorption into Israeli culture, even though, ironically, the Reform community itself struggles with exclusion and is not always accepted as a truly Israeli phenomenon.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Discussion: the entrance exam of the Israeli Reform Movement**

In this discussion, I noted that the Israeli Reform Movement is based on three pillars of integration and growth: community development, liturgical creativity, and collaboration with marginalized groups. By mapping local needs, establishing communities supported by larger communities, and changing the definition of the role of the community rabbi, the Reform Movement has succeeded in doubling the extent of its activities during the last decade. More and more congregations are being founded, not only with the support of the headquarters in Jerusalem, but even more in a grassroots way - local figures are taking initiative, supplemented by resources supplied by the movement’s headquarters. This process enables a strong communal foundation and encourages the establishment of additional communities in the center as well as in the periphery, while preserving and developing existing communities. The number of Israeli-born rabbis, male and female, is also growing.

With expansion of activities, exposure to different populations has also grown. Sociology is shaping the liturgy: textual changes reflect the movement between innovation and preservation, between East and West, between localism and globalism, and proves that, for quite some time, the Reform Movement is not just another American import in the Israeli public sphere. Its Israelization is expressed not only from a historical point of view, in the ideological shift to support of Zionism, but also from a ritualistic point of view, in following the Israeli calendar in addition to the Jewish calendar, prayers in Hebrew, addition of liturgical poems, etc. These trends characterize an accelerated process of taking root that establishes the movement as part of the living organism of Israeli society and culture.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The celebration of life cycle events provides an opportunity for new families to join the communities, if only temporarily. The movement views the family unit as an important element in establishing Israeliness and suggests focusing on the present - the existing family, or one that will be formed in the future (in whatever framework). The clearest expression of this is the performing of a ritual suited to the present and changing needs of the family, while respecting past traditions. Life cycle ceremonies in Reform communities have proven to be a source of attraction to those young families that are seeking a liberal, egalitarian religious experience, even if only for a specific, one-time event.

In addition, collaborations forged with civil society organizations based on global ideas, such as human rights, position Reform Movement communities as political players in the struggle of various groups to achieve official recognition. The movement makes tradition part of the broader struggle for individual rights, and shows how Jewish activism contributes a language and a local Jewish narrative to a global struggle. This collaboration is of common interest to social organizations that thereby benefit from a religious framework that grants religion a place of respect, and to the Reform Movement itself, which wins a foothold in potential arenas that could reinforce its standing and its expansion.

1. This is not surprising given the orthodox way of thinking, which Israeli researchers adopt consciously or sub-consciously, even when negating *halacha*. Existing research, whether it reaffirms the accepted religious-secular dichotomy or (seemingly) rejects it, examines the extent of religiosity according to observance of mitzvoth, beliefs, and feeling of belonging to the Jewish people and to the Land of Israel. In this, even if unintentionally, the researcher today is party to perpetuating the binary division between the secular and the religious in Israeli society. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the end of the previous century, attempts were made to strengthen the Zionist foundations and expression of Zionism in the Reform Movement. This reflects a theological stance in favor of religious individualism in a communal framework and the structuring of Judaism as a social concept and not as a necessary component of national identity. This position has broad theological as well as political implications when examining the movement’s reception and establishment in Israel (Rechnitzer and Minnes Brandes 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, in Europe, mosques, synagogues and churches are multipurpose structures used not only for prayer but for a variety of other activities that maintain the connection between the individual and the community. This includes activities aimed at different groups based on age, status, identity, hobbies, etc. (Bagby, Perl, and Froehle 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, threading Israeli songs and poems through the Kabbalat Shabbat service connects the prayers to the people and the state, contributing to the feeling of social solidarity and perpetuating the national narrative (Eliram 2006). According to sociologist Nissim Leon, the integration of familiar poems and melodies into Kabbalat Shabbat prayers in Sefardic synagogues was an attempt to deal with a diverse population of worshippers. In his words, “the familiar sounds from wedding halls join the ethnic synagogue together with parts of the social and cultural reality outside of it” (Leon 2006:15). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is significant that a synagogue is called ‘a small/diminished temple’ in an attempt to compare prayers to the sacrifices offered in the Temple. This despite the absence of any inherent connection between synagogues and the place where they are built (Reiner 2000:62). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Taken from the Center’s mission statement <https://www.datumedina.org.il/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By the way, in contrast to the cold welcome given by the American Reform communities to Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the last century (Markowitz 1988), the Israeli Reform congregations respect the cultural heritage of the immigrants and allow them to try out Israeli liberal Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In retrospect, it is possible to see how the parallel Reform Movement in America gradually lost the features of the German liturgy and German community of the classical reform movement, and became more and more Americanized. Indeed, a community does not exist in a vacuum; it engages in an open, dynamic dialogue with the general society and with the environment in which it operates. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)