Of Cultural Deference. A Conversation with Rabbi Tanya Segal, Poland's First Female Rabbi — Warsaw, 12 July 2008

By Rohee Dasgupta

Rabbi Tanya Segal leads the progressive reform congregation Beit Warszawa and is currently engaged in rebuilding the infrastructure for the renewal of progressive Judaism in Poland. She also works as a travelling Rabbi in other cities in Poland, determined to help develop a meaningful dialogue in the revival of Polish-Jewish culture. Rabbi Tanya Segal, the first female Rabbi in the entire history of Poland, shares her life's experiences and work in an interview with Rohee Dasgupta. Beginning as a dramatist and actor in Moscow's Yiddish theatre she talks about the transitions in her own Jewish identity as she 'made *Aliyah*' to Israel for seventeen years and her motivation behind combining education, religion and culture to create value in society.

'I saw a woman on the street whose manner was bizarre
Some people spoke in whispers of her children and Ponar
This is the winter of our souls, the blackest hour of night
But nature's timeless wheel must turn and bring a new day's light
Then there will come another time before your eyes grow old
For us a warmer season when our foes will feel the cold
We'll greet your papa at the door, we'll be a family as before
And you will sing out loud forevermore-forevermore.'

Song by the actor in Yiddish in Sobol's Ghetto, Tamar joins her in English. [Excerpt from Midrash theatre script "And Her Name Was Heather" composed and directed by Rabbi Tanya Segal]

Introduction

Living between cultures with troubled histories is not easy — repressed memory, exilic consciousness and the realisation that all cannot be reduced to any simple reconciliation becomes an obvious consequential overlap. However, when the recollection of what's left behind is understood through art against the counter-point of the current experience, it enriches factuality — as the facts interact with the veneer of the performative to help interpret cultural, political or religious questioning and reinstate ideas of common concern. Such questioning about enduring time with a deep awareness of historicization of the circumstances evokes a renewed contestation for knowledge, imagination and identity in relation to the present condition. Rabbi Tanya Segal, the first female Rabbi in Poland, shares her story of living cultural humanism through her own Jewish identity and work — where art and religion revitalize the politics of identity.

Born in 1957, Tanya Segal was raised in a secular Jewish family in Moscow amidst anti-Semitism and troubled political times. For Tanya, art was a spontaneous medium of

expression and a means to alleviate the discomfort of her present situation. In her twenties she began to work as an actor and singer in the Jewish theatre in Moscow (KEMT). The authorities established the theatre as a substitute for the synagogues and Jewish schools it had closed. Her involvement with the theatre helped Tanya connect with Jewish heritage, the Yiddish language, her Jewish identity and provided the sense of community that was denied to her elsewhere. In the late eighties, she completed her studies at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in stage direction. Although she intended to concentrate on symbolic theatre, her first independent projects were in the field of political satire, strongly criticising her country's domestic and foreign policies. As the artistic director of a cultural centre for youth, she focused on issues that were ignored and attempted to raise social awareness. She also gave performances of Yiddish songs, accompanying herself on the guitar, which she continues till today when leading Sabbath services.

Tanya made Aliyah[1] to Israel together with her son Benyamin in 1990. There she primarily worked in three areas — culture, the translation of books on Jewish themes from Russian to Hebrew, and teaching theatre. In 1997-8 she appeared in a one-woman show entitled "The Dybbuk." The play reflected her ongoing search for Jewish identity in a multidisciplinary context. Following this, Tanya went to Riga, Latvia to work as an emissary, teaching Jewish history at the Dubnow Jewish School. After returning to Israel she began to study at the Israeli Rabbinical Programme based in Hebrew Union College (HUC), Jerusalem. Her decision to begin rabbinical studies was a profound process of addressing the religious dimension of her Jewish life. Through her years of experiences in the college she came to recognise the strength of Jewish prayer and ritual in their progressive form. Tanya gradually became a rabbi. Alongside her studies at HUC Jerusalem, Tanya studied both in the department of philosophy and the department of theatre at Tel-Aviv University. Her master's thesis is entitled "From Zoharic Text to Liturgical Performance: The Role of Weeping in the Performance of Eikha." Her thesis combines three fields: a Midrash[2] on the Zohar, Jewish liturgy, and theatre — an apt complement to her interdisciplinary interests. The same theme continues in the foundation of Tanya's rabbinical thesis in which she composed a play entitled "And Her Name Was Heather," which blends a creative Midrash on the Book of Ruth with

[1] Aliyah (plural Aliyot) in Hebrew means ascent and refers to Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel (and since its establishment in 1948, as the State of Israel). Aliyah is regarded as an important Jewish cultural concept and a fundamental concept of Zionism, enshrined in Israel's Law of Return, which accords any Jew (and some non-Jews with Jewish relatives) the legal right to assisted immigration and settlement in Israel, and entitles them to Israeli citizenship. In Zionist discourse, Aliyah refers to voluntary immigration of Jews for ideological, emotional, or practical reasons as well as mass flight of persecuted Jews to Israel.

[2] Midrash is a Hebrew word meaning commentary.

the story of Tamar (Heather) Havilio, an American convert; the play was first staged as part of HUC's *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* programme in 2006.

Since last December, Tanya has been working as a full-time Rabbi at Beit Warszawa reformed Jewish congregation in Poland together with Rabbi Burt Shuman, the chief rabbi of the congregation. Rabbi Tanya is helping rebuild the infrastructure for the renewal of progressive Judaism in Poland and is also developing communities in Krakow, and other cities in Poland.

Interview taken at Beit Warszawa, Warsaw, 12 July 2008

Rohee Dasgupta: Tell me about your background and how it all began…

Rabbi Tanya Segal: I was born in Moscow — since your research is about constructions of identity, it'll be interesting for you to know that I see my life as a continuous search for my own Jewish identity. From a very early age, my Jewishness was very strong. We grew up in an anti-Semitic environment. My family faced many comments, as did the other Jewish families living in our building. My Jewish origin was clear to me and I started to ask questions very early. We were a secular Russian family, but with a strong Jewish identity. When I was twenty, I joined the Jewish theatre in Moscow. I wasn't thinking about theology then, for me it was just a keen interest in symbolic theatre and metaphysical ideas, of course mingled with enthusiasm about performing arts and how it can ascribe my identity with something beyond reality. The Jewish theatre was originally based and quite popular in Birbijan[3], a place Stalin wanted to capture, only things didn't work according to his plans, and eventually the theatre got relocated to Moscow. We performed in Yiddish — it was our language of production, our Jewish language was Yiddish but we did not converse in it, we just rehearsed our parts in it and studied it. We understood the grammar very well but conversed primarily in Russian, which probably was a mistake (laughs aloud), but we only saw ourselves as young actors at that time.

Following Perestroika, I decided to go to Israel in 1990 and took my son, who was two years old. We made Aliyah — it was a very long Aliyah; politically it was a very interesting time when I came to Israel. I lived in Israel for seventeen years. The period of Aliyah in Israel was a long transformation and Aliyah itself is a big question of identity. You leave everything from the past, the cultures that you grew up in, and adopt a whole new life. I was very connected to Russian culture, even though all my experience was indeed very Jewish, but

[3] Located between rivers the Bira and the Birjan, Birobijan was renamed in 1923 as Birbijan and was reorganized into a working village. Birbijan became a centre for autonomous Jewish culture and evolved into a city in 1937.

without religion. In Moscow we had one synagogue, it was a famous synagogue; we went there together with our families, but not very frequently — it was more about socializing. Jews from the neighbourhood came to meet each other in the synagogue. There were police all around, especially during Jewish Holidays — Rosh Hashanah and Pesach — so for us it was more a Jewish culture of social and political opposition rather than being religiously inclined. We were Russians, but we understood we were different; our being together was different too — we have some other common culture between us — as you can imagine from the circumstances we didn't have a religious approach to life.

RD: So the migration to Israel must have resulted in a very different view of Jewish life — as after Aliyah life is not just social and political, it's religious too isn't it?

RTS: Oh absolutely, first of all Aliyah is a very painful, tedious and if I may, a traumatic process — it is all about asking intricately and very deeply *who you actually are* and *where you are*. If you are Jewish, what does it mean to be Jewish? In Russia we didn't ask these questions — we were Jewish, we had an anti-Semitic environment, so we took it for granted, but it never occurred to us to ask each other what it really meant to be Jewish. However, we asked the question in the theatre — what it meant to be in the Jewish theatre (it's important to note that not all actors with us were Jewish) and have a Jewish theatre. Yiddish theatre meant something special, something unique in the language of theatre and somewhat unique in its approach to life and performance, but in Israel I understood the vision of the world very differently. I understood that a Jewish life in Israel gets groomed together with religion and culture. To be honest, if you are not born and brought up with such an attitude, it takes years to realise and inculcate it.

RD: How long was the process of Aliyah?

RTS: I lived in Israel for seventeen years, it was a real challenge. I remember officially I had five years of psychological support — opinions change and perceptions evolve over the years; gradually after five years one starts understanding Israel, and starts thinking differently. For many years, I was a Russian to all who knew me. I will say it took me ten years to really feel Israeli.

RD: Where were you based in Israel?

RTS: I lived in Tel-Aviv. After a year I started to study and continued studying all my life (laughs). It is a stimulating University environment and indeed very different than the closed Russian society in which I grew up. I made a lot of friends, who helped me all through the years of transition; I owe a lot to them.

RD: And your long academic journey…

RTS: Ah well, I began to study theatre; I have an MA in (stage) direction from the Academy named after Lunacharsky in Moscow. I was an actor and I played the guitar — as you saw in the Sabbath. In Israel I knew I had to study Hebrew, so I took Hebrew lessons alongside the theory of theatre at the University. Knowing the language helped as I was studying philosophy at the faculty of Jewish philosophy. I had to start from the basics — introduction to Judaism, philosophy etc. — which progressed gradually all through my University years. I took many additional courses in Jewish philosophy. I hadn't finished writing my MA thesis when I decided to take a break and came to Riga with my son to teach Jewish history at a Jewish yeshiva (school). In Israel there are two degrees: an MA in Rabbinical College and an MA in Jewish studies at the University. My initial study was in Kabbalah and Jewish mystic philosophy, I was primarily based in the faculty of theatre but somehow wanted to connect all my interdisciplinary interests. For me theatre was a search both for my identity and myself. My thesis finally got affiliated with two faculties — the Theatre faculty and the Kabbalah faculty of Jewish philosophy. My thesis was about Midrash and lamentation in the Zohar[4] as liturgical performance, so I could finally combine it all. (smiles)

RD: What made you come to Poland?

RTS: I came from Russia — I saw how hard the process was for Russian Jews like me to understand themselves as a Jewish woman besides being a Russian. When I came to Riga I first started to ask myself about religion. I taught Jewish history there and that, as you know, cannot be done without religious interventions. Every time I taught about the movements within Judaism I would ask myself where I was going with all my understandings. The second motivation was that there was only one (orthodox) synagogue in Riga, and we were friends with the Rabbi; it was an interesting set-up in Riga — the yeshiva (school), the Israeli embassy and the synagogue were three 'big' Jewish circles. And the more I realised this, the more I felt the need to close the gap — so when I returned to Israel, I went straight into the rabbinical college.

Moscow was really a very secular experience of Judaism; I was an actor and dramatist in the Yiddish theatre. It was a culture of political opposition, where one could have risked getting oneself arrested for carrying a book by Pasternak in the handbag. I was surrounded by Jewish culture, music and theatre as well as anti-Semitism (smiles). You must understand these were really troubled times — I remember we used to go a private phonetic library of Yiddish; we went through catalogues and scripts there. Singing Yiddish songs was a criminal

[4] The Zohar [radiance] is the greatest classic of Kabbalistic mysticism. It is a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and contains discussions about the divine creation process and the problem of evil. It stresses the cosmic significance of human deeds.

offence. Even in the city we couldn't read or study Hebrew or Yiddish. I carried my guitar always with me and I remember when I sometimes spontaneously sang in Yiddish, they authorities tried to check if my concert organization permitted it, where I came from etc. — it was a very hard time but still I would say it didn't quite hurt my Jewish identity; it was a hard time for Jewish life, also for any kind of Jewish cultural practice. So coming from a secular family and being surrounded by such an anti-Semitic atmosphere I really did not think about being a rabbi. For me Jewish identity then was simply Jewish culture and of course an awareness of Jewish history.

RD: How did you get in touch with Beit Warszawa and what made you want to work here?

RTS: I went to the Hebrew Union College (HUC) in Jerusalem; we have four Hebrew departments — three in the US and one in Jerusalem, all offering different programmes. While studying in Jerusalem, I took an exchange semester in the US. In my second year of rabbinical practice, I did one semester in Westchester Temple in New York — though it was a part of the HUC curriculum, the method and perspectives were different so it was worth gaining the experience. When I came back, I took part in a foundation project sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Education enabling rabbinical students to go to Russia, Ukraine or Belarus to support reformed progressive Jewish communities. I chose to work in Ukraine and travelled from Kharkov to Poltava, then to L'viv. As L'viv is Galicia, I decided I wanted to visit Warsaw on my way back. I was very excited being here, I travelled around the streets; I went to the Nożyk synagogue. I felt something, it influenced me so deeply that I wanted to live and work here. Obviously, in Twarda[5] services are restricted only to the Torah text and women sit separately on the balcony in Nożyk. In Israel we all are allowed in the congregation I started to look for progressive Jewish congregations and found Beit Warszawa, they identified themselves as a religious reform Jewish community. When I went back to Israel from this trip, I started corresponding with them as a rabbinical student; I came here in 2007 during Rosh Hashanah, it was the last year of college and I did the last five months of my rabbinical practice here. I really enjoyed working in Beit, it was specifically about Beit Warszawa and more generally about Poland. It's very important to have such communities here. I remember, when I went back to Israel everyone was curious and started asking questions because many people have their roots in Poland. They just don't speak about it openly because in Israel we have an emotionally hard connection with Poland. Israelis come

[5] The Nożyk Synagogue (Polish: Synagoga Nożyków) is Warsaw's only surviving pre-war synagogue on Ulicia Twarda (Twarda Street). It was erected prior to 1902 and rebuilt after World War II. The synagogue is still operational and currently houses the Warsaw Orthodox Jewish Commune, offices of the Chief Rabbi of Poland and American Jewish Joint Distribution committee.

to Poland, but only to visit the concentration camps. It's hard for them to accept that Poland has a thriving Jewish culture. However, stereotypical approaches are slowly changing. What can I say… I felt an urge to come and work here, and I followed my intuitions.

RD: Obviously when you took up this role you knew it would be a very significant step — you are the first female Rabbi in the entire history of Poland. How do you feel about it? Do you find your role contested within and outside the reformed Jewish community?

RTS: To be honest, I really did not think about it, I really wanted to come because of my religious and cultural interests. I must add that my son supported my decision – they study the history of Holocaust in high school. When I asked him whether I should work in Poland as he joined the Israeli army, he said "It is Warsaw, you have to go." So I really didn't think about it as "I'm going to be the first female Rabbi in Poland," because in Israel, in the circle and college I was in, the reform movement is the central cause, and we have many female rabbis in the congregations who take leading roles; so to begin with it was a very common experience for me. I know that even in Conservative Judaism in Israel they ordinate women rabbis, but they don't take the sole leading part. The Maram[6], the Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis, has women rabbis and the gender issue is not really a big question there — so I didn't think that way. It was only when I came and settled to work here that all the publicity started. Everyone started speaking about it and I realised it was perceived as a very strong statement in Poland. I'm happy about it, the moment people see me, they learn something about the reform movement — which among many things stands for equality in gender.

Beit Warszawa is a very dynamic place; it is developing and growing very fast. People knew about Beit Warszawa earlier, but it was more a Jewish cultural organization to begin with, where people came with a bit of curiosity and without religious needs or questioning or any expectations. Rabbi Schumann came in 2006 and now I also lead the congregation, so things have definitely changed. It has become a strong religious statement with the cultural rather than a question. We get interesting feedback from people through our cultural and religious projects; you saw the interest in the Jewish festival during Sabbath.

So the reform movement will make an impact; it's certainly not a fight with anyone, but we want to impart the religion, education and culture from our perspective, which is rooted deeply in the Halakhic[7] point of view. In the liturgical perspective, we differ from the

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[6] It is interesting to note that etymologically the word Maram is of Arabic origin meaning wish or desire and is both masculine and feminine in gender.

[7] Halakha (Hebrew; means the way of walking) is the collective body of Jewish religious law, including biblical law (the 613 mitzvot) Talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions. Judaism classically draws no distinction in its laws between religious and non-religious life. Hence, Halakha guides not only religious

orthodox community. It's crucial for us to build the reform movement firmly now. Often I meet people from the orthodox community who know me on a personal level; these encounters are always normal — first people, then religion. They say "Oh, so it's you who is leading the programme; I'll definitely come to your lecture" — it's natural, I think, but again it's obvious that as a reform movement, we have some serious ideological considerations that differ from other conservative communities. Beit has to live up to the liturgical position — we are working on it. On the other hand, my being here is not much of a contestation but I would say it's a very strong statement, and that comes with a lot of responsibility as historically — even in the liberal tradition — Poland had only male rabbis.

RD: Do you travel a lot in Poland as you practice?

RTS: Yes, I am a travelling rabbi for Beit Warszawa. My role is to go to different towns and try to build the same or different models of progressive reform Jewish communities. I travel to Lublin, Chelm, Kraków, Częstochowa and try to work there. I am also involved in the Midrash theatre project, which is an obvious endeavour on my part, having started with the artistic approach to religion. The cultural approach is the first point of interest for most people. Many people in Poland choose to live Judaism through culture or study but not through any religious or liturgical events. But I always smilingly start with Sabbath (laughs aloud). Sabbath as you know is a religious ritual but the people don't realise this, for them it is a yet another cultural affair in Judaism. Many people come to Sabbath without actually knowing that it is actually from the Torah. So we start by celebrating the Torah and celebrate Sabbath on Friday; in Kraków sometimes we have additional discussion lessons. These discussions led us on to the Midrash theatre project. Studying the torah through performance has a lot to do with negotiations of Jewish identity.

I remember the first people who came and approached me during the festival; their first — almost warning — statement was "We are not religious." I said, okay, welcome, but we can try to study a bit from the classical text and discuss themes — what it means to be Jewish and its related meanings, but most importantly we are going to check how this text belongs and relates to our lives today. People say they are not Jews at all but it is very interesting how discussion unfolds and questions give rise to relations, Jewish relations and indeed Polish-Jewish relations.

practices and beliefs, but numerous aspects of day-to-day social life. Historically Halakha served many Jewish communities as an enforceable avenue of civil and religious law, now however Jews are bound to Halakha only by voluntary consent. Among Ashkenazi Jews, there are various disagreements over Halakha, which resulted in the emergence of the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements within Judaism.

What I find different about Jews in Poland from the Jews in my earlier circle in Russia is that many people don't know about their Jewish identity here — most people are repressed about it and keep it as a distant past, but as it happens with these intensive discussion sessions, memories from the past come back. Something that they can relate to, which connects them to a forgotten part of their lives through family backgrounds or some personal stories that they remember and say "there was Jewish for me." Though the common feeling is about rebuilding or revival of Jewish identity, I say it is about *building* Jewish identity. I remember a person from Israeli TV who came to interview a Polish-Jewish person in Beit — while talking generally he commented: "You will understand as you are Jewish," and the interviewee was shocked. For an Israeli it is an obvious thing, but for a Polish-Jew being Jewish doesn't come as an easy acknowledgement. I had to tell the Israeli interviewer that in Poland we don't express it so explicitly. He was very surprised and I had to explain the difficulties in the best possible cultural translation. In contrast, in Russia we all knew that we were Jewish; we had Jewish friends and it was a clear fact for us. We were not religious, didn't go to the synagogue regularly, but still we had a very strong Jewish identity. In Poland, most people come to know about their roots in mid-life or some even earlier on, but many families don't want to speak about it; they are Polish Catholics with Jewish roots — they are very confused. Many were raised as Catholics but remember things that had been different in their childhood. We are thinking about writing a community book based on these stories.

To be Jewish really means to feel you are a part of some group, that you have some common knowledge. In Poland it is hard to raise that feeling spontaneously. Jews were always together through all these years of the political divide, but the last trauma of '68 left a strong impact on people. They prefer to remain at a distance and just show interest in cultural Judaism, to confess they are Jewish only much later, when they are "confident" enough. In Israel, on the other hand, there's always a place for Jewish identity — of course, the contradictions between reformed and orthodox movements are another story (laughs). But here acknowledging one's identity as Jewish is really a complicated matter. In real life many Polish-Jewish stories blur the boundary between truth and deception, and some stories have no ending — but reflection through art helps to search life again for those overlooked ideas and reconsider things "differently."

RD: It seems like you really work through a process — before you go to these places do you have an outreach from Beit Warszawa announcing your visit? How has the response been from other cities or towns?

RTS: Yes, we announce it in advance. It generally helps to educate people through Sabbath as they get exposed to both education and culture; then, if they choose, they engage with religious questions. It was interesting in Chelm (once a famous Jewish town, now there is nothing there): two of our administrative officers advertised my visit in the local newspapers and radio — it was a pleasant surprise to see that every time we organized a visit there we had around forty people. As I said, not everyone knows or thinks that they are Jewish, and to begin with we don't ask this question openly either. In Chelm we did Sabbaths together. Some people came with their families, some came with kids and we could slowly see their interest to expose their lives to Judaism. We realised some Jewish families were still there — sometimes it becomes apparent during our discussions or while studying Jewish songs. We have good singers and musicians in the group, so they make the learning more interactive while studying the songs or texts both from the cultural and theological point of view. We also celebrate Sabbath every month in Lublin, so you see, becoming a congregational community is really a process, as you said. For them to celebrate Sabbath ritually and to feel Jewish is still a very long way to go. It'll take time for people to realize to make them feel a part of the community. For Beit Warszawa it took eight years; many things happened here to make this change, and additionally it is based in the capital with people and resources. Other towns' progress is relatively slow but the process has indeed begun.

To return to the Midrash theatre project: it started with two people. We started studying together and I worked on the theatre concept with them. Eventually more people joined and we staged *Melody of Silence* in the Jewish space at the Galicia Museum during the Jewish Festival. We tried to pose the questions of how the text speaks to the individual, what the essence of this connection in real life is, what's the traditional view on it and what's the modern view on it, how do Jews in Poland connect to *Akedat Yitzhak* (meaning traumatic or repressed memories as an ordeal of self-discovery) and how we deal with it. And as you know, Galicia Museum's *Traces of memory*[8] exhibition presents this theme very well. I have a group of fifteen people today through this project. This year, many young University students showed interest in the Midrash theatre; they came to me and said they wanted to form a similar Jewish cultural group or association — it sounds familiar (laughs). So I let them know that I am eager to teach, give lessons if they want to learn. I know many of them have Jewish roots but they are not willing to come out in the open. It is not easy and I respect their wish.

[8] The late British photojournalist Chris Schwarz worked in Poland since the 1980s. In 2004, he founded the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków — a cultural education centre and exhibition space devoted to Jewish culture and civilization in Polish Galicia. Among other installations, the museum features his photo project Traces of Memory, containing twelve years work on Poland's Jewish cultural past. For more information visit: www.galiciajewishmuseum.org.

RD: What is Midrash theatre?

RTS: Midrash theatre is a creative method of understanding Jewish theology; it is based on interpreting the Torah text while integrating the arts into the process of study. Drama, music, vocal improvisation, movement, dance are frequently used tools to interpret the text; however in Midrash theatre the audience is also free to ask the actor a question, and thus it sustains the traditional "question-answer approach." Midrash theatre is also known as environment theatre as space is very important — whoever directs sets the space of performance in the best possible natural way. The spaces where workshops take place are the source of inspiration for sequence and dramatization of the plot. The presentation of Midrash theatre is unique, the audience moves along with the actor, who introduces and narrates his or her story moving from place to place in the 'natural setting'. The matter of space and *mise-en-scène* forms the centre of discussion in the ritual manner of performance. Space is used to infuse the performance with substantial meaning, and it is examined in relation to the term *proxemics* — the study of spatial separation maintained in various social and interpersonal situations — in the plot and how this separation relates to the present cultural factors.

So you see, ultimately Midrash theatre is about encouraging individual creativity with the traditional texts, it provides an opportunity for the emerging Polish Jews to explore their Jewish roots and identity, to share the depth of Jewish traditional texts through a creative medium. It also helps to introduce Jewish traditions to the people who are interested in the intellectual understanding of Jewish culture irrespective of their academic or professional backgrounds.

RD: So Midrash theatre is really creative learning with ritual performance– how did you start working on this concept?

RTS: I first started working on Midrash theatre while writing my drama thesis at Tel-Aviv University, which dealt with the dramatic technique in Midrash Eikha in the Zohar. I developed it further in my rabbinical thesis. As I said, Midrash is about improvisation through commentary from real stories which then gets symbolically portrayed in the religious text. My rabbinical thesis in HUC is a real story of a Christian girl named Tamar Havilio in the US, who happens to come to London through an international student exchange programme for drama students and goes to see *Ghetto*, the famous play by Sobol[9] at the London National Theatre. While watching the drama, she starts to cry. As my thesis is about lamentation, I related her crying to her revived spiritual experience (smiles). I think what happened to her is what is happening in Poland now — I'll return to this in a moment. But to finish the story: on her return back to the US, Tamar starts taking courses for conversion and ultimately converts to Judaism. She eventually goes to HUC, learns how to be a cantor, marries an Israeli and today she is the cantor of HUC in Jerusalem teaching other cantors. As Midrash theatre is about interaction, I combined her story with a text from the Torah — it was the story of Ruth set in interaction with the space of the college designed by the Israeli architect Moshe Safdia; this is environment theatre, a key concept in Midrash performance. I first staged the play on *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.[10]

[9] Joshua Sobol is a famous Israeli playwright; his play *Ghetto* surrounds the story of a theatre group in the ghetto.

[10] Shavuot is a Jewish holiday that occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Sivan (late May or early June). Shavuot commemorates the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Tikkun Leil Shavuot is the custom of staying up the entire night (*leil*) of Shavuot studying with the community in order to renew the experience at Sinai.

RD: Did the play at the Jewish festival carry the same theme?

RTS: Yes, but again it was different in its presentation and improvisation. At the Jewish festival, we performed it in the Galicia Museum. The play was entitled *The Melody of Silence* — signifying the emptiness of the once vibrant Jewish life in Poland — and carried the message that "we need to lean, to hear the sound or 'the melody of silence.'" We built a small stage, where an actor would sit and recite the Midrashim — the story of Ruth — talking about the conversion ritual as well as serving as conduit for the performance of *Ghetto* in the play. The curator of the museum referred the story of David in the introduction — so everything connected well to the theme. Once the plot started to build up the synchronicity, the interpretation wasn't too hard to find for the audience. Improvising interaction between the group is what modern Midrash theatre is about; each time the script and plot can be performed differently depending on the director and the kind of actors he or she has — in Kraków for example I didn't start with the *Akedat Yitzhak* theme as I did in Jerusalem, I started with interaction with the group; after this came interaction with the space which was followed by the interpretation from the text. Finally, the connection came about with tragic memories in *Akedat Yitzhak* and how Jewish identity is built on this text. With the *Traces of Memory* exhibition all around, the ambience became even more symbolic to connect the play with the memory of Shoah.

RD: Does Midrash theatre with its links to the stories of biblical women harbour a gender perspective?

RTS: Midrash features poetic monologues and is about sensibility in interpretation, exploring relationships both from a male and female point of view. While the idea is to appeal to all and to open dialogue amongst people about Jewish identity, it can't be denied that women have played a significant role in developing the reform movement. Most stories are about brave and wise endeavours of women who are assertive "risk-takers" and creative leaders. In Poland the reserves in the concept of Jewishness is one of the first obstacle for us to overcome before finding an answer to the patriarchal rabbinic order; however, our work has already begun. (smiles)

In the reform movement Jewish women have always had the freedom to read classical sacred texts and interpret them "their way". This is a realistic and truthful choice of creating an unequivocal Jewish identity. As a rabbi it's crucial for me to foster that clarity of purpose. Midrash is an intersection between an ancient (biblical) text and a contemporary story drawing out new ethical spirit of questioning that matters to society. Now whether the text is about Ruth, Sarah or Rachael, what matters most is the vitality of spirit and the thought-

provoking questions with which the audience interacts. I feel that gender equity or lessons from our intuitive fore-mothers inevitably comes out of such a strong portrayal.

RD: Can you share an instance about how you link these themes in Sabbath services to bring out discussion about Poland's Jewish past and present?

RTS: Well, we recently studied *Megilat Eikha* (the Book of Lamentations), and I introduced the Midrash Eikha in the Book of Zohar. Megilat Eikha, read on Tisha B'Av, is a liturgical documentation that commemorates the destruction of the temple in Israel, which is perceived in the Jewish tradition as a national tragedy. The mourning of destruction is a Halakhic matter and follows traditional Jewish mourning rituals and customs. The key element of Tisha B'Av is to feel a strong connection with the tragedy of the destroyed temple — to have this event in Poland, the land of Holocaust, with the 'returning' Polish Jews is a very moving experience. Following the discussion about Holocaust, we discussed the question of what kind of lesson education can provide — the knowledge of the difference between good and evil and what people can do to make the right choice. In my rabbinical thesis, I contend that emotion generated by weeping in the performance lays the groundwork for the congregation's emotional connection to mourning the destruction, the collective experience of grief and sorrow, the link between personal grief and public grief, and its connection with the metaphysical level while keeping relevant the contemporary meaning of events. In Poland, such a perception is very relevant as we overcome history to make the "right choice" — which of course can be reinterpreted in various ways in Jewish theology and in reality.

RD: As a travelling Rabbi, how has your interaction been with (non-Jewish) Poles from the smaller towns that you visit?

RTS: Oh yeah, I meet them in towns, in trains and there's a big interest among them. I have met many people in towns who later came to the Sabbath service as well — they are interested and they are curious to know how a woman can lead a congregation and how she preaches. It is a big issue for many Polish people as even in Catholicism the role of women is constrained and limited. In small towns, I have had priests attending out of curiosity when I lead Sabbath or liturgical discussions or lessons during Jewish holidays — I really welcome this, it's a very positive step. I remember in Częstochowa I was leading the Sabbath and a priest who was attending asked me about Jewish holidays, the interpretations of Sabbath songs, the role of women in Jewish liturgical life. Wherever I have said that I am a rabbi I've always had very positive reactions. I get a lot of questions, some surprising, some sensible, but overall an intriguing experience.

RD: What is your opinion about Polish civil society?

RTS: When I first came to Poland, I was very excited to be here — everyone was friendly and there was a big interest from the media towards me as the first female rabbi. I like this country; it's very friendly towards Israel, although at the same time it has some right wing responses. I think the country is still in transition, but most of all I appreciate how people here deal with the hard subject of their Jewish identity — especially the younger generation; some come to Beit Warszawa as friends, some out of cultural curiosity, some go through the process of conversion. People struggle to see their past and want to relate it to their future — it is crucial to value that inner search. Their personal quest to know themselves is unique — some may have strong answers others may not be that confident, but what I respect most in everyone is that they confront it, they don't push it away — it is a brave thing to do.

When you walk the streets, after a while you begin to feel that something happened here. In Kraków, for example, as in many other places, the empty buildings, streets, synagogues evoke a cold and sad feeling, but I honestly feel that our reform movement will give them a little 'real' life. It's a humbling feeling to learn how people reinstate their inner selves and lives — it's really a difficult experience. It's a very dynamic country; you can feel that in rabbinical terms it is the time of *hesed* — a persistent urge to confront the truth no matter how difficult it is. People want to deal with it, even people who are not Jewish; they want to deal with it as part of their own culture. Their curiosity to know more about Jewish culture, their strong support is crucial for civil society. Earlier nobody wanted to hear about Jewish life in Poland. With the revival, many people are beginning to experience this culture again. It may not be a daily experience for all anymore, but still the presence of culture matters; the sharing and the Polish-Jewish dialogue count a lot. Things are generally supportive here but still a lot of work has to be done; it is not easy to deal with such a troubled and complicated history.

RD: You bridge the cultural and the religious well when you lead the congregation. I enjoyed the Sabbath in Krakow during the festival.

RTS: Glad you liked it (smiles). Because you see, it's my way…I saw myself as an artist initially and didn't ever think of becoming religiously inclined. I often asked myself in Moscow, where I could have gone to the usual theatre, why did I choose the Yiddish theatre…?

RD: Could it have been your way to your own Jewish identity?

RTS: Exactly, it is. In the rabbinical college it was a big question to what extent culture is the promotion of religious life. I can firmly say that religious feeling grows in the person through culture — for me it was a cultural quest, it began sub-consciously when I was in the Yiddish

theatre. Sometimes I ask myself how much of me is the artist and how much is the rabbi…and am I enough rabbi now (laughs). My rabbinical practice in Beit taught me a lot too. Many a times I have come across comments such as "It's an amazing idea to support a cultural project" — obviously I have to tell them that it is not just a cultural project, it is our project. It's important to convey the message to people that this is as much as a part of their history as ours, and for the religious part, it's an individual choice whether they want to explore Judaism out of their cultural interest or through in-depth study. A strong religious feeling takes time, it takes years to nurture the quest, but we have time… (laughs)

RD: Another forty years maybe? (smiles)

RTS: (laughs) Sure why not!