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Israeli marriages, American Jews, and Israel's security

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In the midst of all that has been going on in Israel, you might wonder why a mission to Israel to join Israeli counterparts in a push for alternatives to marriages approved by the Chief Rabbinate is important just now.

As everyone who ever has gone on a mission to Israel for whatever purpose knows, the trips are planned months in advance. You can never know when Israel will find itself in a critical situation, so the mission goes when it was planned to go. That is why the Jews for Religious Equality Coalition (J-REC) will be in Israel from November 10 to 16 seeking a change in Israeli marriage law.

But why is this mission significant at all? And why is it American Jews' business?

First some background: The only legal form of marriage for Jews in Israel is marriage performed under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate, which is a government agency and Orthodox. Israeli Jews may have a legally recognized civil marriage abroad, but they cannot have one in their homeland. This means that the only marriage format available to them is an Orthodox one, unless they have the time, money, and will to go to Cyprus or elsewhere to be married.

Since Orthodox rules are in force for Israelis who wish to marry, a person's choice of spouse may be limited. For example, if a kohen wants to marry a convert or divorcee, he will find his way blocked. Such marriages are not permitted according to traditional Jewish law, which is what the Chief Rabbinate follows. The Rabbinate also maintains a database of who may or may not marry a fellow Jew for easy reference, should any of those people apply to the office for marriage.

Secular Israelis who think all they have to do is prove they are Jewish to get married to another Jew often find that isn't enough. Even when your Jewish pedigree appears sufficient, if you are a nonobservant Jew you may find yourself caught in a bureaucratic labyrinth until the matter is settled.

Enter J-REC and Hiddush. The first is an American organization whose members are Jewish

professionals, spiritual leaders, and concerned lay people who cover the Jewish-American religious and secular spectrum. The second is an Israeli organization representing groups in Israel seeking to create a new path to Jewish life for Israelis looking for an alternative to Orthodoxy. Both are seeking, as a first practical step in this direction, the creation of legal marriage alternatives to Chief Rabbinate marriages in Israel.

But still, why is this important enough for American Jews who have joined J-REC to go to Israel in the midst of the present situation?

Dov Zakheim, known for his work with the United States Defense Department and as a foreign affairs adviser in Washington, organized J-REC and has gotten strong support for its work from the American Jewish Committee. His central argument for American involvement in wresting the monopoly over marriage in Israel from the Chief Rabbinate is how this monopoly insults American Jewish spiritual leaders and their committed constituents.

Essentially, such a monopoly implies that Israel recognizes Orthodox Judaism as the only legitimate form of Jewish religious expression. That being the case, the message delivered by Israel to Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jews and their rabbis is that they practice a second-class form of Judaism, or perhaps no Judaism at all. Yet the majority of affiliated Jews in America belong to one or another of these movements.

I personally have seen just how angering this is to people who are deeply committed to Israel and to their Jewish religious denomination — but who wonder how committed Israel is to them. Israel supporters with a great deal of communal and political clout find themselves trying to quiet that anger. They also continue to try to engage fellow Jews in Israel advocacy, even as those Jews become more and more ambivalent about Israel, and increasingly distanced from it.

And why should they not be distanced and affronted when a chief rabbi or an Orthodox Minister of Religious Affairs declares Reform Jews, for example, “not Jewish”?

Israel needs people who can speak wholeheartedly to the American government and to fellow Jews on her behalf, and it cannot afford to lose these people over a Chief Rabbinate and an Orthodox establishment for which most of the Israeli population itself has little or no respect. The Rabbinate's ongoing derogation of these American leaders' Jewish credentials, added to anti-democratic behavior in religious areas of Israeli life, can only drive potential supporters of Israel away in the long run.

I have met people who are leaving shortly for this J-REC mission, and I am joining them. They are engaged lovers of Israel, and they will continue to support Israel in spite of how its religious establishment acts toward them. But they fear for the future of Israel-Diaspora relations, which are jeopardized by the government-supported religious establishment's insensitivity to both Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

Neither Hiddush nor J-REC has as its goal the destruction of the Chief Rabbinate; they believe that it should remain a force for those who want it and are willing to abide by its rules. Rather, their goal is opening a way for those who — for practical or ideological reasons — wish to marry without conforming to Orthodox Jewish regulations in order to do so.

While this may seem to be a small matter, it has festered into a major one for American Jews, who in many cases have their ties to Israel intrinsically bound up with their denominational allegiances. You only need consider how many synagogues arrange trips to Israel for their members each year.

J-REC and Hiddush sincerely hope that what appears to be a minor matter of marriage law in Israel does not become the source of a separation, or worse, a divorce, between lovers of Israel in the Diaspora and lovers of Israel in the Land. Our Israel-Diaspora marriage brings too many benefits to each of its partners to be frittered away by leaving the issue of marriage in the hands of a religious establishment that has not shown much sympathy for or respect to the majority of its own constituency, or for the majority of Jews living in the Diaspora.

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