A dialogue with Rabbi Wolpe

Masorti Judaism and Israel

by Yizhar Hess

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The first time I heard Rabbi David Wolpe teach was a few years ago in an international convention of Jews, both lay leaders and rabbis, from
all over the world. I remember the topic. It was about Yetziat Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt. Rabbi Wolpe was dealing with the historical and mythological aspects of one of the most formative and fundamental stories of the Jewish people. He has a unique and brave reading of that story. Rabbi Wolpe’s exodus from Egypt is a case study that is not always easy to come to terms with if you had only been taught a literal reading of it. This was not a lecture; it was a lesson given in a brave, scholarly, halachik, humoristic, engaging, poetic, balanced and nuanced manner by a Conservative-Masorti rabbi who teaches passionately about something for which he dedicates his life – traditional Judaism for modern Jews.

I remember how I left the room. I was thinking to myself what Israel would look like if more opportunities for that kind of Judaism were accessible.

As Rabbi Wolpe, one of the leading voices for a pluralistic Israel, is soon to be honored at the National Masorti Gala in Los Angeles on April 11, 2016, I took the opportunity to dialogue with him. 10 short questions, 10 short answers.

**Hess:** When was your first visit to Israel?

**Wolpe:** I first visited Israel with my parents when I was 12 years old.

**H:** What is most “Israeli” in your eyes?

**W:** I don’t believe Israel has a single essence. The Wall, the sea, the Shuk, the startups – they are all Israel to me.

**H:** What would you say are Israel’s two biggest challenges today?

**W:** External enemies and internal dissension. Both are powerful. In addition to being in the midst of hostile nations, there are class and religious divides in Israel that are dangerous to its future.

**H:** How do you see Israel 20 years from now?

**W:** I am an optimist by nature. Things will get better. There is a deep
H: Do you think Jewish pluralism will win the day in Israel?

W: It must. Gradually Israel will realize that the entanglement of synagogue and state is bad for both. Masorti Judaism will not only make Israel stronger, it will make Judaism stronger.

H: How do you see Masorti’s advancement in Israel today?

W: So often Israelis come to the US and have their first experience of pluralistic Judaism. Their reaction, inevitably, is – “If this existed in Israel when I was growing up, I wouldn’t have been so estranged from Judaism.” Now it is here. In schools, in synagogues, Masorti is representing a different model, a powerful one, that engages Israeli minds and hearts.

H: Why does Masorti matter for American Jews?

W: If we care about Israel, we care about its soul as well as its safety. Masorti can help save the soul of modern Israel. It combines the best of who we have been with the best of who we can be. Judaism that should not confine itself behind walls to keep out modernity.

H: How should a caring-involved Jew in North America deal with the frustrating fact that “the only democracy in the world where Jews cannot celebrate freedom of religion is Israel?”

W: By supporting religious pluralism in Israel, Masorti and other groups who seek an open and vibrant Jewish life.

H: Is there a holy moment you most remember from your visits to Israel?

W: I remember many holy moments; one I will choose is seeing the first Ethiopian immigrants in the mid 80’s arrive in Israel. This was the Israel of which we dreamed.

H: If I’m alone in an elevator with Israel’s Prime Minister for 60 seconds, I would tell him what?

W: That he and his government should do more to make the most religiously observant Jews and the state of Israel a cohesive place where they can thrive.
W: I would tell him that his security is lax if they let him get in an elevator alone with someone he barely knows.

*Yizhar Hess is the CEO of the Masorti Movement in Israel*

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