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“The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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April 11, 2016

Dear Friends

I shuddered in the late 60s when I read Simon Herman's prediction that Israeli and American Jewish societies were growing apart. Now I am watching the fruition of his prediction.

Narratives matter. This weekend's Haaretz contained an article [\[click here\]](#) about how the informal education system under the Netanyahu regime is purposefully teaching their right-wing political narrative in informal Jewish education: like trips and workshops.

The same forces are pushing the narrative that the only legitimate Judaism, the only traditional legitimate Jewish expression, is the Haredi version of Jewish life, without any understanding of the progress of history,

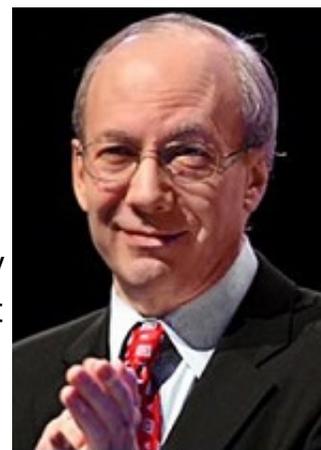
Discuss this and other issues with fellow RRFEI members in the network's new Facebook group by clicking [HERE!](#)



What Do U.S. Jews Need to Do to Support Religious Freedom in Israel?

By Rabbi Eric Yoffie

Public pressure in Israel and America – demonstrations, press coverage, arrests and civil disobedience, public meetings at synagogues, petitions, protests to Israeli diplomats – is what made the agreement possible. And only public pressure will save the agreement now.



That's my take at least. The leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel have said that if the government backs away from the deal, they will appeal to Israel's Supreme Court. I am supportive of that, but going to the High Court could take months or years to resolve an issue that, in theory at least, has already been resolved.

Natan Sharansky, in an interview with Haaretz, has assured world Jewry that Prime Minister Netanyahu sincerely wants

and shunning the modern world around them. Their Judaism is obscurantist and anti-modern, anti-democratic, sexist and racist. That's how the narrative is unfolding.

Earlier this week, Haaretz published an article by Eric Yoffie [\[click here\]](#) in which he calls us to action because now is the time. Eric opens with this statement:

"The Western Wall agreement is collapsing, and it is time for Reform and Conservative Jews and all those who care about religious freedom and gender equality in Israel to go back to the barricades."

He is not speaking metaphorically. It's now or never, in Rabbi Yoffie's opinion, and we had better pressure the Netanyahu government, because the only thing that makes a difference with the current Israeli government is political pressure.

At stake is the vision of a Jewish State held by the vast majority of American Jews, and nothing less. Perhaps we don't care about whether we can pray in our manner from our siddurim at the Kotel. Perhaps that's not

an amicable resolution of the matter. Perhaps. But the issue is not what he wants but what he is prepared to fight for. And long experience has taught us that when the ultra-Orthodox parties flex their muscles, even a tiny bit, Bibi folds like a house of cards. He has done it on issues of conversion and marriage, and infamously, on the drafting of yeshiva students. In the 2013 election, he favored a military draft of ultra-Orthodox young men, and in the 2015 election, he opposed it. In fact, on matters of religion and state, he has spent his entire political career as a creature of political pressure rather than political principle.

We see this too in how he deals with the Western Wall. For nearly a quarter of a century, when the Women of the Wall were not making headlines, he looked the other way. But when the women's struggle for a place at the Wall became a regular story in the New York Times and generated real anger among American Jews, Netanyahu took action. He summoned American Jewish leaders to Jerusalem, involved Natan Sharansky in the negotiations, gave a rousing speech to Federation leaders on the need for a compromise, and assigned top staffers to find a solution. And to the credit of all, the Prime Minister included, they did.

The agreement was not an unalloyed victory for the Reform and Conservative movements. It left control of the Women's Section of the Wall in the main plaza in the hands of the Orthodox authorities. The non-Orthodox movements were given the right to gather for egalitarian prayer at the southern tip of the Wall—a right they had already enjoyed for almost two decades. But the non-Orthodox representatives astutely negotiated a share in the governance of the egalitarian area, a concession that was widely interpreted, and correctly so, as conferring a new measure of government recognition on Reform and Conservative Judaism in Israel. When Orthodox political and religious leaders, who had originally accepted the arrangements, understood this, they howled in protest, retracted their consent, and demanded a return to the status quo. And the ultra-Orthodox parties threatened to leave the government if the agreement was permitted to stand.

This was a moment of truth for Bibi Netanyahu. After all, a deal had been reached after exhaustive negotiations, and the

significant in people's lives. But the larger point, our place in the mainstream of Jewish life, is critical to the future of our community and Jews worldwide.

We would like to hear your version of this narrative. What actions, in responding to Eric Yoffie, ought we undertake? What actions, launched now, might unite us and make a difference? The breakthrough achieved just a few months ago, recognizing liberal Judaism as legitimate in Israel, is being so undermined as possibly become meaningless. Or, is there another narrative developing now?

Please, send us your opinions or post them on FB at the FB group for RRFEI (Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel) [\[link\]](#), or to organizers@rrfei.org.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Kol tuv,

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- [Western Wall compromise agreement](#)
- [Chief Rabbi Lau attacks](#)

agreement of both sides had been secured. And the Reform and Conservative movements could not accept any reduction of their role in the Wall's governance. It was modest to begin with and justified all of the difficult compromises they had to make. All that Bibi had to do was show a little backbone and say to the ultra-Orthodox parties: "The time for deal-making is over. No more changes."

But he didn't, despite his explicit promise to world Jewry to make the Kotel a "source of unity" for Jews everywhere. Instead, Bibi appointed his bureau chief, David Sharan, to come up with terms to satisfy the ultra-Orthodox. Sharansky has now said that Netanyahu should be given the time that he has requested "to bridge the disagreement." But "bridging the disagreement" is just another term for demanding more concessions from Reform and Conservative Jews. They, and not the ultra-Orthodox, will pay the price; after all, the whole purpose of Sharan's mission is to keep the ultra-Orthodox happy.

And what is the lesson for Reform and Conservative Judaism and proponents of religious liberty in the Jewish state? That for Bibi Netanyahu, when it comes to the religious rights of non-Orthodox Jews, a deal is not a deal and a promise is not a promise. That soaring rhetoric and extravagant assurances mean nothing. That if this deal can be summarily set aside, then no deal, ever, is worth the paper it is written on.

And most of all: That Bibi responds to pressure, and to pressure alone. It was pressure from Women of the Wall, with Reform and Conservative backing, that put the Kotel on Bibi's agenda. It was pressure from the ultra-Orthodox parties that got the Kotel removed from Bibi's agenda. And only a new round of pressure, especially from Diaspora Jewry, will keep the ultra-Orthodox powers from again imposing their will on the state of Israel.

Will this happen? It is not clear. American Jews are immersed in their own elections and caught up in the bizarre campaign for president.

On the other hand, frustration at the appalling behavior of Israel's religious leaders has reached a boiling point among American Jews. Hardly a week passes without a religious

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member of Israel's government unleashing a torrent of verbal abuse at non-Orthodox Judaism — words that Jerry Silverman of JFNA has called “invective” and that Jonathan Greenblatt of ADL has characterized as “public expressions of hate.” The challenge for Jewish and community leaders in America is to channel that frustration into organized protest and political pressure in every conceivable Jewish forum, with a focus on the Kotel.

American Jews want a Western Wall that is open to all and governed in partnership with the great religious movements of Jewish life. If we don't fight for it now, and instead permit Israel's leaders to renege yet again on solemn commitments, the opportunity will be lost for a generation.

ADDITIONAL READING:

- [\[Click for:\] Goodbye to the Reign of the Rabbinate, Hello to a New Era of Judaism](#) by Anshel Pfeffer, Haaretz



Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel

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