

Jewish Religious Equality Coalition

Delegation to Israel

November 9-16, 2015

Talking Points

I. Why Are We Here?

- A. We recognize that we have come to discuss matters that are essentially of internal Jewish interest at a moment when Israeli lives are threatened by a sustained outbreak of terrorism. We stand in solidarity with you in confronting this crisis of national security. We are here precisely because we wish to sustain that Jewish solidarity that today may be eroded because of religious divisions.

To be specific, we seek recognized alternatives to the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over matters of personal status, specifically marriage and conversion to Judaism. We believe that the continued attachment of American Jewry to Israel currently is at risk. Beneath the façade of unity around a beleaguered Jewish State lies widespread resentment concerning Israel and policies perceived as offensive by a critical mass of American Jews. Precisely because we are concerned about enhancing and maintaining worldwide Jewish unity and peoplehood, we feel impelled to voice our displeasure here in Israel and hope to persuade Israeli society of the need for change in these areas.

- B. Similarly, the special relationship between Israel and America has rested upon the twin pillars of the perception of Israel as a fellow democracy and the perception that American Jewry desires continued U.S. support for Israel politically and strategically. Those two pillars are endangered by policies unacceptable in any other democratic state and that disenfranchise some 90% of American Jews, the majority of whom largely define themselves as non-Orthodox while the Jewish State grants a

monopoly over issues of personal status to an increasingly ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate legislating for the entire Jewish people. Thus the alienation of large majorities of American Jewry on issues of personal status attenuates American Jewish support for Israel, which in turn creates an unnecessary and potentially hurtful national security problem for Israel.

Put simply, American Jews observe what is happening in Israel. Historically, they have identified with Israel as a Jewish state and fellow democracy. Today, however, many express serious doubts with respect to the future survival of democratic values and norms.

- C. Finally, the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate on issues of personal status damages the image of Judaism in and outside the Jewish State. As a private institution, the Chief Rabbinate has every right to pursue its own policies as it sees fit. But as a public body, the Chief Rabbinate represents the Government of Israel. Statements and policies that reflect the view that strict Orthodoxy is the only legitimate expression of Judaism gratuitously gives offense to adherents of alternate expressions of what it means to be a Jew. Were the Chief Rabbinate a private institution, its statements and beliefs would be reflective only of itself and its adherents. But as an arm of the Jewish State, statements by the Chief Rabbinate reflect upon the Government of Israel, give voice to an image of Judaism as exclusionary and primitive, and suggest that Israel is more theocracy than democracy.

II. Freedom of Choice in Marriage

- A. Others desire the right to marry civilly because they do not wish to go through the processes regulated and supervised by the Chief Rabbinate. These processes, often onerous and even humiliating in themselves, frequently result in rabbis officiating

- who bear no relationship to the couple and see weddings primarily as source of patronage or income. Those who do not wish a religious marriage implemented by the Chief Rabbinate ought to be free to choose their preferred model of religious or civil marriage.
- B. Of particular concern to American Jews is the inability of non-Orthodox rabbis to officiate at weddings conducted in Israel. As noted, only 10% of American Jews are Orthodox. Of late, the Chief Rabbinate has been questioning the authenticity even of Modern Orthodox rabbis. Denial of the right to officiate suggests rejection of the right of Jews to practice Judaism as they wish. Reform and Conservative rabbis may officiate together with Orthodox clergy. However, they do not have the right to officiate absent such Orthodox supervision.
- C. Jewish law contains serious strictures on who may marry whom. For example, a kohen may not marry either a divorcee or a convert to Judaism. Individuals should be free to respect those strictures but the state should not decide for its citizens whether they wish to marry in accordance to Jewish law or not. That is a free decision on their part. Every other democracy grants individuals the right to choose respective marital partners. Yet in Israel the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over marriage and divorce effectively restricts that right only to those who may marry partners it deems acceptable in light of its own interpretation of Halakha.
- D. Given the restrictions detailed above, thousands opt each year for weddings in Cyprus. Aside from the obvious unnecessary travel expenses for wedding participants and guests, such weddings signal that Israel is not the homeland for all Jews so much as for those willing to live in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law. These weddings also further alienate significant numbers of Jews from their own people and religion.

III. Conversion to Judaism

- A. Israel faces a pressing demographic problem of approximately 300,000 Russian *olim* of questionable halachic status. Absent conversion to Judaism, these individuals, having opted to settle in the Jewish State, now find themselves in a halachic limbo, neither fully Jewish nor Gentile. Children born each year to non-Jewish mothers considerably increases the numbers affected. Only conversion to Judaism would alleviate this problem considerably, but most are unwilling to convert given the insistence of the Chief Rabbinate upon strict religious observance prior and subsequent to conversion.

- B. The previous governing coalition attempted to liberalize conversion by decentralizing the process. But the current coalition has insisted upon centralization fully controlled by the Chief Rabbinate. Of late, some Orthodox rabbis are acting independently of the Chief Rabbinate and setting up their own conversionary courts. These are in technical violation of the law, and we firmly believe the law should be changed to accommodate these courts, as well as the courts of other denominations.

- C. Conversion is the central and preferred outcome to mixed marriage. For American Jews this problem has reached gigantic proportions with 58% of Jews currently marrying choosing Gentile spouses. Regrettably, the State of Israel undermines efforts to encourage the conversion of Gentile spouses by declaring that only Orthodox conversions are valid.

- D. Within Israel, the Chief Rabbinate insists upon the most restrictive approaches to conversion. More inclusive approaches, even by Orthodox rabbis such as that of Rav Amsalem, who argues that offspring of Jewish fathers may be converted more easily, are disregarded in favor of the maximalist approaches of the Chief Rabbinate.

Communal needs would dictate the availability and accessibility of these more inclusive approaches as well as those of other denominations alongside the long-held restrictionist approach favored by the Chief Rabbinate. Again, the inability of Conservative and Reform rabbis to officiate at conversions amounts to a demoralizing and alienating message to American Jews concerning Israel as a state of the entire Jewish people.

IV. Therefore, What Do We Seek?

- A. Issues of personal Jewish status ought not be held hostage to coalition politics within the Knesset but rather determined in accordance with the needs and collective interests of the Jewish people worldwide.
- B. There should be regular and ongoing consultation on these issues with the representative bodies of Diaspora Jewry.
- C. We seek not the replacement of the Chief Rabbinate, which is integral to a state that calls itself “the Jewish State.” Instead, we seek the creation of recognized alternatives to it reflecting more liberal and inclusive approaches both with respect to the right of marriage and with respect to conversion to Judaism.