

Strains Grow Between Israel and Many Jews in the U.S.

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Dov S. Zakheim, chairman of the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition, which is pushing for Israel to allow civil marriage. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times



In the last few weeks, an uncharacteristic rift has opened between the United States and Israel, provoked by the announcement that Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) will address Congress in March at the invitation of House Republicans. His speech, contrary to diplomatic custom, was planned without notifying the White House and the president, who happens to be a Democrat.

Simultaneously, a [website in Israel](#) has been advertising package deals for couples who want to get married in Cyprus. For roughly \$500 to \$750, the betrothed get round-trip airfare, two nights in a hotel and the ceremony. Champagne and a limousine are extra. The ad appears in both Hebrew and Russian-language versions, the latter aimed at Israel's numerous immigrants from the former Soviet Union.



A mass civil wedding in the harbor city of Larnaca, Cyprus, in June 2014. Credit Yiannis Kourtoglou/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Though seemingly unrelated, the Cyprus weddings and Mr. Netanyahu's impending address are two facets of the same broader issue: the potential alienation from Israel of a large number of American Jews.

At the same time, with less public attention, a coalition of prominent American Jews has been pressing Israel to enact civil marriage and divorce. Both are controlled by the nation's chief rabbinate, which has grown more stringent in the last decade in deciding who is legitimately Jewish under law. The absence of civil rites is the reason that Cyprus does such a brisk business in Israeli weddings — more than 2,000 in a typical year, both civil and non-Orthodox ceremonies.

To the members of the new advocacy group, the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition, the power of the chief rabbinate to invalidate Reform, Conservative and even Modern Orthodox practices could hurt Israel's national security by estranging the vast proportion of American Jews on theological grounds.

"There are two fundamentally linked issues," said Dov S. Zakheim, the chairman of the coalition and a former Defense Department official in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations. "When you have American Jews who move to Israel and feel they are treated as second-class citizens by an ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, they all have friends and family back at home who hear about it and that discontent and disconnect spreads.

"And the second linked part, which is what got me involved, is national security," Dr. Zakheim said. "While Israel and America do not see eye to eye on every issue, on national security they are two democracies that do see things essentially the same way. If you alienate one pillar of American support, you've lost them."

The linkage that Dr. Zakheim described is echoed by several expert observers of relations between Israeli and American Jews. "Cynical Israeli politicians may conclude that diaspora Jews don't vote in Israeli elections," Gary Rosenblatt, the editor of the New York Jewish Week, [wrote](#) late last year in his influential column. "That's true, but without strong support — personal, political, financial and moral — from American Jewry, Israel, already embattled, may find itself even more alone."

The Israeli philosopher Moshe Halbertal, who holds faculty positions at both Hebrew University and New York University, put it succinctly: "Israel is leaning strategically on American Jews for support," he said. "It cannot simultaneously reject them."

Even so, any effort to curtail or circumvent the chief rabbinate faces much Orthodox opposition at home and abroad. Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for the haredi organization Agudath Israel of America, said: "Such initiatives are ill conceived and dangerous to the Jewish people. A single standard for religious matters, particularly in the realm of personal status, is what has kept Israeli Jews a single people since the state's inception."

Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America, a centrist Orthodox group, sounded a similar caution: "The abandonment of traditional marriage conducted in accordance with Jewish law in Israel would import and exacerbate the diaspora's problem to Israel, and could lead to the creation of two separate national identities."

In Israel, the push for religious pluralism collides with the nation's founding principles and parliamentary politics. It was the secular socialist David Ben-Gurion, who as the nation's first prime minister, granted the chief rabbinate exclusive dominion over such state matters as marriage, divorce and conversion.

Ben-Gurion mistakenly expected that Orthodox Judaism would wither away in modern times. Pragmatically, he required some religious allies in the face of widespread Orthodox opposition to creating a Jewish state. In practice, the chief rabbis of Israel for

its first 40 years or so leaned more toward being religious nationalists more than theological fundamentalists.

Efforts by the Reform and Conservative movements to gain equal standing to the Orthodox in Israel went fitfully, in part because even secular Israelis saw those movements as American imports. So persistent was the sentimental hold of religious tradition even on such Israelis that their revealing joke went, “The synagogue I don’t go to is Orthodox.”

The influx of a million Russians in recent decades changed everything. Several hundred thousand were not considered Jewish under Halakha, religious law, and Israelis outside the haredi community began searching for either formal or de facto compromises to allow for their conversion.

Then, in 2008, Israel’s highest rabbinical court invalidated 40,000 conversions — even though they had been overseen by an Orthodox rabbi. To Dr. Zakheim, the outcry after that decision created the conditions for the present effort to push for civil marriage and divorce, which was seen as a more achievable short-term goal than reforming the conversion process and permitting non-Orthodox religious marriages.

Significantly, the coalition includes several prominent Modern Orthodox individuals and groups — the rabbis Asher Lopatin, Marc Angel and Irving Greenberg; the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance — along with the more expected representation of Reform and Conservative Jews.

The configuration of the coalition has some parallels in Israel, as well. Within Mr. Netanyahu’s now-defunct ruling coalition, parties as otherwise divergent as the center-left Yesh Atid and the pro-settler Jewish Home concurred on ending draft deferments for haredi men. But the coming elections in Israel increase the likelihood that whether Likud or the Zionist Camp takes power, it will require an alliance with one or several religious parties to hold a parliamentary majority.

“We know the election is going to be fought on other grounds — foreign policy, economics, the relationship with the U.S.,” said Steven Bayme, director of the American Jewish Committee’s Koppelman Institute on American Jewish-Israeli Relations. “But the voices of American Jews need to be heard, even on what appears to be an Israeli issue that hasn’t caught fire with Israelis. We’ve got to be a consciousness-raising effort with a lobbying arm.”