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Western Wall.(Photo by: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

## Realigning Israel's priorities

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Time and again, governments have placated the haredi community by sacrificing religious freedom for all Jews in exchange for haredi electoral support.

Israel's Declaration of Independence is an inspiring testament to principles to which Israel has committed herself: "[The State of Israel] will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions."

Certainly Israel strives toward these ideals and remains, in comparison to its neighbors, a beacon of democracy.

But as it relates to religious freedom for all Jews, Israel still has a long way to go.

Time and again, governments, whether led by Likud, Labor or their predecessors, have placated the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community by sacrificing religious freedom for all Jews in exchange for haredi electoral support. Indeed, the past several months have witnessed at least two such instances.

For decades, Masorti/Conservative Jews, Reform Jews and Women of the Wall, who wish to pray at the Western Wall plaza in accordance with their beliefs, and in a manner of which the haredim disapprove, had been prevented from doing so. After an over 10-year legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that the government must build a prayer space in the Robinson's Arch area of the Western Wall at which such prayers could take place. The government never obeyed that order.

However, in 2012, in the aftermath of the public relations fiasco that resulted from the arrest of Women of the Wall leader Anat Hoffman for wearing a tallit at the Western Wall plaza, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky to pursue the vision of "One Wall for One People." Negotiations began in 2013 among the

Conservative/Masorti and Reform Movements, Women of the Wall, the Jewish Federations of North America, the Jewish Agency for Israel and then Cabinet Secretary Avichai Mandelblit on behalf of the government.

The three-year negotiations, which included shuttle diplomacy by Mandelblit with Rav Hakotel Shmuel Rabinowitz, resulted in an agreement based on the approval of all the parties concerned and Rabbi Rabinowitz, who had the consent of the haredi political parties. The pluralistic coalition agreed to give many painful compromises to the haredim as long as two fundamental principles remained in place: official government recognition of the Conservative/ Masorti and Reform movements and Women of the Wall at the pluralistic prayer site, and a common entrance, with the pluralistic prayer site visible so that worshipers could decide how and where to pray.

After the agreement was announced by the government with great fanfare, Rabbi Rabinowitz and haredi party leaders denounced the plan. The rabbi called it a “desecration” and MK Moshe Gafni of the United Torah Judaism party called Reform Jews “clowns” and Shas leader Arye Deri said his party would leave any government that recognized Reform Judaism. Faced with such opposition, the government has failed to implement the agreed-upon plan.

The second setback to freedom of religion for all Jews in Israel in the last few months concerns the use of taxpayer- funded mikvaot (ritual baths). Conservative/ Masorti and Reform Jews were forbidden by the haredi-run Religious Services Ministry from using public mikvaot for conversions. After another 10-year legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled in February that the ministry’s actions were discriminatory and Conservative/Masorti and Reform Jews may perform conversions at public mikvaot. Haredi political leaders denounced this decision and introduced a bill to overturn the court’s ruling, which was voted into law with the government coalition’s support.

So we come, again and again, to the very essence of the matter. From the perspective of the government-funded haredi religious monopoly, Jews who want to practice Judaism in accordance with their consciences and not in accord with haredi principles must be prevented from doing so by the power of the state. And the haredi opposition to such religious practice is not limited to the Western Wall or publicly funded mikvaot, which is bad enough, but also to marriages, divorces, conversions, adoptions, cemeteries and a host of other issues. While some of Israel’s most seasoned and Western-oriented politicians will most earnestly decry these facts in private, they do not care enough to spend any political capital to change things. In the face of the rollback of almost every law that has been passed to curtail haredi hegemony, including laws concerning army service and educational curricula for children, it would be an understatement to say that religious freedom and religious pluralism are not high on the list of this coalition’s priorities. But truth be told, it has not really been high on the priority list of any Israeli party or coalition.

But complacency by the government in the face of these violations of minority rights, equal access to public accommodation and religious freedom comes at a high price. It erodes the credibility of the government with the Diaspora. Proposing a grand plan to solve a problem, negotiating it for three years, signing it into law and then failing to implement it as soon as the haredim exercise their heckler’s veto is not a confidence-building measure on the world stage.

This pattern presents a profound and mounting security threat to the State of Israel by alienating Diaspora Jewry, especially in North America, who serve an essential role in supporting the US-

Israel relationship. Finally, it contravenes human nature by maintaining the assumption that ridiculing people's beliefs, taking their loyalties for granted or behaving as if their love and patience are measures of their gullibility, never has consequences.

In a recent speech to a group of high-level Israel donors and advocates, I mentioned that one strategy toward achieving greater religious pluralism is to educate people about how the Israeli political and legal system works. I was taken aback when the very notion that the government could be helpful was met by these donors and leaders with laughter. A cynicism we can ill afford is overtaking the community. In the never-ending marketplace of Israeli political negotiations, the government needs to invest something here. We declare over and over how precious Israel is to us. What are we worth to Israel?

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