

MY ISRAEL NOTEBOOK

III. Bridge-Building

I returned to my apartment in Jerusalem to find two technicians, who had come to install a telephone, enjoying a coffee break. My wife introduced me to the men, who were partaking of their refreshments bare-headed. "You're religious," said one of them, "so I suppose you resent our eating without *kippot*." "I am religious," I replied, "therefore I have two main worries, in this order: first, that my fellow-man have enough to eat, and second, that he do so properly — kosher, with blessing, and head covered." He was clearly taken aback. Soon he smiled, opened his briefcase, and produced a mini-kippah which he donned, explaining, "In that case, I'm glad to wear one . . ."

This illustrates, to an extent, an insight I gained into Israel's religious situation—its promises and its perplexities. There are many "non-observant" who are ready to return to Torah. But they will not be coerced. They will not be pushed. They want to be invited, gently, to cross over to Torah.

GESHER ("bridge") is attempting to do just that. Its work is geared to introducing Judaism, as it is, without missionizing or overselling, to the non-*dati*. Its beginnings have been small — but its opportunities are great, if we in America will help along.

Following are two excerpts from non-observant participants in seminars conducted by Gesher. The first appeared in a Mapai journal by an adult resident of Kfar Blum.

" . . . But most important was the contact which we had with sensitive religious youth. Young and enthusiastic, keepers of all *mitzvot* both large and small — yet not fanatic or strange, but people searching for a way toward mutual understanding and tolerance — this is what distinguishes them. In our day when it sometimes seems that there is nothing in common between us and religious Jewry, and the abyss which separates us is only widening — it is refreshing to see that there are indeed others. Within religious Jewry there are groups whose members recognize a genuine value in the State, who serve in the armed forces, who settle the country, and observe the *mitzvot* of the Land of Israel with their bodies and souls . . . And yet with all their observance of *mitzvot*, they are trying to understand us, to meet us halfway, to stress that which unifies us rather than that which divides. This is a unique phenomenon among religious Jewry and it seems to me that our youth can also find a common base with it. Suddenly, one becomes aware that much of that which divides us is a product of lack of knowledge, I would almost say outright ignorance, of our extensive traditional literature and values. We have emerged from the week of study enriched . . ."

The second excerpt is from a letter by a teenaged participant in the Gesher seminar held during Sukkot, and which I addressed, at Kfar Etzion:

"This week I felt like a real Jew. At the beginning it was somewhat difficult to rise early for prayer, and to pray three times a day. But I became accustomed to it. I learned to understand my brothers, the *datiim* (religious). I discovered that to be a religious Jew one must sacrifice a lot, and that, perhaps most important, to

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"Bridges" (Cont'd)

be religious is a matter of education. Previously, some sort of invisible barrier separated us. In this week, the barriers between us disappeared completely.

"The seminar brought me close to prayer. Although I did not agree with every point in the debates which my friends and I had with the datim, I believe that we all agreed on the fundamental, crucial point which is the basis of Jewish existence — the presence of One God or One Power in the world.

"This was an experience which words and speech cannot describe, part of something intimate and private, something hidden in the heart of every Jew, which needs only to be awakened. We, our small group of forty students, were awakened — but, it seems to me that my other friends at school could also use this awakening . . ."

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