

## Secular Synagogues Take Root in Israel

A new kind of spiritual community blossoms

BY PAULA JACOBS    JANUARY 10, 2020



BAR MITZVAH SERVICE AT BEIT TEFILAH ISRAELI, PHOTO: NETHANEL TOBIAS

Sigal Korenhendler spent years searching for a deeper spiritual connection to Judaism—beyond Friday night candlelighting, Kiddush, and other rituals she had learned in her Haifa childhood home. While some of her secular Israeli friends found personal fulfillment in Orthodox Judaism such as Breslov and Vizhnitz Hasidism, she sought a path compatible with her own secular, egalitarian values.

In the mid-1990s, Korenhendler began studying Jewish texts at Beit Midrash Elul, an egalitarian learning initiative that engages Israeli Jews of diverse backgrounds in text study and dialogue programs. “When I read the passage in the Midrash Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 34, “The voices of five [objects of creation] go from one end of the world to the other, and

their voices are inaudible,' I felt it was directly speaking to me," she said.

Seeking an uplifting prayer experience, the Tel Aviv resident began attending services at different local synagogues. In 2004, she heard about Beit Tefilah Israeli, a secular congregation in the heart of the city. "I was attracted by the songs and the amazing siddur that includes both traditional Jewish prayers and texts from modern Hebrew literature," said Korenhendler. "The integration of the old and new speaks to my identity as an Israeli Jew. As a woman, it is very important to me to pray in an egalitarian space."

Unlike the Reform and Conservative movements created in the diaspora, spiritual communities like Beit Tefilah Israeli are indigenous to the Israeli experience, using language that combines both secularity and religiosity—and, importantly, liturgy that reflects Israelis' diverse ethnic and cultural roots, including Sephardi, Mizrachi, and Ashkenazi. They have no particular theological perspective, and are independent rather than part of a denomination or movement.

"A new generation is looking to mix their secularism with a strong sense of Judaism," said Shmuel Rosner, co-author of *#IsraeliJudaism: Portrait of a Cultural Revolution* and senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute. "It is clear by now to most secular Israelis that Jewishness is an important part of Israeli culture and rebelling against all aspects of Judaism is no longer necessary."

Nearly 50% of Israeli Jews self-identify as *hiloni*, or secular, according to JPPI research findings. While earlier generations of secular Israelis rejected rabbinic Judaism, today's secular Israeli Jews are now rediscovering Judaism—but not necessarily the Orthodox shul, with its *mechitza*.

Instead, they want to practice a Judaism that authentically reflects their identity as secular Israeli Jews—without religious coercion and with the freedom to create meaningful prayer experiences. Increasingly, as secular Israeli Jews seek to celebrate their Jewishness, they are attending non-Orthodox shuls and also creating grassroots spiritual communities. For example, 8% of respondents to a survey of Israeli Jews who had attended synagogue in the past year say that they had visited a secular synagogue (like Beit Tefilah Israeli); 8%, Conservative (Masorti); and 6%, Reform. While 52% of respondents say they attended an Orthodox synagogue, there appears a gradual paradigm shift as non-Orthodox forms of worship gain traction.

Some secular congregations are led by rabbis, others by laypersons. Most services are held on Friday nights, and include candlelighting, Kiddush, and a *d'var Torah* on the weekly Torah portion. Depending on the community, the Torah is read for special occasions such as bar/bat mitzvah celebrations, community *Shacharit* services, and Jewish holidays. Twenty years ago, only one such independent community existed in Israel, with barely a minyan. Today, such *Kabbalat* services are regularly held across the country—from small communities in the Galilee to large cities such as Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv.

“Beit Tefilah Israeli reflects a yearning toward a spiritual Jewish-Israeli language, a search for community, and a personal need to fulfill something missing from our lives,” said Rani Jaeger, a faculty member at the Shalom Hartman Institute, ordained by its joint Israeli rabbinic program with Oranim. He co-founded the community with Rabbi Esteban Gottfried, who was ordained at the Hebrew Union College Rabbinical School. Inspired by the creative liturgy from Gottfried’s native Argentina and other innovative initiatives worldwide—and triggered by a visit to Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York City—they decided to create a similar type of spiritual community in Tel Aviv but with a distinctively indigenous Israeli character.

“Beit Tefilah Israeli started as a *havura*, which became a congregation after it grew up a community of engaged participants, which became a broader organization,” explained Gottfried, Beit Tefilah Israeli’s spiritual leader. “Today we try to keep the three levels alive: the organization that brings Israeli Judaism to dozens of thousands every year, a community of engaged Israelis exploring communal Jewish life, and we try to still keep the *havura* or R&D [startup] spirit.”

Beit Tefilah Israeli opened in 2004 at the Alma Cultural Center in central Tel Aviv. These days, it holds Kabbalat Shabbat services at its north Tel Aviv headquarters, High Holiday services at the ZOA House, special events including Sukkot and Simchat Torah activities in its “Grand Sukkah” in the Tel Aviv port, as well as in a variety of venues around the city.

“We have created a language that fuses Israeli layers of culture with text and rituals that work for the new reality of being a Jewish majority in Israel and living in a Jewish state,” said Gottfried, acknowledging that an active Jewish life in Israel requires a different approach from his own Jewish upbringing in Argentina. “We have put together materials that connect the place where the Jewish and Israeli identity merge.”

In creating this new Israeli spiritual (but secular) language, special emphasis is placed on music, with lively singing and instruments accompanying prayer. While the service emphasizes community, it also accommodates the individual; for instance, selections from such Hebrew poets as Yehuda Amichai and Leah Goldberg are included for those who prefer an alternative to the traditional *Amidah* prayer. Its *prayer book* (compiled by Gottfried and based on the creative liturgy already used in the community for several years) includes traditional prayers such as *L’cha Dodi* side by side with iconic Israeli songs and poetry that speak to the heart and soul of even the most secular Israeli Jew such as “*Lu Y’hi*” by Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer and “*Eli, Eli*” by Hannah Szenes. There are also international hits such as Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” and a Hebrew version of “What a Wonderful World,” “*Eize Achla Olam*.”

Prior to *L’cha Dodi*, worshippers are invited to share publicly something from the past week for which they are grateful: The person who wishes to share something stands up amid the rows of seats, gives their name, and tells the reason for their gratitude. During one recent Friday night service, an elderly American visitor brought everyone to tears with an

emotional thank you for fulfilling her life-long dream of visiting Israel. This custom fosters community as does the placement right before L'cha Dodi of Israeli composer Shlomo Gronich's rendition of "*Ilu Finu*" — the *Nishmat* prayer traditionally recited on Shabbat and holiday mornings.

"I love this community because it is egalitarian, is soulful, includes prayers with music, and is very much like Latin American *kehilot*," said Ariel Toro, a Chilean-born musician. He is working to establish a similar community in Be'er Sheva where he now resides, although securing the required permits may be an uphill battle because of Orthodox religious control.

Gottfried strives to make prayer accessible to the wider community: "We emphasize that it is a Jewish spiritual journey which is not incompatible with your liberal, contemporary values. It is inclusive, pluralistic, and noncoercive."

In the summer, Beit Tefilah Israeli meets at different locations, with services led by Rabbis Gottfried and Jaeger, as well as laypersons who have completed the congregation's training course for prayer leaders and musicians. (Korenhendler, for instance, co-leads summer *Kabbalat Shabbat* services at the Herzliya marina.) Since 2007, thousands have participated in Beit Tefilah Israeli's spirited outdoor summer services overlooking the Mediterranean sunset at the Namal or Tel Aviv port, a popular dining/shopping spot and tourist attraction. Other

locations have included Dado Beach in Haifa, the Ramat Gan National Park, schools, army bases, and community centers.

Beit Tefilah Israeli speaks to the quintessential Israeli Judaism, where life in Israel and sacrifices for Israel hold intrinsic meaning: Eighty-five percent of Jewish Israelis say they feel sad on Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day), 94% stand for the sirens, and 58% watch the Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) torch-lighting ceremony on Mt. Herzl, according to #IsraeliJudaism findings.

Beit Tefilah Israeli's *Havdalah* service, "A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance," marks the close of Yom HaZikaron and the transition from sorrow to joy on Yom Ha'atzmaut. It includes the Mourner's Kaddish and other traditional prayers, biblical and rabbinic texts, contemporary readings, and poetry such as Haim Gouri's "*Ha-Reut*" (Friendship) and Natan Alterman's "*Magash HaKesef*" (The Silver Platter) that is chanted with haftarah trope.

While Beit Tefilah Israeli captures the vibrant pulse of urban Tel Aviv, Nigun HaLev reflects its surroundings in the "Emek" or Jezreel Valley, where its members from area moshavim, kibbutzim, and small towns reside.

Nigun HaLev was founded in 2000 by Rabbi Shay Zarchi with a small group of secular Jews studying Jewish texts at the HaMidrasha in Oranim, an educational center that promotes the renewal of Jewish life in Israel. The goal was to renew a Jewish way of life for all ages. "We felt that study alone was not sufficient. We wanted a Judaism that was less intellectual but with more *lev* [heart] and *nigun* [melody]," said Zarchi.

For secular Israeli Jews like Yair Hammer, Judaism had always meant Orthodoxy. Twenty years ago, though, while attending a Jewish leadership conference in Washington, D.C., he learned otherwise. “There were nine different *Kabbalat Shabbat* minyanim. It was the first time I understood that you could choose, not like in Israel where it’s black and white,” said Hammer, a co-founder of Nigun HaLev and third-generation resident of Moshav Nahalal, the first workers’ cooperative agricultural settlement in Israel. “It’s very important that we are now providing an option to live a Jewish life as people choose, with or without a kippa.”

Weekly musical *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, inspired by B’nai Jeshurun, include singing, dancing, meditation, *divrei Torah*, and bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies. Women regularly chant from the community’s Torah scroll, although early on some members objected to using a *Sefer Torah* as “too religious.”

In honor of Nigun HaLev’s “*Emek*” roots, Shabbat songs include: “*Shir Ha-Emek*,” “*Yarda HaShabbat*,” and the poetry of Fania Bergstein.

The community also engages in coexistence projects with local Muslim communities, and volunteers with refugee and special-needs children. “One of the nice things about us is that we create a spiritual space for those from a secular community,” said Rabbi Leora Ezrachi, the community’s spiritual leader. “We give our members a chance to breathe, a place to come, and make our own dreams.”

Some secular communities are grassroots, lay-led initiatives founded as pluralistic alternatives to Orthodox shuls. Kehilat

Ma'ayan Gan Yavne in Gan Yavne, which recently celebrated its bat mitzvah year, holds biweekly Shabbat services led by adult and teen volunteers as well as holiday services, bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, and special youth programming.

In Modi'in, Kehila Yisraelit b'Moriah was established to give secular Jews in the Moriah neighborhood a way to meet each other and feel a sense of belonging, according to Orly Broide Shakuri, who co-founded the community with eight local residents six years ago. "People want meaning in their lives outside of work and home," she said. "They are searching to connect their Jewish-Israeli identity and to celebrate together Shabbat and holidays."

Its first *Kabbalat* service attracted 200 attendees, with many young families. Lay-led services include *divrei Torah*, Israeli songs, guitar playing, and children's activities. There are also family holiday programs such as Tu B'Shevat hikes and Hanukkah candlelighting in a local archaeology park.

Jewish learning is emphasized. Adults are learning more about Judaism, while also teaching their children. Even members without a Torah study background now deliver *divrei Torah*. "It's important to make Judaism alive, according to Israeli Judaism, in contrast to the extremes happening here in Israel, and for people to have a moderate, pluralistic Judaism," emphasized Broide Shakuri.

While these spiritual communities want to maintain their independence, rapid growth is somewhat hampered by lack of formal support systems like the Reform and Conservative

movements—although some larger communities belong to Panim, an Israeli-Judaism loose umbrella network.

The Beit Midrash Program for Israeli rabbis—a partnership between the Hartman Institute and HaMidrasha at Oranim—aims to fill this gap by training pluralistic spiritual leaders from all streams of Judaism to lead emerging communities. “It was founded out of the understanding that many Israelis don’t see themselves as Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox or *hiloni*,” explained Zarchi, a program director.

Meanwhile, secular Israelis seek non-Orthodox bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, weddings, and other lifecycle events—generally as nonmembers on a “pay-per-service” basis. Annually, the Reform movement conducts approximately 500 weddings and 2,000 bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies in Israel; the Conservative movement, 250 weddings and 1,200 bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, reports the “Rising Streams” study of Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel. “There is a revolution of pluralism in Israel,” said Meir Azari, senior rabbi of Beit Daniel, a Reform synagogue in Tel Aviv, where 240 bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies and 90 weddings take place annually. (Although these non-Orthodox weddings aren’t officially recognized, some Israelis who’ve had civil ceremonies in Cyprus and elsewhere also want a rabbi to officiate at a religious ceremony in Israel for their friends and family.)

Today Israeli Judaism is creating a new Israeli culture where Jewishness and Israeli-ness are closely intertwined, and secular Jews can choose from multiple paths to Judaism without relinquishing their core identity. Rosner summed up

the trend: “What we see now is the beginning of a long process. A more coherent yet varied type of Judaism will emerge in Israel.”