Reinventing tradition

Peggy Cidor

Secular batei midrash are becoming ever more popular as Israelis of all streams.

By Ariel Jerozolimski

Jews hurrying to the beit midrash, a Gemara book under their arm, is perhaps one of the defining images of our shared history as a people over the centuries. In recent years, however, there has been some change to the traditional picture that we might envision. In addition to the figure of the yeshiva student attired in black, some rather unusual characters can be seen entering the house of learning - non-religious men and even women. Look outside tonight, the eve of Shavuot, and you will see Israelis of all streams - Orthodox, Conservative, traditional, secular, men and women, young and old - rushing after the festive meal to study Torah or at least to hear a lecture on the interpretation of some Jewish text or other. And the traditional *tikkun leyl Shavuot* is not the only occasion. For the last 20 years, a new approach to Torah study has allowed people who previously had no foothold in this area to partake. Behind what appears to be a never-ending trend seems to lie a real urge to reach out to the ancient sacred texts, which had been, at least until recent years, the exclusive domain of religious men. No more, however. Clearly, some deep change is taking place in Israeli society, which sees in the Talmud something that should be accessible for everyone. Today, there are 100 pluralistic - or liberal - batei midrash across the country, a few of them in Jerusalem, where the first one, Elul, was created 20 years ago; but the bulk of them are in the Tel Aviv region, with a few scattered in the north and the south of the country. "I think the first time a need to approach the Jewish texts was felt was immediately after the Six Day War. In the famous book *The Seventh Day*, a collection of interviews with demobilized soldiers from kibbutzim, the leaders of the kibbutz movement realized that their youth had no roots and no knowledge about Jewish texts, as compared to young soldiers who came from the religious Zionist movements, and that ignorance had reached an embarrassing level. So a group of them, some of whom had knowledge in Talmud,

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PEGGY CIDOR

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decided to do something. They created the Institute for Jewish Studies at Oranim College, recalls Dr. Ruth Calderon, the founder of Elul. "I was just finishing my army duty, and I enrolled in Oranim, from where I later graduated," she recalls. "I have always felt a strong attraction to the Jewish texts and roots. In my family - my father was from Bulgaria and my mother from Germany - we were not observant, but it was a real warm Jewish home, and that's what I took with me. I do not use the term 'secular.' For me there is no such thing as far as Jews are concerned. At home we didn't make this distinction nor did we talk in terms of Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and that's how I see it till now. I felt attracted and wanted very much to study the Talmud, so I went to the Hebrew University and enrolled in the Talmud faculty, where I was the only non-religious woman among many bearded religious men." A few years later Calderon, who obtained her PhD in Talmud studies, created the Elul beit midrash in the Katamon neighborhood with her friend Moti Bar-On, who is modern Orthodox. It was an immediate success. "Once we took care of the ignorance, the lack of knowledge, it was time to respond to the need to experience a real meeting, a real encounter. We had to create a new and open space, free from the limits of the kibbutz movement's ideology from one side and the religious limits that existed in traditional religious places of learning. That's how and why Elul was created. It answered a real need, since we all know that 'wisdom cannot live in a closed place,'" she says. For Shlomi Perlmutter, things started long before studying in pluralistic batei midrash became his way of life. "Ever since I was a child, born in a secular kibbutz, I remember asking myself philosophical questions like What is this world? Is there a God? or Why did my parents, secular people, choose to come to live in Israel? What does it mean to be Jewish when you're not observant? What is the meaning of Eretz Yisrael, especially if you're not religious? I came to Jerusalem to study philosophy at the Hebrew University, and as soon as I heard about Elul, I joined." For Perlmutter, the encounter with Elul and the studying of Talmud with religious and non-religious people was the perfect place to keep on asking his questions. There he also met his wife, Efrat, an Orthodox woman. Today this family - they have four children - could serve as a highly motivating example of what it means to share Jewish values beyond the framework of religious definitions. At the Perlmutters', Shabbat is observed, but it is Efrat's duty to make the ritual Kiddush. "During the first year at Elul, I wrote an essay, which I called, with some irony, 'Torat Hakabbala.' I, of course, didn't mean to talk about the esoteric wisdom known by that name, but I was trying to prepare the way for what I learned from my encounters at Elul: what one receives and gives, what is possible to accept (*kabbala* in Hebrew), how you receive and what you do with it and the use you make of it. And the next stage was, of course, 'a guide to practical Kabbala,' which is in fact the story of my marriage with Efrat and also the accomplishment of what we both believed in," he says. While the need for secular people to read the Talmud to preserve a natural link to their Jewish roots may be relatively easy to understand, the question of what religious people, used to the high level of the traditional Talmudic schools, look for in these pluralistic batei midrash is a little more complicated. "First of all, we have to remember

they are a minority," says David Liberman, head of the Kolot beit midrash, a local institution created a few years after Elul by Moti Bar-Or. "Most religious people - and we're talking about the religious Zionists, not the haredim - do not attend these batei midrash, and thus a large part of the religious Zionist establishment doesn't really take this trend too seriously. In the eyes of the religious Zionist establishment, it is not as serious as the Reform movement, for example. My guess is that if it was taken more seriously, some antagonism might emerge. As for those who do come and accept studying with secular people, my understanding is that they are aware of the fact that they come from a relatively closed world and society, at least more than they would like to admit, since the whole idea of religious Zionism is not to be cut off from the rest of the people, including secular, as promoted by Rav Kook. So I would say that those who do come and participate in the learning do it because first of all they are sensitive enough to understand the situation, and they are curious and certainly courageous enough." Ya'acov Oren might be exactly what Liberman had in mind when describing the kind of religious Zionists who attend these pluralistic batei midrash. "For me, the need to meet secular Jews is an important one. In religious Zionism, we do not consider secular people as second-class Jews as you might find in haredi circles. As such, meeting secular Jews, despite all the difficulties it may cause, is of the utmost importance." Oren adds that the importance attributed by religious Zionist society to keeping close contact with all fellow Jews, including and perhaps even especially the non-observant, is something that was already in some way foreseen by Rav Kook. At the beginning of the 20th century he said, "There is much to learn from the secular, and certainly when it comes to mutual respect and the desire to learn, thus creating something true." But it is nevertheless not always easy. "Before I joined a pluralistic beit midrash, I realized that it was not going to be something symmetric. I had to get myself ready for that. And indeed, I was offended several times by the way some of my secular classmates expressed themselves," says Oren. Once, when we were studying the issue of Moses beseeching God not to destroy the people of Israel during their sojourn in the Sinai Desert, someone in the class said something like "Moses came out greater here than God Himself." It was very hard for me to hear that, and although I realized he had no intention of hurting my feelings by talking that way, it was a very painful moment for me." In answer to how he manages to keep attending the beit midrash despite the sometimes harsh encounters, Oren explains that as a rule he approaches the meetings on an intellectual basis, putting aside anything connected to his faith. "This is too intimate and sensitive for me, and if I didn't just decide to put this aspect aside, I doubt if it would have been possible. I know there are others who do not choose that way, and I know it is even harder for them, but I know for sure that if I come to study these texts with secular people from a believer's point of view, I will not be able to establish a real dialogue." Oren cares so much about the opportunity to meet other Israelis who do not observe his religious way of life that he travels once a week all the way from a moshav in Upper Galilee to Jerusalem. And he is not the only one who travels a few hours each time for this special experience. "It is important because we have a shared cultural biography," says Perlmutter, who learns and teaches at Elul and at Kolot. "And for me, it is the culture of my people, a part of me, which has various aspects - the Hebrew language, Eretz Israel, the holidays, great figures from our common history, great characters that I see as models for my own children, for example. Very high values that belong to our people and our history, and these texts - the Talmud, the Torah, the Mishna - what we call today the "Jewish bookshelf" they are the means through which we Jews have always handed down these traditions and values." Studying Torah and Talmud has always been a part of Jewish life throughout the generations. What is happening now is a

new approach. It is not only that non-observant people have decided that these texts are also part of their heritage, but also quite a few yeshiva graduates have decided that it was time for a dialogue with those who have stood outside of the fold for years. In most of the pluralistic batei midrash, a large part of the teachers are still religious, though the number of people who, like Perlmutter, are totally secular in their approach but still totally "at home" with the sacred texts is increasing. Regarding the question of how far this new approach is changing something deep within Israeli society, the positions differ. Bar-Or has shared with his students his disappointment that such changes have yet to materialize. But Calderon feels that things are on the move. "I don't think the goal is to reach the masses," she says. "If you compare it to what happened in the haredi world, where they decided to open their yeshivot to anyone, I think they are paying a price for it. Yes, this is absolutely aimed at some elite, and for me the first to reach are those who hold in their hands the face of Israeli culture in all its aspects: in the media, theaters, music, dance, literature and so on. It is them who I want to reach, to touch with the beauty of the Texts, and this is happening, in Tel Aviv, since the cultural scene is located mostly there. We also want to reach the politicians. Next week we are organizing a study session at the Knesset. But we don't really need to be everywhere, in small remote places. Remember the great yeshivot in Europe before World War II? If you were good enough, you went to Volozhin Yeshiva, since Volozhin was not to be found in every shtetl." One thing is surely shared by all: The pluralistic batei midrash are not intended to encourage any process of repentance or return to religion. "This is absolutely not our aim," says Calderon. "Sometimes people come and they are somewhat suspicious on this issue, but they quickly realize that this is not our goal and nothing is done to encourage it." "The aim of the batei midrash is to turn a polemic or a dispute into a dilemma for your own self. It is a means to find inside myself the seeds of another possibility I was not aware of before. And it is, of course, the best tool with which to create a real dialogue between us, beyond all the differences, like the differences between the religious and the secular," concludes Perlmutter. Hava Pinhas-Cohen, a poet and longtime participant in Elul and Kolot, says, "These batei midrash are the best way to pass down to the next generations our cultural legacy. It is also the best way to ensure that we will have a cultural renewal in the State of Israel."

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