



Religious pluralism, Jewish peoplehood and the Chief Rabbinate

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The very concept of common Jewish peoplehood is endangered when Jews from the Diaspora encounter an Israel that fails to recognize diverse expressions of Judaism and what it means to be a Jew.

Ella Spivack was born in the United States to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. As an infant she was converted by a non-Orthodox rabbi, subsequently was raised Jewish, and made aliya in 2008. She soon enlisted voluntarily in the IDF, underwent the Orthodox conversion process available in the military, and met her husband to be while working in the Knesset.

For ideological reasons as well as bureaucratic ones, the couple desired to be married by a Conservative rabbi. The monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over personal status issues in Israel prohibited this. The couple, in turn, married in Israel in an unrecognized ceremony with a Conservative rabbi, followed by a civil marriage in the States. They are working to have their marriage recognized in Israel.

Karen Brunwasser has an even more harrowing tale to tell. Born in Philadelphia, she was converted as an infant by an Orthodox Beit Din led by a prominent rabbi. At age 28, she made aliya and met her husband to be. This time, the Chief Rabbinate ruled her conversion invalid because two of the three rabbis on the Philadelphia Beit Din serviced congregations that did not have the mechitza or ritual divider separating men and women during prayer services, although the services were Orthodox and men and women sat separately. Only intervention the day before the wedding from an influential but anonymous source enabled the wedding to proceed.

Someone lacking such a powerful connection would have been left at the mercy of the Chief Rabbinate's negative ruling.

These cases are but two of countless examples of how an occasion for joy and celebration may be turned into one of endless agony for couples, given the absence of freedom of choice in marriage in Israel.

Russian immigrants, once tormented in Russia for being Jewish, now find themselves in Israel facing discrimination for not being Jewish.

Given this abnormal and dysfunctional situation, which causes real harm to individuals who have moved to Israel in good faith and often out of Zionist motivations, AJC one year ago established the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition, consisting of a dozen Jewish organizations, across the denominational spectrum, and over 60 prominent Jewish leaders to advocate for the creation of recognized alternatives to the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate.

This coalition differs from previous efforts in its breadth of support, ranging from leadership of the Reform movement to leaders of Open Orthodoxy.

Moreover, it is not calling for the abolition of the Chief Rabbinate, which is a symbol of the Jewish state. Rather, its agenda is to seek recognized alternatives, notably civil marriage and liberalized conversion standards, which the Chief Rabbinate's existing monopoly does not permit.

IN EARLY November, the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition undertook its first visit to Israel to lobby for such changes. Our efforts met with considerable resonance from multiple sectors within Israeli society.

We underscored that American Jews, overwhelmingly Conservative and Reform, found the public role of the rabbinate and the absence of religious pluralism damaging to their relationship to Israel.

By delegitimizing Conservative and Reform rabbis, Israel in effect was delegitimizing the Jewish identity of non-Orthodox American Jews.

Hence our intervention in what ostensibly may be regarded as a domestic Israeli issue, but is, in fact, one with profound consequences for Israel's relationship with world Jewry. We told our Israeli interlocutors that we came expressing total solidarity with Israel in dangerous times, but are also concerned about sustaining that solidarity and support in future generations. In that sense, distancing from Israel among American Jews could well one day result in diminished US support for Israel, as one pillar of the special US-Israel relationship historically has been a strong, vibrant American Jewry advocating close alignment between fellow democracies and strategic allies.

To be sure, considerable obstacles and opposition to this agenda exist both in Israel and the US. The American Orthodox establishment, particularly the Rabbinical Council of America, publicly defers to the authority of the Chief Rabbinate as halachic decider for the State of Israel. Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox parties within Israel oppose any change, often citing the authority of those whom they term Torah Sages and whose word may not be contravened. Secular legislators, concerned about possible future coalition partners, express support for our efforts, but are skeptical about the chances for success. Last and hardly least, the general Israeli public chafes under the restrictions of the Chief Rabbinate but also has somehow learned to live with it or work around it, e.g., through destination weddings in Cyprus or common law civil unions in Israel.

Notwithstanding these formidable obstacles, we believe we must persevere. On the moral plane, individuals like Ella, Karen and their spouses should not be facing discrimination in the state of the Jewish people. Similarly, Jews from the former Soviet Union, who fight for Israel and are ready to die for their newfound homeland, have suffered enough before coming to Israel and should not be made to feel like second-class citizens.

On the religious level, the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate damages the public face of Judaism in the Jewish state. The very concept of common Jewish peoplehood is endangered when Jews from the Diaspora encounter an Israel that fails to recognize diverse expressions of Judaism and what it means to be a Jew. Finally, an Israel whose standing as a democracy is called into question by blatantly undemocratic religious procedures may risk diminishing support.

Our aim is to prevent these scenarios from occurring for the good of individual Jews, for the good of the Jewish people, and, above all, for the good of the Jewish state.

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