

# Introduction

*Jeffrey K. Salkin*

Though no one has asked me, I have an idea for a Union for Reform Judaism Biennial program. Gather all the delegates in the main ball room for a Power Point presentation of the 2001 National Jewish Population Study. It would be a silent presentation, though perhaps we would have some of our movement's greatest vocalists singing plaintively in the background. When it is over, we would send the delegates to pre-assigned breakout groups. Let them meet with the greatest and most creative thinkers and teachers and programmers in our movement—and begin to think of ways to solve the problem.

What is the problem? It will become readily apparent to the four thousand or so delegates the moment they see the slide that heralds some rather dark news:

Statement: *"I have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish People."* Of those respondents who agree:

Orthodox:	91 percent.
Conservative:	74 percent.
Reform:	56 percent.

Statement: *"Very emotionally attached to Israel."* Of those respondents who agree:

Orthodox:	68 percent.
Conservative:	39 percent.
Reform:	21 percent.

Only 34 percent of our members have ever been to Israel as compared to 53 percent of those in the Conservative movement and 73 percent of the Orthodox (for this study, see [http://www.ujc.org/content\\_display.html?ArticleID=155417](http://www.ujc.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=155417)).

Those are some of the most sobering statistics in the Jewish community today. They highlight the greatest problem confronting

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American Reform Judaism today: the frostiness of our relationship to Israel and, by somber extension, to *c'lal Yisrael* as well.

How did this happen? We can line up the usual suspects and then issue warrants for a few others as well. It might be the recessive gene of our movement's old anti-Zionism. It might be because our demographic diversity has diminished our sense of Jewish peoplehood and ethnicity. It might be that in a movement that is the most politically liberal of all the movements, that we have been most susceptible to the leftist critiques of Israel and the contemporary leftist critiques of nationalism itself. It might be that we have been overly competent in awakening our people to the travesties of religious inequality in the state to a fault, for we have incensed our people about Israel before we taught them to love Israel.

Ask most Reform Jews about the goals of Reform Zionism and the purpose of ARZA. Most would define them as the attempt to secure equal religious rights for Reform Jews, Reform rabbis, and Reform institutions in the State of Israel. Well and good. But few Reform Jews would have any broader sense of Reform Zionist ideology beyond these necessary and practical goals. If we woke up tomorrow and discovered that during the night the Orthodox parties in Israel had decided once and for all to make peace with the liberal Jewish presence in Zion, if the fight was over, what would we do? What would we be?

As outreach was the rallying cry of the 1980s, and as spirituality served that purpose in the 1990s, so the reclamation of Jewish peoplehood and nationalism must be for this half-over first decade of the 2000s.

We note with great joy that this year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America). As such, and because of the ongoing need in our movement to address the claims of Zionism, we are devoting this special edition of *The Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* to the large and compelling project of Reform Zionist ideology. Many of the papers have emerged out of the Reform Zionist Think Tank, so ably co-chaired by Michael Meyer and Ira Youdovin, and under the auspices of ARZA. These meetings were convened in Malibu, California; Jerusalem, Israel; and URJ Kutz Camp-Institute in Warwick, New York. We are grateful to ARZA's president, Stanley Davids, for ever being the inspiration and the goad in our thinking.

What will you, the reader, find in these pages that might give flesh to an ideology, as well as hope for the Reform Zionist future?

Ira Youdovin, who was the founding executive director of ARZA, creates an organizational history of Reform Zionism. Stanley Davids asks some penetrating questions about how Reform Jews think—and might think—about Reform Zionism, while Peter Knobel uncovers the role of ideology and liturgy in shaping a Reform Zionist vision. Jan Katzew writes about the practical, programmatic, and educational implications of Reform Zionism for our movement. William Cutter describes how our language of Zionist engagement must change, and how we can create a new narrative for our Zionism.

Michael Meyer wonders aloud about the future of “post-Zionism,” and how Reform Zionism might learn from, and inform, that Zionist ideology. One of the Reform movement’s great stateswomen, Evely Laser Shlensky, responds to Meyer, describing her own Zionist journey. Michael Marmur, playfully invoking the imagery of the Pesach *haggadah*, invites us to better integrate Zionism with our theology. As a particular treat, we have been able to include some rather controversial remarks by the Israeli literary figure A.B. Yehoshua, translated from the Hebrew, with responses by Michael Meyer and Eric Yoffie. Finally, Richard Hirsch, perhaps the most senior statesman of Reform Zionism, reminds us of the symbiosis of liberal Judaism and Zionism, with a call to action.

The essays in this special volume all elucidate a common theme: Reform Zionism’s purpose is to reform Zionism, and to Zionize Reform Judaism. As Reform Zionism becomes a necessary nutrient in the Israeli body politic, we will raise our eyes toward the heavens and the horizon and to a Zion once again redeemed by our presence and our concern.

The contemporary author Andre Neher writes:

We have stubbornly refused over the centuries to substitute another place for our focus. Christians have another Jerusalem in Rome and in the heavens; Moslems have Mecca and Medina; agnostic consciousness builds other Jerusalems in Paris and New York. I have never been a Wandering Jew; I have always been a pilgrim towards Jerusalem.

I express my personal gratitude to Elyssa Mosbacher for her careful copy-editing and management of these essays, as well as to Shira Koch Epstein, ARZA Associate Director-ARZA Initiatives, for her skillful shepherding of this project.

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Finally, we are in debt to the Journal editor, Jonathan Stein, for his literary *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming of guests) in devoting an entire edition of the Journal to this important issue that will truly shape the future of our movement and, we pray, Zionism itself.

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