

Rabbi Brian Fox's talk about NETZER 8/11/2017

Netzer began with a dream. That dream was that one day there would be a Progressive Jewish equivalent of Habonim or Betar.

Coming from Habonim in Auckland, New Zealand, I always defined myself as a Progressive Jewish Zionist; this together with the fact that the shlichim for Habonim came from Israel to New Zealand for a 3 year stint.

There was one shaliach in particular who was outstanding in this role, Shlomo Etzioni, from Perth originally. He was a typical member of the Anglo Jewish community whereby Jewish identity was really Zionist identity with the minutiae of Jewish Law and practice, not really taken seriously. The Jewish philosophy of Zionism struck a chord in me with their attitude of "everything is in your hands; you can achieve everything if you try". Secondly, the Hebrew language, Ivrit became a vehicle whereby our Jewish identities were anchored.

Imagine a little wooden house in the suburbs of Auckland New Zealand, called "Maon" that house had a largish room in the middle and 3-4 bedrooms. Habonim had taken the large room, stripped the carpets so dancing could take place.

Some of the leading names in the New Zealand business world would be pounding the floor with rikudim (Israeli dancing). In the library the shaliach would be running a sicha on Ahad Ha Am or Alef David Gordon or Peretz.

My parents founded the first Progressive shul in New Zealand, in time for my bar mitzvah. One of my earliest experiences is working with the shaliach, Asaf Agin, down on our hands and knees, cleaning the area that was to be our synagogue, clearing sheep droppings from the paddock. A lesson was learned in those days, about hard work.

Then by age 14 I was having a very exciting experience in the Maon - where there was a toaster, a loaf of bread and strawberry jam. My Zionism was secure!

And then there were the camps. Coming from the new temple, this progressive Jew felt a need to take a leadership position particularly with regards kashrut and the running of the services.

So the Liberal Youth Movement was Zionism re-defined. I was associated with Rabbi John Levi, met him first when he visited Auckland, stayed in his home in Melbourne as a teenager, so on ordination in 1972 Dina and I moved to Melbourne to work with him. That was the beginning of Netzer AND Youth Leadership training at Machon in Jerusalem AND ongoing funding for the shlichim.

I was in Bob Zablud's office in Melbourne discussing finances that I needed.

Bob Zablud was the President of the State Zionist Council of Victoria, an orthodox Jew, big and portly.

He picked up the phone, spoke to someone in Polish then said to me "it's going ahead, we'll work out the details. You've got what you wanted." He had phoned Menachem Begin's office. Bob Zablud and Menachem Begin had sat on the same yeshivah bench in Poland.

Meetings for the foundation of a progressive Jewish school in Melbourne started in 1973. The same year that two kids from Temple Youth went to Israel and the same year of the Yom Kippur War.

I think the name Netzer was devised by Danny Schiff and the first Melbourne shaliach Arik Hatzor.

I have learnt 3 truths about any institution:

1. That no one starts a movement or an organization by themselves. Once the idea has been expressed it is no longer your own but is the property of the collaborators.
2. Forces outside of your control may be at play in the founding of any movement or institution.
I have thought long and hard about my so-called founding of King David School, The Emanuel School and Netzer and came to the conclusion that the wave of multiculturalism (as defined as 1 fruit in a bowl of different fruits, each fruit being of equal value). That force of multiculturalism had a powerful effect on me and my collaborators.
3. You never can know what will be the leading Zionist movement in any country at any time. Why Netzer or Habonim are in the ascendancy may or may not be just luck.

I think it is important to recognise our origins prior to Netzer. There was the Temple Beth Israel (TBI) youth council, the meeting of teenagers led by an elderly gentleman who served as the chairman for all meetings - he was a well-meaning, kind amateur and any activity was conducted by youth leaders who could never have foreseen or even imagined what would become a respected life pathway.

At the end of the day Netzer arose because Zionists wanted it to, and what followed were outstanding shlichim and frequently a remarkable madrich.

What of the future?

1. That a corps of Progressive Jewish Zionists will constantly ask the question;
“Does my Progressive Jewish Zionism put an obligation on me to make Aliya?”
2. Can we commit ourselves to the Kibbutz movement in all its manifestations? Kibbutz Lotan for example follows the path of Eco-Zionism and demonstrates the potential of an intentional community committed to sustainability as well as to contemporary challenges. The rationale of Eco-Zionism lies both in political and cultural Zionism.

Can we start to take the Hebrew language (Ivrit) seriously as the building material for continuing Jewish culture? We haven't even started to recognize the powerful effect on Jewish identity of the Jewish language.

“Remember the Rock from which you were hewn.” Isaiah 51