

SHABBAT YAḤAD: AFTER TEN YEARS

By *PENINA PELI*

(With this issue, we are initiating a series of articles describing various experiments in religious life in Israel. We have asked Penina Peli who, together with her husband, Rabbi Pinhas H. Peli, was among the founding members of Shabbat Yaḥad, to describe its purpose and experience. [Ed.]

Ten years ago, during the cold and dreary winter following the Yom Kippur War, Israel was recovering from yet another bad blow. Spirits were scarred; much of the country's resources had been drained; not to mention the open wounds of those who had suffered personal losses. Against this background, a project known as Shabbat Yaḥad was launched, whose purpose was to offer a new kind of communal experience in a dynamic Jewish environment. By tapping the great storehouse of the Jewish heritage, resources could be found that would be invaluable in strengthening and revitalizing its spiritual existence.

In creating this first retreat program of its kind in Israel, one of the founding members of Shabbat Yaḥad was particularly inspired by the teaching of his late mentor, Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1972), whose ideas and contemporary insights into Judaism had returned many to its fold. Heschel's book on the Sabbath imbued it with new meaning for modern man. Unfortunately, his work was still unknown on the Israel scene. Instead, Judaism was frequently presented as a mechanical pattern of observance, or else consciously ignored because of its

Mrs. Penina Peli, a writer and teacher of Judaism living in Jerusalem, is Programming Director of Shabbat Yaḥad.

supposed rigidity, having been rejected by the generation of the builders of modern Israel, who saw it as restricting healthy, expansive growth. Many felt that the time had now come to understand and redefine their true identity by becoming more closely acquainted with the nature of Jewish tradition, enabling them to work towards forming a nation reflecting its highest goals.

The first Shabbat Yaḥad retreat, held in the aftermath of the 1973 war, erased many of our worst doubts as to whether the barriers between various groups in Israel could be transcended in the name of ideals aimed at unifying rather than accentuating differences. The prospect of bringing religious and secular Jews together to share a Shabbat experience seemed out of the question. It was argued that the religious Jews would demand that there be clearly stated, accepted norms of observance, and that the secularists could not possibly tolerate the strictures of a traditional Sabbath. In addition, we were warned that Israelis were generally reserved in expressing their inner selves, while Americans, who were more open, thrived only in English-speaking settings. Yet remarkably enough, from the very outset friction based upon religious or other differences never disturbed the prevailing mood of good-will, which was manifest at all subsequent Shabbat Yaḥad gatherings as well.

Looking back at that first Shabbat, it still seems as though a minor miracle occurred. When the appointed date arrived, a cold chill had settled over the snow-covered Jerusalem hills, lending a sense of grey despair to everything around us. Yet, inexplicably, those who had expressed interest in the scheme showed up that afternoon with their friends and families and, amidst the excitement of registration at the scenic resort outside Jerusalem, the sun suddenly emerged, shedding a warm glow over the entire scene. Candle lighting took place that evening in an atmosphere charged with expectation, and the blessings of the Shabbat never seemed more in evidence as when they radiated among the group gathered there to welcome its presence in prayer, song and hope.

Over the years, the Shabbat Yaḥad program has dealt with topics of interest from within the Jewish tradition, such as: the Challenge of Peace; Women in Judaism; the Sabbath and its meaning for modern man; the Maharal of Prague: Philosopher and Mystic; 100 years of Jewish settlement in Eretz-Yisrael; the ingathering of the exiles; Israel and the nations; and Israel and the Jewish People in the year 2000. To those who have participated while celebrating the Sabbath in a festive atmosphere, sharing mutual concerns and discussing our doubts, it is clear that people committed to a common purpose can join their hearts together. There is a new movement afoot towards imbuing existence with profound meaning, relating positively to the Jewish People's return to its historic homeland. Significantly, a Canadian congregation, Sha'ar Hashamayim of Montreal,

became a live-giving partner to the Shabbat Yaḥad enterprise through the initiative of its rabbi, who sought to create real bonds with the Israeli community. No *yaḥad*, “togetherness” or “community,” is possible without the participation of Jews outside of Israel. Once a year, a group from Shaar Hashamayim Congregation participates in a program held in English, followed by a specially-prepared “Seminar on Wheels” for intense and concentrated study of a specific theme. A striking example of this was the seminar on the Arab-Israel Relationship held in November 1977, featuring among the speakers a Moslem municipal leader and a Palestinian journalist from East Jerusalem, followed by visits to Arab towns and to the Good Fence on the Lebanese border, established by the late Major Sa’ad Haddad, which for years has enabled tens of thousands of Lebanese to receive hospital care and other forms of aid in Israel.

An unexpected feature of the Shabbat Yaḥad program has been the active participation of Christians eager to study, observe and to experience authentic Jewish tradition, as well as to become acquainted with Israelis on a personal level. This has enriched the Shabbat Yaḥad program in many ways, adding another dimension to the self-understanding of the Jews of Israel. Catholic personalities, Protestants from Nes Ammim, and the irrepressible members of the Japanese Makoya movement have enhanced many a Shabbat Yaḥad. Israel is often misunderstood and over-criticized in a world hyper-sensitive to purported injustices in its backyard. Thus, the presence of these elements provide inestimable encouragement to a people that too often “dwells alone.”

While many other institutions have followed suit in establishing Shabbat programs and other retreats and seminars on Judaism, Shabbat Yaḥad is unique in being at one and the same time committed and open, appealing to a cross-section of people of different ethnic origins, political views and religious orientations. The uniqueness of the community as we conceive it consists in demonstrating the ability of people to appreciate one another in a framework reflecting the worthwhile in the various traditions represented. The kind of destructive self-interest that occurs when a group is heedless of the harm done to its own nation thus disappears when people are given the opportunity to view issues from a broader perspective and are encouraged to cooperate in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

None spoke more eloquently of the cosmic dimensions of the personal and collective fulfillment of Judaism’s vision of a better world than the late Abraham Isaac Hacoheh Kook (d. 1935), the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Palestine:

There is a renewal of the desire in the Jewish people as a whole to return to the land, to its own essence, spirit and way of life... Out of the worldly, too, will emerge the holy... Let the bud come forth, let the flower bloom, let the fruit ripen and the whole world will know how the Holy Spirit is speaking in the community of Israel in all the manifestations of its spirit.

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