

Israel- a place of division, connection, and love

RH morning 2017

Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A new rabbi comes to a well-established congregation. Every week on the Sabbath, a fight erupts during the service. When it comes time to recite the Shema prayer, half of the congregation stands and the other half sits. The half who stand say, "Of course we stand for the Shema. It's the credo of Judaism. Throughout history, thousands of Jews have died with the words of the Shema on their lips." The half who remain seated say, "No. According to the Shulchan Aruch (the code of Jewish law), if you are seated when you get to the Shema you remain seated."

The people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, "Stand up!" while the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing, "Sit down!" It's destroying the whole decorum of the service, and driving the new rabbi crazy. Finally, it's brought to the rabbi's attention that at a nearby home for the aged is a 98-year-old man who was a founding member of the congregation. So, in accordance with Talmudic tradition, the rabbi appoints a delegation of three, one who stands for the Shema, one who sits, and the rabbi himself, to go interview the man. They enter his room, and the man who stands for the Shema rushes over to the old man and says, "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to stand for the Shema?"

"No," the old man answers in a weak voice. "That wasn't the tradition."

The other man jumps in excitedly. "Wasn't it the tradition in our synagogue to sit for the Shema?"

"No," the old man says. "That wasn't the tradition."

At this point, the rabbi cannot control himself. He cuts in angrily. "I don't care what the tradition was! Just tell them one or the other. Do you know what goes on in services every week — the people who are standing yell at the people who are sitting, the people who are sitting yell at the people who are standing—"

"That was the tradition," the old man says.

How many of you have heard that joke before? You have certainly heard that where there are two Jews, there are three opinions, and many other jokes that demonstrate that we are a people with different views who express them unabashedly.

When I was at Camp Newman, our Reform movement's camp in northern CA, I worked with 9th and 10th graders in leading them in worship and programming. Sometimes I had a couple

hour break in the afternoon. Often I went to a coffee shop to get WIFI, which is scarce at camp, to send pictures to our TBD parents of campers, check email, start working on a sermon for the High Holy Days, or edit my book. Sometimes, I let myself go to a winery. Well, this day, I wasn't in great spirits, so I decided I'm going to treat myself by going to a winery that I've never been to before. I found one in a remote place. I had to travel on gravelly road and it was so long that there were signs along the way, saying only ½ a mile left, only ¼ a mile remaining, almost there. I felt a little guilty that I was going out of my way to sip some wine when I knew I should be working on a sermon. I walked into the Notre Vue Estate Winery and the greeting area was empty however in the room to the side was a group of twenty adults sitting at table engaged in a spirited discussion.

One man recognized me, Elliot Swartz, and waved me over. "Rabbi Myers," he said with a smile, "We are the board of Camp Newman, please join us!" I'm flabbergasted. What are the chances of me running into them? Daryl Messinger, longtime leader of the URJ, was talking to other prominent leaders in our movement. Apparently this was the third winery they visited this afternoon on their group 'party' van. They introduced themselves quickly, I sat meekly down with wide eyes, and then they descended back into an intense conversation about Israel. At one point, they stop their conversation, and look at me, who by the way only had two sips of wine, and ask, "Rabbi, are you going to talk about Israel this High Holy Days?" I took a deep breath.

Some of you are aware that there have been unfortunate developments between the Israeli government and non-Orthodox Jews this past June. In January 2016, a year and a half ago, there was a compromise agreement on the Kotel, the Western Wall. How many of you have been there? You are aware that there is a large area only for men and a separate one for women. It is not just a divided prayer space but women are not allowed to have a Torah on their side, chant or sing, or even wear a tallit. Women of the Wall has been fighting for years for greater tolerance for women. Anyways, further along the wall, is the Robinson's Arch area, the area that was negotiated as place where Reform, Conservative, and modern Orthodox Jews can come and pray together without being molested or harmed by irate ultra-Orthodox males.

The Netanyahu government agreed to this compromise but then it didn't happen. There was feet dragging. When the Reform Rabbis met with the Israeli consulate general, Sam Grundweg, last winter in Palm Springs, he urged us to keep quiet and to just give things time. My colleagues were not placated. This past June, the Israel government announced that it was officially freezing its implementation of the agreement. The Netanyahu government reneged on its agreement. To add insult to injury, there is a bill floating around the Knesset that would grant

the Ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate sole legal authority over conversion in Israel for the first time in the State's history. This would delegitimize all non-ultra-orthodox conversions in Israel.

The reaction from Jews here in the US has been unequivocal.

Charles Bronfman, the Canadian-American billionaire and a major Jewish philanthropist, sent a letter to the Israeli prime minister taking him to task and noting that “to my knowledge, no other country in the world denies any Jew based on denomination.”¹

“Anat Hoffman, the chairwoman of Women of the Wall, accused Netanyahu of reneging on a “historic” agreement with liberal Jewish denominations. “This is a bad day for women in Israel,” she says. “The Women of the Wall will continue to worship at the women’s section of the Western Wall with the Torah scroll, prayer shawls and phylacteries until equality for women arrives at the wall as well.”

Natan Sharansky, a former government minister and chairman of the Jewish Agency, who helped broker the original deal, said the move was a “deep disappointment.”²

Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, the executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative rabbi’s organization, said she felt betrayed by the decision. “It was both a surprise and not a surprise — there’s been countless delays and backtracking. But one can only be surprised that the government of Israel could be so spectacularly shortsighted — and betray its strongest allies in the world. It is very demoralizing to people, [especially when] the Israeli government promoted this with such great fanfare.”³

Abraham Foxman, former national director of the Anti-Defamation League, called the decision a “slap in the face” to Diaspora Jews.

The Reform movement cancelled an upcoming meeting with Netanyahu. “We cannot go about our scheduled meetings as if nothing has happened,” said Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Rick Jacobs, who cited an “acute crisis between the Israeli government and diaspora Jewry.”⁴

When the camp Newman board members asked me if I was going to talk about Israel this High Holy Days, I answered with an emphatic, “No.” I explained that I didn’t want to fuel anti-Israel sentiment or at worse, apathy. I couldn’t see any good that would come of it. They

accepted my answer and I went on a tour of the winery with them. However, I found myself wrestling with my answer and not happy with it. I turned to them and said, “Okay, what would you like your rabbi to say about this issue and what kind of result would you hope to come from his/her words?” So the poor wine representative was trying to show us the metal containers holding gallons of young chardonnay as board member after board member approached me sharing their thoughts and insights. Generally speaking, they told me that they would want to be informed of this issue and guided as to what they could do about it. All of them are committed Jews, lovers of Israel, but this issue clearly upsets them.

ARZA, Association of Reform Zionists of America, asks that we think about money we contribute to Israel. They ask that we contribute to ARZA who will pass these contributions fully to the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. They suggest that we contact the Israeli consulate general by phone, email, and letters and insist that the rights of the non-Orthodox Jews in Israel be respected and treated equally by the Israeli government, and that we write letters to the editor for newspapers and media demanding that the Kotel Agreement be implemented. I have provided hand out sheets with the information about ARZA and our Israeli consulate contact information.

Richard Wasserman, one of Newman board members from Texas, also the husband of Tina Wasserman, the chef behind the Reform Judaism’s recipes, told me, “Just like we fight and argue with our brothers and sisters, we are still family,” he said with a smile. His comment resonated with me because I love Israel and this is why I probably don’t talk about Israel as much as I should. These kinds of issues pain me. I love the land first all. Everything is steeped in ancient history from the limestones that form walls in Jerusalem, the archaeological remnants that are thousands of years old, the waters of the Mediterranean, and ancient fortresses such as Masada. I love the people. They are so outspoken, loud, and overbearing. Maybe it’s because strong Jewish women have shaped my personality, but I find it refreshing in its honesty. I love the food and culture. The cucumbers, figs, and persimmons are the best. And I love Judaism.

This is why I am leading my second Temple Beth David trip to Israel this spring to celebrate Israel turning 70 years old. We will also explore how it is the birthplace of the three main religions. We will tour the old city of Jerusalem, learn about the Christian, Arab, and Armenian quarters. There will be opportunities to learn about efforts to bridge people from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim backgrounds. We will visit the beautiful city of Haifa and see how it’s a model of coexistence. Then we will celebrate Israel’s birthday in Tel Aviv. There will be shopping for Teri Roth and Eileen Tobey, nice hotels for Charlie Niederman, BJ, the best tour

guide, will be with us for Andrea Tabor, a comfortable tour bus for Anne Hoogasian, lessons on compassion and coexistence for Lynn Horn, great memories for David & Julia Metz, and lots of new experiences for Florence Sudakow & Chris Taxier. And for me, we'll hit one boutique winery in northern Israel.

We already have people signing up. I know others are seriously considering coming and I'm hearing from some of you as well. Deadline for early bird pricing ends on October 4. On the back side of my sheet is some information about the trip to Israel.

So that fateful summer afternoon, when I was just taking a break, feeling a little guilty about not working on a sermon, ended up being quite fortuitous, educational, and thought provoking for me. I feel that even if we have differing views on whether to stand or sit for the Shema, how to pray at the Western wall, conversion, and many other issues, I think that it is worthwhile to wrestle with what the state of Israel means to us individually and as a people. Through dialogue, it can help us define the values and ideals that are most important to us.

And even at times of disagreement, fellow Jews are indeed are brothers and sisters. We are one people and Israel is our Jewish homeland. It is a refuge, place of inspiration, and it roots us in our history along with our people.

I have to conclude this sermon with the words of Hatikva, the National Anthem of Israel.

Kol od balevav p'nimah

Still within the innermost heart

the Jewish soul yearns,

and towards the East,

the eye looks to Zion.

Our hope has not yet been lost,

the two thousand year old hope,

to be a free people in our land,

the land of Zion and Jerusalem

And let us pray, l'shanah habah b'yirushalayim, next year in Jerusalem.

Notes:

¹https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/03/world/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-ultra-orthodox-western-wall.html?_r=0

²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/26/jewish-diaspora-angry-as-netanyahu-scraps-western-wall-mixed-prayer-plan>

³<http://www.timesofisrael.com/liberal-jews-decry-slap-in-the-face-from-netanyahu-on-western-wall-prayer/>

⁴<https://www.algemeiner.com/2017/06/27/us-jewish-leaders-express-outrage-after-israels-western-wall-prayer-plaza-decision/>

<http://ccarnet.org/about-us/news-and-events/kotel-statement/>

**Central Conference of American Rabbis
Deplores Netanyahu's Government's Reversal
on Kotel Compromise**

The Central Conference of American Rabbis condemns the Israeli government's announcement today that it is officially freezing implementation of its January, 2016 compromise agreement to create space for egalitarian prayer at the Kotel equal in stature to the Orthodox sections for gender-segregated prayer, which would remain fully intact.

Reform rabbis recall the moving egalitarian worship service we held at that designated section at the southern end of the Kotel, when we were gathered in convention in Jerusalem in February, 2016. Nevertheless, the Robinson's Arch area of the Kotel, slated for the future Ezrat Yisrael or "section for all Israel," may best be currently described as a makeshift prayer space, in no way comparable with the sections of the Kotel set aside for gender-segregated Orthodox worship.

Today's decision calls into question whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a man of his word. The Prime Minister, whose name is on the January, 2016 agreement on behalf of his government, has apparently caved in to the extremist views of his ultra-Orthodox (Hareidi) coalition partners. Moreover, this decision further strains the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel, and makes it increasingly difficult for our rabbis to make the case of support for Israel.

The prophet Isaiah, preaching of a messianic future about the Temple itself, prophesied, "Let my House be a House of prayer for all people." Our pre-messianic goal is more modest, that the Kotel could be a place of prayer for all Jews. The Kotel is a powerful symbol but unfortunately one that exemplifies the inequalities and indignities to which Reform, Conservative and other non-Orthodox Jews are subjected in the Jewish State every day.

Reform Rabbis join our Reform and Conservative Movement partners -- and our Orthodox partners, too, along with Jewish communities worldwide -- who will continue to struggle on behalf of Jewish religious equality at the Kotel and throughout Israel.

Rabbi David
E. Stern

Rabbi Steven A. Fox

Chief Executive

Central Conference of American Rabbis Statement on the Israeli Conversion
Bill

Wednesday, July 12, 2017

The Central Conference of American Rabbis condemns the bill put forward in the Knesset by Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties with support from Prime Minister Netanyahu's Cabinet.

The bill would grant the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate sole legal authority over conversion in Israel for the first time in the State's history. If adopted, the bill would supersede a 2016 Supreme Court ruling, which permitted all *gerei tzedek* (righteous converts) to register as Jews with Israel's Interior Ministry alongside those born into the Covenant. Proponents of the bill seek to erase Jews welcomed into our Covenant by our Israeli Reform and Conservative colleagues and also by the many Israeli Orthodox rabbis who receive converts outside the Chief Rabbinate's purview.

President

The fact that the bill would not impact conversions outside Israel is of no comfort to Reform rabbis. Similarly, the threat to Jewish unity posed by the bill is not diminished by the Prime Minister's action to delay vote on the bill for six months.

In the Babylonian Talmud (Bava Metzia 30b), we learn that the Temple was destroyed because of a refusal to see beyond the letter of the law. Rabbi Donniel Hartman teaches that such legal inflexibility causes societies to crumble, not just in 70 C.E., but in every age.

As *ohavei Yisrael* (lovers of Israel), Reform rabbis stand among the Israeli majority, calling upon the Netanyahu government to stop dividing the people of Israel, in Israel and worldwide. Reform rabbis are eager to collaborate with all who would build Jewish unity, in Israel and worldwide.

Rabbi David Stern
President

Rabbi Steven A. Fox
Chief Executive

Central Conference of American Rabbis