It is virtually axiomatic that the Reform Jewish Quarterly publishes thoughtful and scholarly articles. This issue includes careful re-readings of passages of Torah (Scott Saulson’s “God Shan’t Blush” and Edward Boraz’s “The Bitter Waters at Marah”), an intriguing translation and commentary on a medieval text that rails against cruelty to animals (Anson Laytner’s “Introducing Iggeret Baalei Hayyim (The Epistle of the Animals)”), a provocative discussion of Judaism and mind-altering drugs (Peter Margolis’s “Digital Judaism”), and an analysis of Jewish influence on early Muslim thought by Reuven Firestone, one of the foremost scholars in the field of Judaism and Islam. I would like, however, as we stand at the gates to this edition of the Journal, to focus my remarks on the cluster of articles that mark the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Zionism vs. Israel

Among Abba Eban’s numerous well-known quips is this one: “Proof positive of life after death is the continued existence of Zionist organizations.” The remark appears to be understandable. Did not the Zionist movement come into being in order to build a Jewish homeland for the Jews? And has not that aim been accomplished? So, what are Zionist organizations doing by insisting on persisting?

Institutions are very resilient. It is not unusual for an organization to keep operating after its initial aims are accomplished simply by establishing new aims. The March of Dimes, started in order to fund a cure for polio, is a very apt example. If we argue that Zionist organizations have simply changed their focus after the founding of the State, then we just move to another question: what is the new focus?

The answer to all these questions, I believe, is that Zionism is both broader and narrower than the establishment of the Jewish State.

A number of important institutions were created in the pre-State years: Keren Kayemet L’Yisrael (The Jewish National Fund), the
World Zionist Organization (WZO), and the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI). All of them have continued operating to this day rather than being absorbed one way or another into the governmental apparatus of the State. Their continued existence is due to the limitations on Israel. In brief, Israel is the Jewish State, but in operational and political terms, the State is not Jewish.

Israel came into existence as the result of an extraordinary effort by dedicated Jews and self-consciously for the sake of Jews. Yet, once established, the State does not encompass all Jews, nor is it limited in population exclusively to Jews. Even more to the point, the Jewish State has citizens who are not, nor will ever be, Jews. There is a clear distinction between being Israeli and Jewish. Zionism, at its heart, is not about Israel, but rather about the relationship of the Jew to Zion.

KK"L, WZO, and JAFI remain in existence, therefore, because Israel, as a political entity devoted to all of its citizens, cannot fairly privilege its Jews. Zionist institutions must carry on that work. And then there is the fraught, complex, and indeterminable "relationship of the Jew to Zion." The three principal terms in this phrase are necessarily vague. What is Zion (Tziyon)—the "marked place"? It is a space on earth, a piece of geography, and not merely an idea or ideal. But what are its borders? Just where does it reside? What do we mean by "Jew"? What is the nature of the relationship? All of these questions are being continuously addressed within Israel and across the Diaspora. The founding of the State was hardly the end of Zionism; in many ways, it was only a new beginning.

In 1977, the North American Reform Movement decided to become formally part of the Zionist project with the founding of ARZA and Kadima (later ARZA Canada). I am pleased to offer in this issue of the RJQ, a series of articles, "ARZA at Forty." Why 1977, fully eighty years after the first World Zionist Congress, and nearly thirty years after Israel’s independence? Michael Satz, in an excerpt from his 2007 rabbinic thesis on the history of ARZA, "The Origins of ARZA," provides the context. (It is worth noting that the Zionist organization of American Conservative Judaism, MERCAZ, was started a year later, responding to the same stimuli.) And why a Reform Zionist organization? Larry Englander ("The Future of Reform Zionism"), writing from the perspective of being the immediate past chair of the overarching international confederation
ARZENU, clearly lays out the significance of Reform Judaism’s participation in the WZO.

The balance of the contributions to this section have been provided by former and current directors of ARZA. Eric Yoffie, Ammiel Hirsch, Andrew Ergas, and Josh Weinberg offer a wide-ranging perspective. In so doing they meditate on my description of Zionism: what is Zion, who is a Jew, and what is the relationship between them? Their approaches are conceptual, political, cultural, and aspirational. They remind us of Reform Zionism’s achievements in its first forty years and the paths that must still be forged.

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As a conclusion, let me offer a few personal remarks. I first traveled to Israel in 1970 as a member of the inaugural class of HUC students who were to spend their initial year of the seminary curriculum in Jerusalem. This decision on the part of the College-Institute was a watershed moment in Reform Jewish history. It represented both an endeavor to insure that from that point forward virtually all of the rabbis ordained in the American Reform Movement would have a direct experience of the Jewish State, and that Reform rabbis were expected to have some facility with Hebrew as a living language (see Andrew Ergas’s article on the subject).

Spending a year in the Jewish State did not make me a Zionist. Indeed, it rather provoked a serious cheshbon hanefesh (self-examination) of just what place a modern secular State had in my developing self-identity as a “Rabbi in Israel.” Much of my experience was off-putting. The extent of Israelis’ ignorance of non-Orthodox Judaism was, for the most part, bottomless. The gap between my developing Jewish religious identity and the reality of living in the Jewish State could hardly be wider.

Israel, its land and its people, nevertheless, had become an inextricable part of my personal and professional life. The events and encounters of the next forty-plus years have only served to reinforce that connection. In my first decade as a rabbi, I worked in Hillel, and thus had the opportunity to forge a warm friendship with Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf. Arnie was at that time the head and chief spokesperson for Breira, an organization that publicly called for direct negotiations between Israel and Palestinian leadership, a radical and intensely controversial notion at the time. His motivation arose from being, in his own words, “an old-fashioned
Zionist.” I came to understand how true this assertion was. Wolf’s Zionism was genuine, historically grounded, and heart-felt. It was my first clear exposure to what it meant to have a Zionist vision that incorporated and transcended the Jewish State.¹

A few decades later, I took the position of being the URJ’s director in Canada. The job came with a concomitant responsibility to be director of ARZA Canada. This work is Zionism in the trenches. I therefore appreciate the contributions to this section on “ARZA at Forty” more than most. In my return to the United States, my Canadian experience brought me on to the Board of ARZA, and a role as one of its representatives to the AZM Board. A few years ago, I was asked by the president to sit on the cabinet, a brain-storming group of sorts that convenes on a monthly basis between quarterly board meetings. Last winter, I was elevated to the position of a vice president.

Israel has become an enduring and important part of my life, work, and personal identity as a Jew. In Spring 2018, I look forward to publishing articles and essays that mark the seventieth anniversary of the State. This issue, however, represents something deeper and more elusive with respect to the Land and its people. Zionism is mostly buried in the conversations—noise—that engage us: on settlements, negotiations, the security wall, the Kotel, conversion, BDS, Iran, and on and on. But Zionism, and particularly its institutions—ARZA and the WZO—is more critical to our hopes and aspirations of “being a free people in Zion and Jerusalem.”

Paul Golomb, Editor

Note

1. Rabbi Wolf, ever a liberal, also conceded his Zionism was hardly the only one. He regularly publicly debated the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League. I asked him why he bothered. He responded that someone needed to do it. It was signal that Kahane’s radicalism had to be opposed not only because it was outrageous, but also because it had to be taken seriously.