

# Between Pluralism and Secularism: An American Jewish Educator's Journey into the World of Israeli Secular Torah Study

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eJP

by Rabbi David Kasher

“Something is happening in Israel.”

This was the refrain that Rabbi Yonatan Cohen, a gifted Torah teacher and a one-time schoolmate of mine, kept returning to in his Shabbat sermon in my Berkeley synagogue. “Something is happening in Israel.”

Yes, *something* is always happening in Israel. But Rabbi Cohen wasn't giving some political rallying cry. Instead, he was referring to the movement that has been growing in Israel for years of secular Israelis taking interest in and ownership of traditional Jewish learning. *eJP* recently referred to an [interview](#) with Knesset member Ruth Calderon, the founder of a secular, pluralistic, egalitarian Israeli Beit Midrash, whose remarkable speech last February on the Knesset floor – during which she celebrated the Talmud as a pillar of Jewish heritage and taught a section to the members present – gave voice to this small but growing movement. Deeply significant in Israel for its own reasons, secular Israelis' engagement in traditional Jewish learning also holds a powerful meaning for the diasporic community of Jewish educators.

I am a student and a teacher of Torah who grew up secular, spent years in *yeshivot* of various stripes in Israel, was ordained at an Open Orthodox Rabbinical School (*Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*). I now serve as the Director of Education at Kevah, an organization with a distinctly pluralistic philosophy that seeks to bring traditional Jewish learning to the whole spectrum of the Jewish community – many of whom identify as secular, and most of whom have had few to no encounters with classical Jewish texts. Kevah's model is unique: we enable Jews of all backgrounds and levels of knowledge and ritual observance to explore the spiritual and intellectual richness of the Jewish textual tradition in comfortable, small-group settings, driven by the particular interests and aims of the learners themselves.

At Kevah, we believe what is happening in Israel is profoundly kindred to our work; these secular Israelis are our siblings or cousins in the family of Jewish education. In the service of building partnership and collegiality I traveled to Israel this past summer to meet with key figures in the schools and programs in which secular Israelis are today studying Torah – to observe them, to learn from them, and to reach out to them.

In Jerusalem, I met with Einat Lerner from **Kolot**, a pluralistic Beit Midrash founded in 1997. Kolot provides community leaders access to the study of classical Jewish texts and encourages them to incorporate that experience into their public role.

Just south of Beer Sheva, I visited Debbie Golan and **Atid BaMidbar**, the remarkable community learning center she has built in Yeroham. Atid BaMidbar was founded with a focus on repairing social gaps and community dynamics in Israel, but soon became a learning hub for the whole Negev region.

In Gan Yavneh, near Ashdod, Orly Kenneth oversees **ZIKA**, which combines learning with a strong action component. While learning is central at ZIKA, Orly has implemented a wide array of communal Jewish rituals, such as Cooperative B'nei Mitzvah ceremonies, in an effort to create a community of modern Jews who “have begun to speak Jewishly.”

Just outside of Kibbutz Yifat in Northern Israel, I met Shai Zarchi, the head of the **Beit Midrash at Oranim** and the man who might be thought of as the father of this secular Torah-study movement in Israel. The Midrasha at Oranim was the first program of its kind, founded by Shai and his colleagues in the 1960s, focused on making classical Jewish texts relevant and accessible to people from every sector of Israeli secular society.

Finally, in Tel Aviv, I paid a visit to **Bina: The Secular Yeshiva**, where traditional yeshiva learning is centered around

how immersion in Jewish textual tradition and values can and should inform social justice work in Israel.

These meetings were fascinating and inspiring, and what emerged most prominently were the ways in which my Israeli counterparts and I are clearly doing the same kind of work, though the unique characteristics of Israeli society make that work look very different. My brief survey of this educational landscape led to an identification of these common themes:

### **Stressing the Multi-vocal Nature of Jewish Texts**

All of these organizations place particular emphasis on the diversity of opinion in the Jewish textual tradition, whether in shifting attitudes from generation to generation, or even – as is often the case in the Talmud – within one text. Other Jewish learning settings may stress the resolution of divergent opinions as a way of harmonizing the texts. For a secular or pluralistic community, however, leaving opposing voices in tension is seen as a virtue, as it echoes and affirms the diversity of contemporary society.

### **Facilitative Style of Education**

One of the goals of secular Torah study is to empower participants to take ownership of the Jewish textual tradition. To do this, learners must engage actively with the text. Educators in this setting, then, are not merely delivering information and insight: they must also be skilled in facilitating a conversation, seeking verbal participation from everyone in the room, and giving them the tools to respond meaningfully to the text.

### **Texts are Not Taught as Binding**

In an environment that seeks to be inviting to secular participants, one cannot assume that texts will be read as making binding claims on behavior. These means that narrative is often selected over law – *aggadah* over *halachah*. Even when legal texts are taught, they are mined for underlying values rather than presented as normative standards for practice.

### **Seeking Personal Relevance**

Neither, however, are these texts presented merely as fascinating relics of the past. The goal of all of the educators I spoke to was to make Jewish texts deeply relevant to contemporary Israelis: intentionally presenting the material as a rich source for the construction of identity, the formation of values, and the making of meaning – even if the particular identity, values, and meaning are left open for personal interpretation.

### **Grappling with Questions of Practice**

The move away from normative behavioral assumptions and toward personal meaning does not obviate questions of practice. Though none of these organizations is looking to promote *halachic* observance, most of them see some behavioral shift (e.g. social activism or personalized ritual) as a necessary indicator of internalization and application of Jewish learning. Each of these organizations shies away from the language of *mitzvot*, but they do not avoid classic Jewish rituals like Shabbat, prayer, and lifecycle celebrations, and there are attempts to create new rituals or celebrations that synthesize classic Jewish practices with secular Israeli culture. All of these avenues promise exciting possibilities, but for now, the question remains as to where precisely practice fits into this new educational landscape.

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Each of these features of Israeli secular Torah study is mirrored, almost exactly, in the American field of pluralistic Jewish education, and I believe an important linguistic distinction helps to explain this parallelism. The fact is, the word “secular” (*hiloni*) just does not mean the same thing in Israel as in the U.S. Here, secular means irreligious, and probably atheist; in Israel it is often used to mean, simply, “not Orthodox.” Many of these Israeli educators and participants are deeply invested their spiritual lives; many keep kosher; many believe in God. “Secular” in Israel – in the context of Jewish education – really means something closer to what I would call “pluralist” here in America.

Also, whether they have spent time in American non-Orthodox spiritual communities, were born in the U.S., or were at one point employed in the American Jewish philanthropic sector, every leader I met with recognized the way that the flourishing of liberal Judaism in America had laid some of the groundwork for this cultural shift in Israel. Even Ruth Calderon learned from American émigré Rabbi David Hartman and cited his influence in her now-famous speech.

I went looking for my brothers and sisters in Torah, and while there are real differences between our communities, I found them, more closely related than even I had suspected.

So, while American Jewish pluralism and Israeli secular Torah study are distinct communities with their own strengths, challenges, and goals, we have so much in common, so much to share with and learn from one another. One incredible advantage that Israelis have in accessing Jewish texts is the simple fact of their Hebrew fluency, and there is much here to learn about the role of Hebrew language in American Jewish education. Meanwhile, Israelis continue to struggle with a societal dynamic that is extremely dichotomized between religious and secular Jews, so much so that secular Israelis often lack a sense of ownership over their Jewishness. They have learned, and continue to learn, from their American counterparts how to construct rich and vibrant Jewish spiritual lives outside of a strict Orthodoxy.

Most important, however, is recognizing the ways in which 'Israeli Secular' and 'American Pluralistic' Torah-study communities have a tremendous amount in common and are well-poised to partner with one another and grow together. Above all, we share a sense of urgency: in both Israel and the United States, there is a sense of a Judaism in crisis, whether that means the assimilation and shrinking of the Jewish community (U.S.) or the struggle to define Jewish identity (Israel). But on both sides of the ocean, there is a shared belief that a reconnection to the Jewish textual heritage is part of the solution, a belief that the eternal vitality of these ancient words have the power to awaken new life.

Something is happening in Judaism.

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