From the cemetery to the study hall (Bet Midrash)

Chaya Rowen Baker

A Random Conversation While Leaving the Cemetery

I recently attended a funeral at the Kibbutz Maale Hachamisha cemetery. Tall, pretty trees grow alongside the cemetery's walkways; birds chirp from the branches and the breathtaking view of the Judean Mountains appears beyond the sadness and loss. The ground is covered with flowers, the graves decorated with greenery. The cemetery resembles hundreds of Jewish cemeteries outside of Israel, in places where space is readily available, where asceticism and stringency do not prevail, nor coat the living – nor the deceased – with stone and cement. Those cemeteries are covered in greenery, abundant with trees and shade. They are serene places that avoid adding discomfort to the already difficult visit. Such a place is the Maale Hachamisha cemetery, with an Israeli twist: it is surrounded by Mediterranean woodland and abundant with Israel's flowers.

While leaving the cemetery, I walked alongside a young man, around 30 years old, who muttered half to himself and half to me, in a belittling tone: 'What a cemetery! It looks like...'

I cut him off and completed the sentence as I understood

The author is the Rabbi of the Ramot Zion conservative congregation in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem. She has a BA in Jewish history and archeology from Hebrew University and an MA magna cum laude in Jewish Studies from the Schechter Institute, with an emphasis on Talmud, Jewish law and philosophy. She lives in French Hill with her husband, Itai, and their three daughters.
it 'a cemetery should!', although that was obviously not how he intended to finish the sentence.

The young man, who disagreed with me, answered: 'Too bad they're dead and can't appreciate it'.

'But the family can', I responded.

'You know', said the man, 'it is written 'The dead praise not the lord, neither any that go down into silence'. The dead body is meaningless, decorating it is unnecessary'

I thought to answer that although the dead body is meaningless, the living family who visits the grave is meaningful, but at that point we had already reached our cars and I had had enough of the conversation that was, in my opinion, disrespectful of the deceased that we had just laid to rest.

**Sanctity and Innovation**

I got into my car with the bitter feeling of disbelief in the ability that we humans have to idealize a bad situation and sanctify it; to tell ourselves that not only is this the way things should be, but also that any attempt to change them or suggest alternatives is a desecration. I regretted the absurd fact that a person leaves a place like this and instead of enjoying the different, though expensive, appearance of this cemetery, as opposed to the depressing state of other cemeteries in Israel, this man went as far as to complain that it was not stern, ugly and neglected, as tradition requires of Jerusalem cemeteries.

Our tendency to sanctify existing situations and justify them in many aspects of our lives, is on one hand a source of comfort and a necessity, especially when we have no control over the situation, but in other cases, when change is possible and desirable, even if challenging, this tendency stifles vision and the suppresses the urge to improve.
In especially sensitive issues such as religious outlook and Jewish identity, this phenomenon is ever stronger. So many of our opinions are guided by our emotions related to these issues, that it sometimes seems that intuition is enough and that there is no need to research and study them. There is no need on the one hand, and there is hesitance on the other hand, as research and study lead to new encounters and challenges which could end up shaking the foundations of our lives – foundations that we are so accustomed to justifying to ourselves.

Such is the world of the individual. But in a society where this is the accepted approach, this type of tendency can be devastating. Each day we witness ignorance and mistaken assumptions with are expressed though emotional, verbal and physical violence. The non-orthodox communities in Israel and to a certain extent the liberal Orthodox community as well, suffer from the consequences of this type of thought. A lack of familiarity with these communities and the misunderstandings about them, along with the mistaken understanding of the evolvement of Jewish law and the different variations of Jewish law throughout the generations, causes other to delegitimize progressive communities in Israel, unlike in other parts of the world where these communities are part of the mainstream. That is why the non-orthodox community in Israel is so highly motivated to overcome ignorance of Judaism, which may lead to a better understanding of their community. Even if it doesn't, it will at least create deeper horror and complete rejection of the ever increasing displays of violence against it which do not receive adequate attention from the press, legislatures, law enforcement bodies or the indifferent public.
Treatment of Non-Orthodox Religion as a Reflection of a Widespread Problem

The problematic state of Jewish education throughout all layers of the population, young and old, is reflected not only in the public attitude toward the non-orthodox community, but also, and possibly especially, in the general Jewish identity crisis in Israel. The secular public has established a love-hate relationship with Jewish tradition and both sides of this coin are a threat to Israel's existence as a Jewish state. On the one hand, it appears that the secular public has long ago given up on its place within Jewish discourse. That sector was never given the tools, or was given only minimal tools to cope with its surrounding environment from a Jewish perspective – both in the public school system and in their parents’ homes, and it seems to them that what Judaism has to offer is archaic, irrelevant and often racist. On the other hand, a significant portion of the secular public feels, from a very deep and irrational place inside them, that the expression of the Judaism that it shies away from is the authentic expression of Judaism and this feeling disgusts them even more. Alienation creates a lack of knowledge, lack of knowledge creates self-exclusion and avoidance of ownership, and these pave the road towards marking the extreme forms of Judaism as authentic, while romanticizing them as we would foreign cultures and identifying 'authentic' with 'anti-modernity'. Thus, the feelings of admiration, if they exist, act to create a distance and lead to a lack of a positive Jewish identity as a result of the inability to find a personal, relevant connection between Judaism and the modern person.

These combined facts have led the members of the Ramot Zion Conservative congregation in the French Hill neighborhood in Jerusalem to open a unique study hall to the public two years ago. The study program has two goals – one is to help the secular Israeli public discover the values of Judaism through study and as a result, expose new perspectives of
Jewish identity, allowing them to find aspects of Jewish tradition that they can relate to and open a window of new thought on Jewish approaches to the world which do not contradict their own perspectives on life. The second goal is to overcome the close-mindedness that we experiences in the Maale Hachamisha cemetery, which causes significant parts of the Israeli population to legitimize only the Judaism that it deems negative or to claim ownership of the truth and reject other perspectives and ways of thought.

We opened our unique study program in the home of the Ramot Zion congregation in French Hill, designated primarily for residents of the northern Jerusalem neighborhoods. The program is called Tzfunot.

**A Different Kind of Study**

When attempting to address the issue of adult education seriously and thoroughly, it is important to recognize the complexity of this issue: adults seemingly do not need to be 'educated' and are not interested in education. Their world views are mature, as are the morals and values. It is very difficult, and sometimes undesirable to convince adults in their forties, fifties or sixties that the truths that they believed in throughout their lives are questionable. Tzfunot is careful to avoid doing so and does not strive towards indoctrination. Tzfunot's goal is to expose the students to new approaches to Judaism which are not addresses by the well-known orthodox institutions who have other ways of coping with the challenges of the modern world. Our assumption is that this type of study will broaden the students' horizons and further their knowledge of Jewish subjects, face them with new challenges, enrich their point of view, help them form a personal connection with Jewish sources and develop their own deep and complex Jewish identities. Tzfunot does not teach viewpoints; it gives tools which each student can use to grow independently.
The variety of topics and different levels of study make the program suitable to people with different interests and backgrounds. It exposes the students to a variety of texts and approaches to studying them, different reading styles and types of commentaries. In addition to the study program itself, the very encounter with Tzfunot's impressive teaching staff opens the students' minds to styles of thought and dialog that are hard to find within the rushed daily routine.

The study program at Tzfunot runs three evening each week. On Monday evenings, the Be’Havruta series is held, in memory of Solomon and Sylvia Bronstein. This series is comprised of small groups studying texts together, combined with moderated study in pairs as well as dialogue. In 2010, the series included the following:

* Talmud study from page one, with Rabbi Shlomo Tucker;

* Different voices of religion and different secularization possibilities in modern Hebrew literature, with Dr. Yael Shenkar;

* Food for thought: Study and creativity with pottery, with Tamar Forman;

* The Jewish movie collection - Bible and film, with Einat Kapach;

* Then your light will break forth like the dawn, with Rabbi Mira Regev;

* Life and Death in the Bible, Midrash, Talmud, literature and modern poetry, with Rabbi Shlomo Fuchs;

* Deuteronomy and its teachings, with Prof. Alexander Rofè;

* At the crossroads – a renewed journey within the weekly torah portion, with Rabbi Chaya Rowen Baker.

On Wednesdays, we run the Shorashim (Roots) series, one of Tzfunot's innovations. Inspired by the successful Me’ah program that
runs in the US, Shorashim invites its students to an all encompassing, sequential review of the history of the Jewish people from its creation until today. The review is given by world renowned, dynamic, fascinating lecturers who are experts in their fields. In four semesters, participants learn of Israel's history from the moment that it came into being, continuing on to the first and then second Temple periods, the end of the ancient times and Jewish history under the rule of the cross and the crescent in Muslim and Christian countries during the Middle Ages. They discuss the changes and revolutions of the modern era in a society that combines tradition with modern culture. Participants learn of the significant events and important literature of each era, fill in information voids and build a strong base of comprehension of the evolvement of Jewish culture throughout the centuries. In 2010, the courses were given by Professor Nili Wazana, Professor Israel Levin, Professor Israel Yuval and Professor Immanuel Etkes.

The secret of Shorashim's success is its ability to maintain the fine balance of filling voids on general knowledge, giving each person the opportunity to form a complete picture of the history of the Jewish nation, while maintaining a high, uncompromising level of study so that even those with prior knowledge have much to gain. Due to the enthusiastic responses to this program, a continued series was offered in 2011 which was devoted to in-depth study of Jewish history in the 20th century in different parts of the world. The course presented a variety of perspectives and was given by leading lecturers in different fields.

On a third evening each week, a series of lectures is given by well-known lecturers on different topics of popular interest and current events from the Jewish cultural perspective. A special series in honor of Tel Aviv's 100th anniversary was given during the first semester and during the second semester, the lectures focused on the transition from
secular political violence to religious political violence, while referring to Muslim and Jewish texts. These short series gave the public a taste of a learning experience that is more anonymous. People can just come to listen without committing to weekly courses for a long period of time. This learning method is more passive, but we maintain it because of our desire to offer learning programs of varied style and frequency in order to attract wider audiences.

**A Community Hosts a Hall of Study**

Some 100 students throng the study hall each week. Close to half of them are members of the Ramot Zion congregation and others come from outside, mostly from Jerusalem's northern neighborhoods. One of the most exciting traits of Tzfunot is the wide variety of students that it attracts. Some claim that they have no prior knowledge of Judaism, other insist on presenting themselves as 'completely secular' and others arrive from all over the religious spectrum – including orthodox people looking for an open and challenging study environment, members of the reform movement and of course, members of the conservative movement who are proud to host this initiative. Encounters and dialogue between different sectors alone create an entire world of study and deliberations. The program is faced with the challenge of bridging differences: between different levels of prior knowledge, different outlooks and different approaches to study. One way of coping with these differences is to divide the participants into groups based in their levels or their interests. Another approach is to recognize that the differences exist and give them their place and significance within heterogeneous groups and making these differences a part of the learning experience.

The combination of a study program open to the public with the framework of a congregation creates interesting situations in itself. Participants who are not members of the congregation discover that
beyond the study program is a Jewish community that is active in all aspects of life. The average Israeli associates the synagogue primarily with prayer, making it seem foreign and irrelevant to anyone who does not pray regularly. In Tzfunot, that same Israeli encounters a Jewish congregation that is more than just a prayer group. It is a support group, a place to share sadness and happiness, a place of intellectual and spiritual activity and a place that strives to make the world a better place. Through this experience, the participant discovers new aspects of active Jewish life and encounters new, modern aspects of Jewish involvement in world events.

Communal adult education minimizes the natural alienation felt is public places such as these. Congregation members want to form relationships and bring people closer, therefore they make every effort to make the visit to their 'home' as pleasant as possible, just as hosts invite guests into their homes. The cooperation between congregation members, who have a deep and long-lasting relationship with each other, and guests each semester is an important challenge for the congregation members and requires openness and consideration.

Our student's typical age groups indicate that those who seek Jewish, adult education desire, above all, undisturbed space in which to conduct their search. Tzfunot's students can be divided into four major age groups:

1. University students, who participate in a designated program for students which includes academic study, inspiring experiences (joint volunteer work, moving Shabbat evening prayers with the Ramot Zion congregation) and social and communal activities
2. Young parents, a group that formed through creative, innovative classes or those that participated in a program specially designed for them.
3. Middle aged adults and parents of high school students
4. Retirees

The members of each of these four groups are at a significant turning point of their lives: choosing a career path and starting a family; changing their status and becoming parents; deep insight as the nest empties; searching for intellectual challenges and enrichment after leaving the workforce. The responses that we get all of the time indicate that Tzfunot offers a place to think, research, deliberate, search and study in ways that participants have never experienced before and helps them fill voids that opened up in their souls triggered by the turning points in their lives.

Wonderful people, like Moshe and Ruti Noam, French Hill residents who are not members of our congregation and insist on stating that their secular identity is clear and established, are an example of people who found Tzfunot to be a defining experience: 'The program that we attended opened the door to an additional spiritual world which was previously inaccessible to us', said Ruti and Moshe, who participated in several of the Be' havruta programs, 'and we are happy and thankful for that'.

Tzfunot is of course not the only institute involved in this field. We have been preceded and are surrounded by other institutions that offer great wisdom, impressive teachers and a healthy approach to dogmatic, Jewish education for adults. We are honored to join these pioneers who we believe will bring positive change to Israeli society, making it smarter, more attentive, creative, tolerant and peaceful. We hope to overcome the approach that says that all that we see around us is as it always was, and is how it always must be.

We suggest taking Rav Kook's famous quote 'The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be sanctified' one step further. We have to be as careful when sanctifying the new as we are about renewing the old. At times, holiness – when stemming from separation and distance –
leads to the inability to renew. If this is the case, we may find ourselves still frozen in another generation or two down the line, just in a different place. What must be renewed is the ability to search: the old will be renewed, as will the new, and study will be sanctified.

**Tzfunot** held by Ramot Zion, 68 Bar Kochva St., French Hill, Jerusalem.

For more details, contact Rabbi Chaya Rowen-Baker, 054-5532393