ISRAELISM
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As some of you know I was in Israel two weeks ago for the annual convention of Reform Rabbis from across North America, Israel and Europe. It was a powerful and fascinating trip.

We met with PM Netanyahu, nearly two dozen leaders of the Knesset, we heard from scholars, toured and experienced new Israeli centers of learning and technology, met with leaders and activists on all sides of the religious and political discourse that overlays everything that happens in modern Israel and of course explored ancient archeological sites and biblical narratives.

It was a historic trip because for the first time we worshiped together and read torah at the new Egalitarian Section of the Kotel, all 400 hundred reform rabbis, male, female, transgender. A moment that made not only history but headlines as the Religious Parties in Israel grappled with the reality of a vibrant Reform/Progressive Judaism that is ascending in their midst, and in spite of their attempts to defame and derail our leaders and congregations. We were front page news in Israel and across the Jewish world, though what we were doing – men and women reading Torah together was only news worthy or controversial in Israel.

In the midst of all of this I had a unique, but very Israeli experience on the Friday night of our brief trip. I had Shabbat dinner with a typical secular Israeli family – this too should have made headlines.

One of my best friends from my days as a camp counsellor is an Israeli couple, Gil and Dandy Chadash. Gil is the principal of a progressive K-12 school in the modern Israeli city of Modein, a suburb of both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. His wife Dandy, is an art therapist in the same school system. Two days before I arrived in Israel Gil, Dandy and their two young children had just returned from a 6-month sabbatical in South East Asia where they lived in rural communities and helped to build schools and community centers.

Gil and Dandy are those kind of people, those kinds of Jews – who take their hard earned vacation from work or the army and go out to some impoverished corner of the world and do *tikkun olam* – with their children in tow no less. This was their sh'lichut, their religious mission – though they would be the first to tell you they are not at all religious. Which raises the first of many questions, why did they go?

I was invited to Gil's parent's home for Shabbat dinner with his whole family – the first time they would see their parents, siblings, nieces and nephews in six months.

In so many ways the evening was like any other heart warming family reunion, hugs and kisses, jokes and pictures, stories and catching up.

Gil has three siblings, each is married with children, and his parents home was full of action, movement and mounts of food.

We sat down for Shabbat dinner, I wore the only yarmulke in the home and Hannah – Gil's mother was self conscious having a rabbi at their table. It was a first in the history of the family. Hannah lit two candles but did not say a blessing. Yaakov, Gil's father raised a wine glass, not a Kiddush cup and said *borey prei hagafen*, and we drank delicious Israeli wine. There was homemade challah on the table, which was passed around without a motzi. And every one exchanged greeting of Shabbat Shalom.

Out came the chicken soup, with the requisite Israeli soup nuts, little croutons that are a staple at every meal. Then came the shrimp in red sauce, chicken, potatoes, salads and brisket – all followed by ice cream and a chocolate cake. In cased you missed it – this was not a kosher meal.

Everything was in Hebrew, and the conversation ranged from Gil and Dandy's travels in Vietnam – to a heated debate about the headlines in the paper over why women felt they needed to read torah or wear a tallit at the western wall.

I was defending the progressive women, and Gil's sister, who by her own admission has never been in a synagogue and sees no need to ever enter one was defending the orthodox rabbis who want to prohibit such rituals when performed by women. The Judaism she doesn't practice apparently is orthodox Judaism.

Then her older brother chimes in from the other end of the table, he and his family have been going to the Old Tel Aviv Port of Friday nights and singing songs to welcome Shabbat with a reform/progressive community that gathers there every week.

There are drums and guitars and women singing words from the torah and the siddur. He says it touches something inside him, has stirred a part of his identity that is both Jewish and Israeli. Gil then answers my questions from before. He says in Hebrew "budiuk – exactly". I say, "mah budiuk? What exactly?" He replies, "that's why we went to Vietnam to build schools, its what we do as Jews and as Israelis." His brother says that's why he goes to the Old Port to sing songs for kabbalat Shabbat.

In that moment he clarifies something we so often forget – the two identities Jew and Israeli are for many separate and distinct from each other. That he and his brother have found a way to bridge them is significant.

It was such interesting and enlightening experience to participate in a typical Israeli family Shabbat dinner and as we drove one more question lingered. As I contemplated the Shabbat dinner without blessings, the defense of the orthodoxy by a secular Israeli and the embrace of progressive Judaism and tikkun olam also by a secular Israelis, the question that would not leave me was:

Why aren't Israelis more Jewish?

Of course I realize it all depends on what one means by "Jewish."

But the inescapable bottom line is that Israeli Jews are not like North American Jews.

In case we needed more evidence to support that observation - this week, the Pew Center released its study on Israeli Jewish identity. The survey was conducted in-person with 5,601 Israeli adults. It revealed a very complex portrait of what it means to be Jewish in Israel.

Israeli Jews do Jewish differently.

In Israel, Judaism is tribal: secular, traditional, Religious-Zionist, and Haredi (a.k.a. "black hats.").

Where in North America our movements easily comingle and collaborate with each other, some of us in Vancouver belong to multiple congregations up and down Oak street. in Israel each of these four tribes is very distinct and segregated from the other.

Let's take secular Israeli Jews. They are involved in Jewish ritual — more than their secular American Jewish counterparts, but they don't see it as religious, they see these ritual as culturally Jewish. Shabbat is an Israeli holiday, not a religious holiday.

Only 2% of secular Israelis say that religion is important in their lives.

60 percent say they never go to synagogue.

They are more secular than secular North American Jews, but they are so Jewish.

Why is that?

In part you can blame it on Israel's founders. They were anti-religious. They were fleeing from an overly passive Diaspora Judaism and an overly oppressive *shtel* Judaism ruled by rabbis and yeshivas. The purpose of Zionism was to build a new Jew, a tough Jew, bronzed by the sun, hardened by the toil of making the desert bloom.

The new Jew of Israel, the secular Jew that makes up 40% of the population doesn't need the synagogue. The land itself is one big synagogue, mitzvoth and civil law are interchangeable.

Stores are closed on Shabbat. Buses don't run. Most restaurants are closed. Jewish holidays are national holidays. You have to make an effort to <u>not</u> eat kosher – and many, like Gild parents with their shrimp in tomato sauce will make that effort because Judaism is not their religion it's their culture.

By contrast, North American Jews have a “religion,” our culture is Canadian or Americanism – our religion is Judaism. If we want to feel Jewish we have to do Jewish, and the only Jewish doing is along the spectrum of religion, found essentially somewhere along Oak street.

It wasn;t always this way, America too had its period of cultural but not religious Judaism. It was the old socialist/leftist values that see Judaism through the lens of the prophetic imperative to repair the world. We used to call this yiddishkeit. Today we call it Bernie Sanders Judaism

There is a very old Israeli joke that reflect this yidshishy Judaism that is I think the origin of Israeli and North American Jewish secularism.

A woman is on a bus with her grandson. She is speaking Yiddish. A younger man overhears, turns to her and says, "Madam, this is Israel. You can speak Hebrew to him." She replies, "Yes. But I don't want him to forget he's Jewish."

In Israel amongst the non-orthodox Jewish is a cultural identity not a religious one.

But this is changing, it changed right before my eyes at the Shabbat table – and that was what was so interesting.

The Pew study found that 8% of Israeli society is Haredi, or Ultra Orthodox, but another study found that 7.5%, nearly the same percentage of Israelis are Reform or Conservative. This is good and bad. Israeli Jewish identity is becoming more religious - secularism is slowly diminishing, but the society is becoming more polarized by religion.

Just as the religious take over neighborhoods, cultural standards and civil society, Israeli cultural Judaism is slowing evolving to embrace North American Progressive Jewish modes of expression.

Secular Israelis are now saying: “Jewish tradition and texts belong to all of us.” Popular musicians are adapting piyyutim — sacred Jewish poems; it has become a minor Israeli cultural obsession.

On Shabbat, throngs gather to celebrate at the old train station in Jerusalem and at the port in Tel Aviv. And yes Israeli women are demanding the right to read from the Torah at the Kotel – a place and a right they had no use for a generation ago.

And so back to our Shabbat dinner. The conversation was a microcosm of the shifting Jewish identity of modern Israel and North American Judaism. And it is a very important conversation that needs to take place, a conversation that Reform Judaism has started.

Its important because in the next generation, given demographic trends, there will be only two Jewish communities of any real significance in the world — North America and Israel.

I know that our focus is often on, and perhaps singularly on Israel's existential threats, as Ari Shavit wrote this week, "People prefer to address the brawl with the Palestinians and the quarrel over the occupation and ignore questions of identity and issues of symbolic importance. [We] couldn't be making a bigger mistake. Precisely because of the external challenges [Israel faced] we must find a way to manage the internal controversies – intelligently and responsibly.

Maybe it can begin and end with a Shabbat dinner? We cannot become strangers to each other. Both communities need to listen to each other, speak to each other, learn from each other, and live with each other. The model for that is North American Jewish community, and it is perhaps the greatest export and most important contribution we can make to Israeli society today, and it begins like all things Jewish with food.