

*Religious Zionism  
Post Disengagement:  
Future Directions*

EDITED BY  
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## THE ORTHODOX FORUM

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Can American Orthodoxy  
Afford to Have  
its Best and Brightest  
(Not) Make Aliya?

*Yoel Finkelman*

A few years back, Reuven Spolter, a synagogue rabbi in Detroit, published an article in *Jewish Action* entitled “In Search of Leaders.” The article got some attention on the Internet and in the “after shul gossip” (at least in my earshot), and it prompted quite a few mostly critical letters to the editor. As a Modern Orthodox Zionist rabbi, Spolter was frustrated by what he perceived as a flow of the most dedicated Modern Orthodox laypeople and *klei kodesh* (religious functionaries) from the United States to Israel. It was difficult for him to criticize *aliya* (immigration to Israel) and *olim* (immigrants), but at the same time Spolter felt that American Modern Orthodoxy was suffering a serious depletion of its best and brightest. For some

“Modern Orthodox rabbis in America,” he suggested, the temptation to make aliya might be a “*yetzer hara*” (evil impulse). Spolter had “outed” a problem that had been hinted at by a few other writers, but which had yet to be tackled head on.<sup>1</sup> Could aliya weaken the fabric of American Modern Orthodoxy?

In the comments below, I will attempt to provide some context for and evaluation of this claim. I am concerned, along with others, that American Modern Orthodoxy will struggle if it does not have adequate leadership and if it cannot attract high-quality professionals to its institutions. Still, I believe it to be ideologically misguided and ultimately futile to discourage aliya in any significant way. I suspect that the professional and leadership shortages that may plague Modern Orthodoxy reflect tensions that are built into that community’s Diaspora Zionism more than they reflect any problem with aliya per se. I will begin this essay with several reasons why framing Modern Orthodoxy’s leadership problems in terms of the challenges of aliya is itself problematic. Afterward, I will try to distinguish between three potential areas of concern for Modern Orthodoxy: first, a manpower shortage in institutions and schools; second, a loss of ideologues, agenda-setters, and leadership to Israel; and third, the tendency to look to American expatriates to play leadership roles in a community in which they no longer live. I have a great many more questions than answers, but I claim that, ultimately, American Modern Orthodoxy must face the social and economic factors that discourage talented people from becoming religious leaders, and it must begin to explain to itself the meaning of Diaspora Religious Zionism.

My comments will focus more on the field of Modern Orthodox education than on rabbinics, communal services, and lay leadership, primarily because I have worked in and have a deeper familiarity with the field of education. Still, I offer these remarks with a measure of caution. I have spent almost all of my adulthood, and all of my professional life, in Israel. Olim who comment on American Jewish life can easily get things wrong. I hope that my comments about the American Orthodox community will be received in the spirit that they are intended, one of caring and concerned constructive criticism.

### ALIYA AND FRAMING THE TOPIC

Someone has to lead the American Jewish community; presumably those people ought to be American Jews. Nobody else can easily do so. Hence, every educator, rabbi, lay leader, and professional who leaves America removes a resource that could benefit the American Jewish community. Americans are likely to be best at educating and leading Americans, and, therefore, one cannot expect that an influx of Jews from anywhere else – including Israeli *shelihim* (emissaries)– could genuinely replace olim once they have left. Furthermore, American Jewish leaders received their own Jewish education, in large part, due to the largesse of the American community that supports schools, universities, and other communal institutions. It makes sense, therefore, that American Jews should be morally obliged to return that investment to the American Jewish community. These concerns, I believe, should be taken into account by individuals who are planning their futures as Jewish leaders and contemplating aliya.

With that, I believe that it is unwise and unhelpful to frame the discussion of Modern Orthodoxy's leadership problems in terms of a perceived problem with aliya. To begin with, aliya is a good thing. Axiologically, and increasingly demographically, the center of the Jewish people is in the Land of Israel and the State of Israel. It is probably unnecessary to catalog the almost endless series of sources that identify living in the Land of Israel as a value. The *Tosefta* in *Avodah Zarah* (4:3), to mention just one very well known example, prefers that one live in a gentile city in the Land of Israel than in the most Jewish neighborhood outside the land, because "dwelling in the Land of Israel is weighted as much as all the mitzvot of the Torah." In that sense, North American aliya is simply and straightforwardly positive. Indeed, given the importance of Religious Zionism in the mission statements of so many Modern Orthodox day schools, aliya is a sure sign that the American Jewish education is succeeding in doing what it set out to do. Jews who want to be at the center of Jewish living, who want to live as full a spiritual and religious life as possible, should be "here" and not "there." North American Jews, like their coreligionists throughout the Diaspora, belong collectively in Israel.

That they are not is easily explained sociologically and economically, but more difficult to defend religiously. At most, American Modern Orthodoxy's leadership problems are an unfortunate byproduct of an essentially positive phenomenon. Whatever soul-searching may be necessary to overcome the aftereffects of leaders' aliya should be doubled and tripled in questioning American Modern Orthodoxy's collective complacency about preferring the "cucumbers and melons" (*Bamidbar* 11:5) of Egypt over the place where the "eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" (*Devarim* 11:12).

Furthermore, many olim continue to make contributions to the Modern Orthodox community in the United States. Some work in Israel's numerous one-year yeshivas and seminaries for English-speaking high school graduates, institutions that are rightly perceived as a critical element in North American Modern Orthodox education. Some olim return temporarily to North America, either during the summers to work in camps or learning programs, or on various *shelihut* programs. Many Israeli olim also contribute the fruit of their pens to the American Jewish community. Furthermore, olim may help cement the Jewish involvements of their friends and relatives who remain behind. It seems likely that American Jews with loved ones in Israel will visit Israel more often, be more concerned with Israel, and be generally more involved in Jewish affairs. While these contributions are not the same as a full time commitment to American schools, synagogues, and communities, they should not be overlooked.

However, even if American olim made no contribution at all to the American Jewish community, I believe that it is problematic to look too critically at the olim and their supposed abandonment of the American scene. Every individual who takes on tasks of Jewish leadership, no matter how talented and dedicated, must make decisions about where to focus his or her energies. In every case, those decisions will involve "abandoning" a certain potential constituency. There will always be more tasks that need to be done than people to do them. If American Modern Orthodoxy discourages aliya, it will take leaders for itself and leave Israel weaker. It is not immediately

obvious to me that Jewish education and rabbinics in America is higher on the list of *Am Israel's* (the People of Israel) priorities than all those many things that olim are doing in Israel. Those who work with one particular population should be cautious about challenging the particular decisions and sacrifices of those who have chosen to work with a somewhat different population.

American olim are some of the most dedicated and contributing members of Israeli society. Individual olim have become leaders of Israeli Modern Orthodoxy, as *roshei yeshiva*, academics, institution-builders, and writers.<sup>2</sup> They have been active in politics, particularly in extra-parliamentary groups.<sup>3</sup> Within Israeli Religious Zionism, Americans often come from a tradition of a moderate, Modern-Orthodox, non-fundamentalist religion, which, from my own personal perspective, is an absolute necessity for keeping Israeli Religious Zionism's moral and religious compass focused on a rational north. That tradition of religious moderation and freedom has also projected American immigrants into the forefront of attempts to create dialogue and bridge the gap between Israel's secular majority and religious minority.<sup>4</sup> (Those with somewhat different political or ideological convictions are likely to find American immigrants over-represented in their ideological camps, as well.) As a group, North American olim help strengthen the democratic, white-collar, middle class of Israel because they are generally socio-economically better off than the average Israeli, and come from countries with longer and more established traditions of democracy. If we discourage North American aliya, we may strengthen American Modern Orthodoxy and leave Israeli Judaism weaker in equal measure.<sup>5</sup>

Another reason why we may do ourselves a disservice if we focus too intensely on the "problem" of the aliya of leadership is that there is little to be done about it. As long as the North American Modern Orthodox community is Zionistically inclined – and as long as Israel remains a viable country with a reasonable standard of living and a rich religious and Jewish cultural life – then some of Modern Orthodoxy's best and brightest will come on aliya, as well they should. Perhaps emphasizing the importance of remaining in America to support the Diaspora community will convince a handful

to sacrifice their aliya dream, but for those dedicated to aliya as a religious obligation and opportunity, and for those who can make such a move while paying a relatively small social and economic price, such an approach is not likely to have a significant effect.

The American community could try to urge future olim to stay in America for a few years longer before leaving for Israel. This, too, is a limited strategy. Many olim already do that. If you forgive the anecdotal nature of this evidence, some of my thirty-something peers have made aliya recently after several years of service to the American Jewish community, and others have concrete plans to do so in the next year or two. Almost none, I suspect, would be willing to postpone their aliya anymore, if for no other reason than because aliya with older children, and certainly with teens, can be challenging. Those who come on aliya younger (like myself), at an age when they did not yet have specific career plans, are not likely to be ready to calculate their relative contribution to the Jewish people in Israel or America. Shelihut – an oleh returning to North America for a few years, to be followed by a return to Israel – is also likely to be of limited impact. Due to the challenges of having a successful career in education in Israel, and the limited financial benefits of shelihut, olim who have found a place for themselves professionally are generally reluctant to suspend their professional progress in order to return to the States, only to “start over” upon return. If there is little that can be done to “prevent” leaders from making aliya, and if there is little that can be done to increase the length of their stay in North America, then we would do well to look elsewhere for solutions to the perceived crisis of leadership in North American Modern Orthodoxy.

### **WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM?**

Before moving on to potential solutions, it may, perhaps, be helpful to distinguish between three aspects of the “problems” related to aliya. First, there is a perceived manpower and personnel crisis among Modern Orthodox klei kodesh, and it has been suggested that the aliya of educators and rabbis has contributed to the problem, or at least made its solution more difficult. “There are simply

not enough talented Modern Orthodox professional leaders to go around,” says Spolter, before quoting the principal of the local co-ed Orthodox high school as explaining that he “cannot find Modern Orthodox teachers.”<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the matter of professional staffing, there is a larger concern with leadership, vision, and guidance. This is not a question of filling jobs, but of leadership at the top of the ladder. Theologians, agenda-setters, ideologues, institution-builders, *poskim* (halakhic authorities), and spokespeople are critical in providing religious direction, institutional vision, and ideological coherence to Modern Orthodoxy. If those North Americans making aliya include even a handful of the potential visionary leaders, American Modern Orthodoxy may find itself with a shortage of that level of leadership. This seems closer to Jonathan Sarna’s and Shalom Carmy’s (separate) descriptions of a “brain drain”<sup>7</sup> as a long-term problem for the future of American Modern Orthodoxy. Sarna wonders whether “a movement that sends its most illustrious sons and daughters there [to Israel] can truly expect to triumph here?” Can Modern Orthodoxy thrive without the “remarkable Orthodox men and women who might have transformed American Jewish religious life but preferred to cast their lot with Zion?”<sup>8</sup>

Sarna raises an additional, third concern. As talented American Modern Orthodox Jews make aliya they may continue to play leadership roles within the community that they have geographically left. It seems likely that for American Modern Orthodoxy to thrive, its leadership must be local and indigenous. “American Orthodox Jews increasingly look to Israeli rabbis and yeshivah heads for direction. When a young American Orthodox Jew speaks of ‘my rebbe,’ chances are that he is referring to someone in Israel.” This leads Sarna to question “whether Israeli Orthodox leaders really understand the American Jewish scene well enough to exercise leadership here. Historically, at least, religious movements that cannot count on indigenous leadership to direct them have not fared well in America – at least, not for long.”<sup>9</sup> Is Sarna correct about the facts? If so, is there reason for concern?

Regarding the first issue, the problem and solution is not

located in the sphere of aliya. Rather, the problem should be contextualized within the American Jewish community's broader discussion of a perceived personnel crisis. Solutions are to be found in the field of professional recruitment and retention. The second and third matters may, perhaps, present more serious future challenges. However, rather than identifying aliya as the problem, American Modern Orthodoxy would be better served by facing, head on, the paradoxes (contradictions?) that have brought about these challenges: namely the tension of being a religious Zionist community in the Diaspora. If American Orthodoxy is going to address the challenges associated with its leaders' aliya, it must first begin a complex – perhaps uncomfortable and painful – process of explaining to itself, and to its most dedicated youth, why it has chosen to remain in *galut* (exile), and how it understands its role as a voluntary Diaspora.

#### A PERSONNEL CRISIS IN MODERN ORTHODOX INSTITUTIONS?

I would like to begin with the first aspect of the problem, that aliya has created or exacerbated a shortage of qualified teachers, rabbis, and professionals in Modern Orthodox institutions. We must, I believe, begin by determining the extent, nature, and seriousness of the problem. Often the claim that we do not have an adequate pool of candidates for educational jobs is dependent on an unstated definition of what an adequate pool would look like. Even if such a definition were stated, it may be unrealistic or idealized. Hard and important questions remain. Do Orthodox schools have fewer qualified teachers, or teachers who are less qualified, than public or private schools?<sup>10</sup> How do Orthodox schools compare to public schools and other private schools in terms of their staff turnover rate? If Orthodox schools are not significantly different from other schools, perhaps what is perceived as a crisis is in fact typical of the conditions in the educational job market. The fact that principals and educational directors must annually assemble their staff anew toward the beginning of each fall can easily lead to frustration. But this annual manpower search may – and I reiterate, *may* – also lead to exaggerating the nature of the problem.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, historical perspective also raises the possibility that the problem is not as severe as it appears. As Susan Shevitz has pointed out, the American Jewish (though not specifically Orthodox) community has been discussing a crisis in the teaching profession at least since the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the decades since then have witnessed dramatic growth in the field, as well as increased professionalism. There are more Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish schools than ever, and constantly increasing opportunities for professional training. The field of Jewish education is larger and more professional than it has ever been.<sup>13</sup> At one level, the growth in schools increases demand for teachers, which may be contributing to the shortage. At another level, however, decades-long discussion of a crisis, at the same time as the profession is thriving, may also indicate that the field of Jewish education is underestimating its own strengths. Are we, perhaps, caught in another example of the “recurring myth of teacher shortages”?<sup>14</sup>

Even if there is a crisis (and I do not, in my above comments, mean to suggest that I know that there is not one), it also behooves us to think carefully about the nature of the crisis. What precisely is missing in Orthodox educational and lay leadership? Is there a shortage of teachers, principals, congregational rabbis, psychologists, social workers, or other figures? Perhaps there are enough people, but they lack specific talents and skills. Perhaps existing talent is concentrated in a few geographic areas, with people reluctant to move from the perceived centers of Orthodox life. Perhaps the existing pool of talented professionals is not being managed or organized as efficiently and effectively as possible? Perhaps “there is no personnel crisis in Jewish education; rather there are a series of personnel *crises*, each of which needs to be addressed differently.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, if there is a crisis, it seems odd to point to aliya as such a critical factor. To begin with, the rates of aliya from the United States are simply not that high. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, there were 2,157 immigrants to Israel from the United States in 2006. While this number represents a slight rise from the previous few years – a rise that is probably associated with peaking American real estate prices, the growing cost of day-school tuition,

and the trend toward commuting from Israel to work in the United States<sup>16</sup> – the number of olim today remains lower than it was in the early 1980s, and certainly in the peak years of the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> These numbers hardly involve a significant demographic shift. Given these small numbers of olim, in order to claim that aliya is such an important factor in the teacher shortage, one would have to demonstrate that educators and rabbis are significantly over-represented among olim, something that to the best of my knowledge has not been studied and may or may not be the case.

Instead of focusing on the immigration of what amounts to a rather small percentage of the population, it would be better to consider more obvious and probably more central factors: professional recruitment and the retention of those professionals once they are recruited. Orthodoxy should begin careful research designed to map the profession of Orthodox education, with all its strengths and weaknesses. It might begin by examining how Orthodox education has achieved the real and dramatic successes of the second half of the 20th century. What things have been done in the past to make the field of Orthodox education as large and as professional as it is today? What has worked, and what has not worked? How have we gone from a handful of schools, and fledgling attempts at centralization by *Torah Umesorah*, to a vast network of day-schools supported by university and yeshiva-based professional training, and numerous umbrella organizations providing a plethora of resources?<sup>18</sup>

Researchers should continue with careful surveys of the working conditions of Orthodox professionals in various fields, and attempt to identify what makes these professions attractive, and more importantly, what makes them unattractive. Orthodoxy should begin to ask questions of those young people who choose to enter Jewish professions, and particularly those young people who consider such a path but ultimately choose a different one. We should be surveying those who leave these professions, as well as those who remain in the field. What are their experiences? Why have they made the career choices they have made? Are they happy with those choices? Why or why not? Answers to these questions might suggest plans of action that could increase the pool of professionals. Such programs

are likely to be more effective than any amount of breast-beating about the downsides of aliya.

The general Jewish community has begun to address many of these questions. Yet, Orthodoxy remains underrepresented in these discussions.<sup>19</sup> Orthodoxy should increase its cooperation with other American Jewish groups – and create its own initiatives if need be – in conducting systematic research, diagnosing problems from a variety of methodological perspectives, suggesting modes of intervention, and implementing those suggestions. In the larger organized Jewish community there is a “consensus about the need for a community-wide approach” that “invites comprehensive, holistic solutions rather than small, technical fixes.”<sup>20</sup> We should build a grass roots effort to recruit and retain professionals from within existing American Orthodox ranks.

Research conducted thus far points to the fact that Jewish education is a profession with poor compensation, few worldly benefits, and to some degree low social status. One systematic study of teachers in North American Jewish schools points to the fact that many work only part time, less than “half of the day school teachers...reported satisfaction with their salaries,” and most full time teachers do not receive health care benefits or have pension plans, to mention nothing of sabbaticals or tenure. In addition, many move from job to job more frequently than they would like.<sup>21</sup> Several years earlier, Steven Cohen and Susan Wall found that Jewish educational leaders felt harried by the endless hours of their jobs, frustrated by lay leaders who do not treat them like knowledgeable and competent professionals, and irritated by parents who meddle too much in school life. They felt no small measure of burnout, and were non-committal when asked if they intended to remain in the field. While Cohen and Wall found that educational leaders, particularly Orthodox ones, did not generally suffer from feelings of low status, these leaders did suggest that if their social status were to be improved they might be treated better and have more influence on lay leaders and board members. Furthermore, Jewish college students indicated that they were concerned that were they to enter the field of Jewish education, they would suffer from low social

status.<sup>22</sup> Under these circumstances, when “earnings and benefits are meager compared to most professions,”<sup>23</sup> is it any wonder that it seems hard to fill positions?

If there is a shortage of talented teachers and educational leaders, it is time to raise salaries, provide benefits such as health care and pensions, make the workplace more professional and challenging, provide professionals with opportunities for further training and advancement, supply the most talented and dedicated professionals with sabbaticals and tenure, offer adequate administrative assistance to principals, and help educate lay leaders about the profession of Jewish education. All of this costs money, money which the schools at the moment do not have. Still, in its long history, the American Jewish community has provided great deals of funding for significantly less worthy projects. If there is an educational, moral, and religious will, there is most certainly a financial way. The result of the above is likely to help attract talented people to the field of Jewish education.

There is, I believe, reason to suspect that doing so is more difficult than just fundraising. To begin with, this is not a specifically Modern Orthodox problem, but a problem with American educational culture as a whole. “The fundamental problem facing [American] teaching,” explains educational researcher Richard Ingersoll, is “the low standing of the occupation. Unlike in many European and Asian nations, in this country, teaching is largely treated as low status work, and teachers are semi-skilled workers.”<sup>24</sup> If low salaries, minimal benefits, and inferior social status for teachers is pervasive in American culture, then Modern Orthodoxy will have to be way ahead of larger American trends if it hopes to improve things, a distinct challenge to say the least.

But certain aspects of contemporary Modern Orthodox life may exacerbate this general American problem. Unfortunately, Modern Orthodox Jews are often characterized by inconsistent religious commitment and ambivalence about religion. Often, Modern Orthodox laypeople are thoroughly embedded in America’s suburban middle or upper class. Religion is shaped – sometimes simply disregarded or ignored – by the internal logic of that experience. Religion is not

so much an axiological commitment to the service of God. Instead, it provides a social framework and cultural identity for middle or upper class suburban Americans, in a culture that deeply values religious affiliation. Alan Brill is correct when he says that “The [contemporary] Orthodox community is completely embedded in American culture.... [It is] a community whose worldview is drawn from its embeddedness in American culture.... Jewish suburbia is entirely embedded within general suburban trends.”<sup>25</sup>

For many of these Jews, religion is valuable, but primarily to the extent that it is compatible, or can be made to be compatible, with the social and financial needs of suburban upward mobility. When it is not compatible, it may simply be overlooked and ignored. Modern Orthodox laypeople, therefore, may view religious leadership with ambivalence and discomfort. Rabbis and educators call for more consistent religious commitments, and they challenge – in part due to their own higher levels of religious consistency, and in part by their very preference of rabbinics and education over more lucrative professions – the materialism, complacency, and religious indifference that is reflected in so much Modern Orthodox practice.

If I may be permitted a somewhat ironic take on this, I might suggest that under these circumstances, the low pay and low status of teachers is actually quite functional. As Samuel Heilman has put it, “Jewish school[ing]...is a model of the Jewish community it serves, a mirror image of what goes on in the Jewish world around the school.... The Jewish community, instead of being altered by the education it provides, perpetuates itself *along with all its attendant problems*.”<sup>26</sup> There may be little better way to transmit and reproduce Modern Orthodox lay anxieties and ambivalences about religion and religious leaders than by sending children to schools where underpaid and under-appreciated teachers demonstrate that Judaism is important, but not *that* important. The community’s collective ambivalence about Judaism is reproduced by the cultural contradictions inherent in the low social status of those who are, ostensibly, the most important. The Modern Orthodox doctor or businessperson, parent of a young person trying to choose a career path, might say (or think silently): “I’m glad that there are rabbis

and teachers out there, but I am more glad that I am not one of them, and I wouldn't want my child to become one." Keeping salaries, benefits, and social prestige of teachers and rabbis low helps make this statement loud and clear. Students get just the education that their parents desire – Jewish in content, but subtly demonstrating that there are more important things than full time and intensive religious existence.

I hope that I am wrong, and that this paradox will not make it more difficult to draw talented Americans into the fields of Jewish educational and professional leadership. Even if I am right, however, the American Orthodox community is better off working to overcome this challenge by putting its resources into improving the conditions of Jewish professions and attracting more of its members into these jobs. I suspect that questioning aliya will do little to answer these deeper challenges.

### LEADERSHIP IN ISRAEL

Hypothetically, the American Modern Orthodox community might succeed in addressing its manpower shortage in a variety of ways. Still, as noted, other issues may rear their heads, and affect the long-term strength of American Modern Orthodoxy. Modern Orthodoxy requires not only talented professionals for its institutions, but also ideological leaders, institution-builders, agenda-setters, poskim, visionaries, and spokespeople. Certain individuals may be particularly influential and important in these roles. The aliya of one such a person may have a wide impact.<sup>27</sup> Are people who could serve these roles for the American Modern Orthodox community failing to do so because they have moved to Israel?

There may be another related phenomenon. Olim may continue to play a leadership role in the American community even after they have moved. As technological advances allow for easy international communication, and as American Modern Orthodox youth spend some of their most formative educational experiences in Israel, the community may discover that some of its leaders are, in fact, no longer living in North America. Some Modern Orthodox laypeople may turn to their "*rebbeim*," their teachers from Israel, for guidance,

advice, and halakhic decisions.<sup>28</sup> Olim may have an impact through Israeli institutions that service Diaspora communities, like Bar-Ilan University's Lookstein Center or ATID, and olim may have a growing say about American Orthodox affairs, by way of publications, interpersonal communication, or *pesak* (halakhic decision).<sup>29</sup> Sarna is concerned that a shift in the geographic location of American Orthodox leaders could lead to problems.

Perhaps Sarna exaggerates the problem. It is possible, and even likely, that on the ground – inside schools, synagogues, and communities – leadership is still provided overwhelmingly by locals. It is also possible that the problem is more serious, but that the same advances in communication and travel that have allowed olim to be so involved in North American Jewish life are also the solution. The global village will shrink the world so much that the location of someone's home will matter little in his or her ability to serve as a leader for a community somewhere else. But it is also possible that geography will still matter a great deal. Those of us living in Israel may find ourselves with less and less of an understanding of the dynamics of the community from which we came, and still retain a significant voice in that community.

Obviously, I am an advocate of open communication. American Orthodoxy has a great deal to learn from those in Israel, both because olim may have intelligent things to say to Americans, and because the eyes of an outsider can often provide helpful perspective. But, as Sarna points out, a community that relies too much on imported goods for its cultural capital may find itself in trouble. I have no idea when the point of "too much" is reached, and how close the community might be to that point. I feel even less qualified to predict precisely what consequences it might have if "too much" is reached, but there may be challenges along the way.

Thank God, the American Modern Orthodox community is blessed with many extremely talented and well respected educators and leaders. Certainly, there are individual olim who have become institution-builders, visionaries, ideologues, and leaders in Israel, probably at the expense of similar roles they might have played in America. And there are those who remain in America but continue

to turn to Israel for leadership and guidance. Under these circumstances, is Sarna correct? Are there any signs that American Modern Orthodoxy is in fact suffering from a lack of leadership? The extent of these phenomena is very difficult to evaluate, which makes it that much more difficult to predict what impact they might have. At one level, as in the case of staffing, solutions might lie in developing the talent that is in America, but which is underdeveloped. (One obvious example involves removing the glass ceiling that can exclude women from positions of leadership.) There are things that the community can do to help people become leaders, and there are at least some institutions in place in the Jewish community that are trying to do so.

Yet, at another level these challenges – if they indeed emerge as serious problems – are part of the larger paradox of American Modern Orthodoxy as a religious Zionist community in the Diaspora. American Modern Orthodoxy teaches and preaches about *Eretz Israel* and the accomplishments of modern Zionism, and struggles to inform itself and its students about Israeli reality. It collectively identifies the centrality of Eretz Israel and Medinat Israel. It is communally dedicated to supporting and visiting Israel, and celebrates the aliya of the minority who choose that path.

Yet, American Modern Orthodoxy has a great deal invested in the Diaspora. At a purely material and financial level, individuals have jobs and homes; communities have synagogues, schools, and yeshivas; and the movement supports a university as well as other numerous non-profit organizations of all kinds. Most importantly, American Modern Orthodoxy is made up of thousands of individuals who are utterly, completely, and totally American in terms of virtually every meaningful cultural and social parameter.

This is not merely a paradox, irony, or dialectical tension. For the most part, the question of what it means to be a Diaspora Zionist community is not a central aspect of contemporary Modern Orthodox discourse. R. Shalom Carmy's essay, "A View from the Fleshpots: Exploratory Remarks on a Gilded Galut Existence," may be the exception that proves the rule, in that regard.<sup>30</sup> R. Carmy asks some hard questions about American Modern Orthodoxy's collec-

tive decision to remain in the Diaspora. He attempts to provide an initial theoretical explanation of a valid galut existence, despite his serious misgivings about the potentially apologetic nature of the project and the way in which it might be used to mask an appropriate measure of discomfort. For better or worse, his discussion hardly sparked much discussion and debate. R. Carmy's observation that "the reasons for remaining in galut are more muddled than ideologists assume," is certainly to the point.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, I suspect that in most cases the reasons for remaining in galut are not even muddled. To be muddled, one would have to say something, while intending but failing to be coherent in doing so. For most American Orthodox Jews who remain in the Diaspora, the conversation never starts in earnest, and therefore never gets to the level of muddled. American Modern Orthodox Jews remain in America because they are Americans, and because they are comfortable in the United States. They do not think about what it means to be in exile, because they feel entirely at home. Gerald Blidstein put it well, nearly thirty years ago (at a time when aliya rates were higher than they are today), when he suggested that for most American Jews the topic of Israel is like that of death: "a subject of incessant, indeed compulsive, attention, but both always happen to somebody else."<sup>32</sup>

American Jews are not going to come to Israel *en masse* in the foreseeable future, and, truth be told, it would probably do more harm than good, at least in the short run, if they were to do so. Under these circumstances, American Modern Orthodoxy has yet to address a series of critical questions about the nature of the contemporary Diaspora. The question of when or how Diaspora Jews should criticize Israeli government policy rears its head whenever a given group of American Jews opposes that policy. But that, it seems to me, only scratches the surface of larger issues. Can American Modern Orthodoxy give an accounting to itself of the nature of Diaspora Religious Zionism? What role does that community see for itself, relative to World Jewry, in an age when the secular State of Israel is a living reality? How should we conceptualize the idea of exile, when that exile is voluntary and when one can and does

visit the Holy Land regularly? How does the nature of galut change when it is to be contrasted not with a utopian (and hence largely imagined) *ge-ulah* (redemption), but rather with the contemporary State of Israel with all of its human foibles? If Diaspora Jews over the ages have felt a great measure of alienation from the nations in which they live, how should American Modern Orthodox Jews, who largely lack that alienation, understand their place in America? What do the concepts of location, space, territory, and land mean to American Religious Zionists?<sup>33</sup> I do not have answers to these questions, but they have been at the center of the agenda of modern Jewish and Zionist thought,<sup>34</sup> and are largely absent from contemporary American Modern Orthodox discourse. Addressing these issues can only strengthen the community's ideological and theological base.

Indeed, when *Tradition* recently issued a generally pointed, insightful, and well-received symposium on Rav Soloveitchik's Zionist essay, "*Kol Dodi Dofek*," the discussion largely ignored these seemingly important issues. Several authors pointed out that the title of the essay echoes *Kuzari* 2:24, which describes God knocking, calling on the Babylonian exile to return to the Land. The Khazar king challenges the *Haver*, explaining that the Jewish People "falls short of the duty laid down in your Torah, by not working to reach that place [the Land of Israel], and making it your home in life and death." The *Haver*, unfortunately, finds himself agreeing with the king's critique. The community had not, and still does not, live up to the demand of returning to the Land. Yet, this observation about the title of the Rav's essay did not lead to a sustained reflection in the symposium on the implications of that allusion for the contemporary American Zionist community, and the possibility that that community is failing in the same way as its ancient predecessors. Perhaps American Modern Orthodoxy is, collectively, refusing to don its shoes and robe, leaving God knocking longingly at the door.

Furthermore, the symposium did not address Rav Soloveitchik's role as a Religious Zionist theologian of the first rank who lived in the Diaspora, who did not pursue plans to come to Israel, and who did not publicly encourage his students to come on aliya.

Is there something in his theology to nourish the Religious Zionist experience of “voluntary exiles?” If yes, the American Modern Orthodox community should be working to articulate it. If not, are there other thinkers or positions that might fill such a need?

As Religious Zionists, we cannot, I believe, accept the Zionist tradition of *shelilat hagolah* [negation of the exile], which in the more extreme versions of Brenner and Klatzkin, links the return to the Land of Israel with a stated rejection of the entire rabbinic-exilic tradition and its values. We believe that it is possible to live a real, rich, and spiritually valuable life outside the Land. Furthermore, as committed to Halakhah and *mesorah* [tradition], Modern Orthodoxy revolves around the literary and spiritual contribution of the 2,000 years of exilic Torah. Without that galut, we are orphaned. Yet, acknowledging and celebrating the centrality of the rabbinic tradition that developed in galut is not the same as recommending it for contemporary Jews. Modern Orthodoxy can no more negate the exile than it can agree with Ahad Ha’am or Mordecai Kaplan, for whom Zion was a cultural center to inspire a fuller Jewish life for the majority of *Am Israel* that would remain in the Diaspora. Contemporary Modern Orthodox Jews, in contrast, must address those halakhic and *aggadic* sources that identify dwelling in Israel as a positive commandment at most, and as a spiritual value of the highest order at the very least. I suspect that the lack of serious discussion of the meaning of Diaspora living is related to the difficulty – perhaps impossibility – of arriving at an adequate theory.

Under these circumstances, American Modern Orthodoxy is bound to find some of its most promising talent moving to Israel, and is bound to find some of its members turning to Israel for advice and leadership. There is, it seems to me, no way that American Modern Orthodoxy could have it otherwise, at least given today’s circumstances. As long as Israel remains such a vibrant center of Jewish and Torah life, as long as American Modern Orthodoxy values Zionism, and as long as it has no significant theory to explain its Diaspora existence, some of the most dedicated Modern Orthodox Jews will follow their hearts and minds, and come to Israel.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the first week of August 2006, I sat down to organize my thoughts and write an outline of this developing article. I found myself distracted by an irony that tugged at my conscience. As I sat in my Beit Shemesh home, thoroughly enjoying the unstructured summer that allowed me to work on this and other projects, over a million Israelis were either living in bomb shelters or had fled their homes. Israel was at war, and home was the front. My family and I had pitched in, helping with refugees staying in a local school. But the incongruity between my relaxation and their conditions made me feel decidedly uncomfortable.

Then the phone rang. I had been called in for an emergency draft. I packed my bag and left early in the morning to the emergency induction point. Our unit – a typical group of mixed Ashkenazim and Sephardim, younger and older, religious and secular, immigrants and natives, married and single – was all there. It was good to see “the guys” again, including some older soldiers whom we expected not to return to the unit. Still, there was a palpable sense of fear and concern. In the end, we were assigned a safe and easy task on the home front, with good living conditions and by the standards of things, easy access to home. Hardly a bad stint of reserve duty for me; more difficult and challenging for my wife and children.

It seemed appropriate to begin writing this essay using the primitive tools of pen and paper between shifts of guard duty. Writing under these circumstances has not, I believe, substantively altered my analysis of and attitude toward the challenges that face the American Modern Orthodox community as it watches talented lay leaders, rabbis, and teachers realize the age-old dream of aliya, but I maintain that it does help frame the discussion. Jews belong here in Israel. North American immigrants to Israel make enormous contributions to themselves and to Am Israel, whether as teachers or hi-tech workers, store clerks or government officials, or sitting on a hilltop during reserve duty munching on sunflower seeds and casually spitting the shells on the ground. North American aliya is a blessing, and it is a *zekhut* (privilege) to be part of it. I wish more would join us.

At the periphery of this positive development lie, perhaps, certain challenges for the overwhelming majority of North American Modern Orthodox Jews who have chosen to remain in exile, ignoring the historically unprecedented ease with which they could accomplish what their ancestors only dreamed of. Those challenges are worth discussing and evaluating, but we must not lose sight of the center. I reiterate: whatever soul-searching may be necessary to overcome the aftereffects of leaders' aliya should be doubled and tripled in questioning American Modern Orthodoxy's collective complacency about staying put.

### NOTES

1. Reuven Spolter, "In Search of Leaders," *Jewish Action*, 64:3 (Spring 2004): 38–44 (After a decade of service to the American Jewish community, R. Spolter has recently announced his own aliya plans). Also see Shalom Carmy, "A View from the Fleshpots: Exploratory Remarks on Gilded Galut Existence," in *Israel as a Religious Reality*, ed. Chaim I. Waxman (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1994), 1–42; Jonathan Sarna, "The Future of American Orthodoxy," *Sh'ma* (Feb. 2001), available at <http://www.shma.com/febo1/sarna.htm>.
2. See Yair Sheleg, *The North American Impact on Israeli Orthodoxy* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1999), 3–7.
3. Avi Kay, *Making Themselves Heard: The Impact of North American Olim on Israeli Protest Politics* (New York and Israel: The American Jewish Committee, 1995), and his "Citizens' Rights in Flux: The Influence of American Immigrants to Israel on Modes of Political Activism," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 13:3–4 (Fall 2001): 143–158.
4. See Sheleg (though in places he may overstate his case).
5. On the impact of olim, also see Uzi Rehbun and Chaim I. Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel: A Demographic, Cultural and Political Evaluation," *Israel Studies*, 5:1 (2000): 65–91.
6. Spolter, 41–42.
7. Carmy, 40 and Sarna.
8. Sarna.
9. Sarna.
10. On the whole, Orthodox day-school teachers have more extensive Jewish education, but less extensive university-based teacher training, than do their non-Orthodox counterparts. See Adam Gamoran, et al., *The Teacher's Report* (New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1998), 5–7. Gamoran does not distinguish between different shades within Orthodox education, and it may be that Modern Orthodox teachers more closely resemble their non-Orthodox peers than do haredi teachers.

11. Shaul Kelner, "A Bureau of Labor Statistic for Jewish Education," *Agenda: Jewish Education*, 17 (Spring 2004): 17, available at [www.archive.jesna.org/pdfs/agenda\\_17.pdf](http://www.archive.jesna.org/pdfs/agenda_17.pdf).
12. See Susan L. Rosenblum Shevitz, "Communal Responses to the Teacher Shortage in the North American Supplementary Schools," *Studies in Jewish Education*, 3 (1988): 25–61.
13. Several important works from the 1960s – Alvin I. Schiff, *The Jewish Day School in America* (New York: Jewish Education Committee Press, 1968); Charles Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book*, 66 (1965): 21–97; idem. "The Training of American Rabbis," *American Jewish Year Book*, 68 (1969): 3–112 – have yet to be updated systematically. The emerging works of Adam Ferziger on American Orthodox rabbinic and professional training are beginning to fill the gap. Also see Marvin Schick, *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States* (New York and Jerusalem: Avi Chai, 2000).
14. Richard M. Ingersoll, "The Recurring Myth of Teacher Shortages," *The Teachers College Record*, 99:1 (1997): 41–44, available at <http://www.tcrecord.org>, ID Number: 10602.
15. Editor's introduction to Isa Aron, "Realism as the Key to Excellence in Congregational Education," *Agenda: Jewish Education* 17 (Spring 2004): 9.
16. See Dodi Tobin and Chaim I. Waxman, "Living in Israel, Working in the States: The Transatlantic Commuter," *Jewish Action* (Winter 2005), 44–48.
17. For the statistics from 2006, see Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics press release, available at [www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=200721026](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=200721026). The CBS statistics from previous years can be found in its yearbook. See <http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader>. For statistics and a discussion of aliya rates from the United States during the years 1949–1993, see Chaim I. Waxman, "American Orthodoxy, Zionism and Israel," in Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out? Myth or Fact: The Impact of the "Year in Israel"* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007), 184. The Jewish Agency provides slightly different numbers. See <http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Home/About/Press+Room/Aliyah+Statistics/dec20.htm>. The differences between the CBS and the Jewish Agency numbers cannot be explained merely by the fact that the former is counting immigrants only from the United States, while the later is counting those from all of North America.
18. See above, n. 13. Also see Daniel Zvi Kramer, *The Day Schools and Torah Umesorah* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1984).
19. The impetus for this growth in the research came with The Commission on Jewish Education in North America's report, *A Time to Act* (Lanham, MA, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1990). For a survey of available studies and policy reports, see Shaul Kelner, et al., *Recruiting and Retaining a Professional Work Force for the Jewish Community: A Review of Existing Research* (Waltham, MA: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Fisher-

- Bernstein Institute for Leadership Development in Jewish Philanthropy, Brandeis University, 2004), available at <http://www.cmjs.org/files/RRLR.pdf>.
20. Kelner, et al., 29.
  21. Gamoran et al., 11–16. Gamoran’s study included both Orthodox and non-Orthodox professionals.
  22. Steven Cohen and Susan Wall, *Recruiting and Retaining Senior Personnel in Jewish Education: A Focus Group Study in North America* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Education Committee of the Jewish Agency, 1987): 20–27.
  23. Gamoran et al., 11.
  24. Ingersoll, “Myth.”
  25. See his, “Judaism in Culture: Beyond the Bifurcation of *Torah* and *Madda*,” *The Edah Journal*, 4:1 (Iyyar, 2004): 10–11.
  26. Samuel Heilman, “Inside the Jewish School,” in *What We Know About Jewish Education* ed. Stuart Kellman (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1992): 321, emphasis mine. Heilman, in this particular passage, may be overstating the conservative role of schools in reproducing culture, and may be underestimating their transformative roles.
  27. There has, for example, been some speculation about what impact it might have had had the Rav been elected as Israeli Chief Rabbi. See Jeffrey Saks, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and the Chief Rabbinate: Biographical Notes (1959–1960),” *BDD*, 17 (September 2006): 66–67.
  28. Some one-year programs in Israel may, inadvertently, exacerbate this problem. In their enthusiasm to establish personal relationships between students and staff, some of these programs send subtle messages to students that their year in yeshiva is the peak of their spiritual lives and that their teachers from Israel may be the best qualified to offer them spiritual advice into the future. This can, in some cases, create an unhealthy dependence on Israeli teachers, at the expense of indigenous American religious leadership.
  29. This challenge is reflected in the irony of having R. Aharon Lichtenstein address the topic of “Being a Religious Zionist in the Diaspora” in this volume. Despite having lived in Israel for decades, R. Lichtenstein is rightly considered one of the most important rabbinic and halakhic voices in contemporary American Modern Orthodoxy, and is rightly considered uniquely qualified to comment on the situation of the Diaspora community.
  30. Carmy, “A View from the Fleshpots.” Also see R. Lichtenstein’s contribution to this volume, as well as Jonathan Sacks, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? Jewish Continuity and How to Achieve It* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1994), Chap. 8.
  31. Carmy, “A View from the Fleshpots,” 6.
  32. Gerald Blidstein, “America’s Jews and Israel,” *Tradition*, 18:1 (1979): 9.
  33. In Israel, there is extensive discourse surrounding questions of land and location. The nature of the Land’s sanctity, the value of settlement in the Greater Land of Israel, and the need for religious presence in locations such as largely secular Tel

Aviv and in struggling development towns are all subjects of extensive conversation.

34. Arnold M. Eisen, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflections on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).