

What American Jews Can Do for Israeli Pluralism

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Sara stood on this very bimah, tremulously *chanting* her Torah portion, and became a Bat Mitzvah, right here in the sanctuary of Temple Beth Torah. Her parents sat in the front row beaming. They had done everything right. They had embraced the Jewish value of creating a family, adopting Sara at birth. They had brought her into the covenant of the Jewish people by bringing her to the mikveh at the University of Judaism, and having her go through the ceremony of conversion to Judaism, so she—born of a non-Jewish birth mother—would be fully and forever recognized within *Am yisrael*, the people of Judaism. They had enrolled her in Torah School, becoming an active family within the life of our temple. Her father, deeply aware that he had been living a Jewish life with his Jewish family for more than a dozen years, converted before her Bat Mitzvah. Sara continued on through Confirmation, and it was on one of those Confirmation nights that she met Tzachi, a young Israeli who had been brought to Ventura through the Federation to talk

about a number of Israel programs. Tzachi left Ventura two days later, but over the next 6 years, he and Sara would trade emails, stay in touch. When Sara enrolled in Hebrew as a freshman in college, she skyped Tzachi for help with her Hebrew assignments. When she signed up for birthright, Tzachi invited her to add a few extra days and visit with his family. And when Sara graduated college, she found a Masa career program that gave her the chance to work for six months in Israel. Sara found something else as well- she found love. Sara applied for *aliyah*, under the *Law of Return*, and was accepted by the Interior Ministry as Jewish for the purposes of *aliyah*. Seven years after meeting right here, in Meister Hall, Sara and Tzachi wed.

This is a story about parents embracing the words, the institutions, the traditions of the Jewish community and successfully raising a positively-identified young adult—just like so many of you have done or are doing. Sara could be any of our daughters, or sons for that matter, any of our grand-children. This is a love story, and a

feel-good story about American Jews and Israeli Jews finding that there is more that binds us than separates us. But my friends, this is where the feel-good part ends. When Sara and Tzachi applied to be married in the state of Israel, the Chief Rabbinate, which has hegemony over what are called the “personal status” issues of marriage, divorce and burial, rejected their application. Sara was not Jewish, they said. The Conservative mikveh which oversaw her conversion at infancy is not recognized because it is not Orthodox. Sara could go through an Orthodox conversion in Israel. This process would take time, but this was Sara’s only path to being married as a Jew in Israel- to renounce her Reform upbringing and her Conservative conversion. Sara and Tzachi were outraged and hurt. Tzachi, whose grandparents immigrated from Lebanon, Poland, and Yemen, was incensed. It is incredibly painful for me, he wrote in a blog, that the country I love, the country I served for many years in the IDF, is telling me I cannot marry the woman I love in the country that I love.

You may wonder why I would choose this Rosh Hashanah to speak about the issues of marriage equality and pluralism in Israel, what with dire concerns about chemical weapons coming from Syria, and political unrest in Egypt. But I speak about marriage, because Israelis say to us- we can't put off talking about social issues until the day when we aren't in an existential crisis. Israel is always in an existential crisis; we can no longer ignore the difficult religious and social issues. Sara and Tzachi are like every other non-Orthodox couple in Israel that is asked to accept a religious framework that is patriarchal, unjust, demeaning and does not reflect their Judaism. As American Jews, it is hard to imagine a democratic, modern, Jewish state where two Jews cannot chose to consecrate their love with Jewish ritual, and have that marriage recognized as legitimate. In fact, these are the very values that 75% of American Jews have embraced and advocated for in our own support for marriage equality. With the overturn of Prop. 8 last June and the declaration that the Defense of Marriage Act was discriminatory, our U.S.

Supreme Court stated what three-quarters of American Jews have believed: that marriage equality—marrying who you want, and how you want-- is a civil right. And that is the core of the problem in Israel. Even though 63% of Israelis favor civil marriage—the right to choose if you want to be married by an Orthodox rabbi, liberal rabbi, or a civil authority-- there is no civil authority when it comes to marriage, only ultra-orthodox authority.

It doesn't have to be that way. Do you know that Theodor Herzl envisioned for Israel that same “separation of church and state” guaranteed in the American Constitution? He wrote in 1896 about his proposed Jewish state: “...priesthood shall receive honors high as their valuable functions deserve. But they must not interfere in the administration of the State.” And it hasn't always been that way. The notion of a “Chief Rabbinate” is unprecedented in Judaism- it is an office established 90 years ago by the British so they would have just one or two people to deal with about Jewish issues in Palestine. The Chief Rabbi is not the rabbi who is the most scholarly or

influential- or even the “chief”. The real “chiefs” are the political leaders of the two most powerful ultra-religious political parties, the Sephardic Shas party and the Ashkenazic United Torah party; *they* nominate who they want to place in the position of “chief rabbi”. The Chief Rabbinate has been plagued with so much corruption, nepotism, and power-mongering, that the American Jewish Committee, supported by the National Council of Jewish Women, recently declared, *“In the 21st century, a coercive Chief Rabbinate has become, at best, an anachronism, and, at worst, a force dividing the Jewish people and corroding Israel's international standing.”* This view is prevalent among non-Orthodox Israelis. The CR is a political office serving as a power center for ultra-Orthodox Jews--it does not serve the needs of the non-Orthodox.

So how do Israelis deal with this Chief Rabbinate? Consider this: in the last ten years it is estimated that up to 25% (Hemdat stat) of non-Orthodox Israeli couples have two weddings. Rather than submit to the Orthodox rabbinate, they turn to the dozens of

Israeli Reform and Conservative rabbis who perform thousands of weddings a year. These ceremonies include chupah and two Kiddush cups, breaking the glass, a ketubah...but they do not include a document from the State of Israel legalizing their marriage. For that, these couples, like Sara and Tzachi, fly to Cyprus to be legally wed, in order to have their marriage recognized by the state upon their return. For decades, Israel has literally been exporting this problem because of the failure of the Chief Rabbinate to respond to non-Orthodox Israelis. Second--and far worse: Israelis are forgoing marriage altogether rather than submit to religious rigmarole. In the last decade the rate of couples choosing to co-habitate and not marry has increased 250%! Yonatan, *who, unlike Sara and Tzachi refuses to marry until he can do so in Israel without the Chief Rabbinate*, wrote in a blog recently about his partner Shirah and their child: "Think of the message my children will get when they ask how come their mommy and daddy are not married. Think of the polarization you are creating... how many Jews you are pushing.

By holding on too tightly to your fixations of what Judaism should be like, you will lose all of us.” What are the implications for the future of Judaism, if our people opt out of Jewish living, because we have constricted Jewish law to fit a narrow few? What do we deny to the individual, when we deny the benefits of marriage? I believe that Judaism has survived for 3,000 years in part because of the commitments we make to each other in creating sacred marriages, and sacred homes, where Jewish life can be lived, celebrated, and explored.

If up to this moment, you have imagined Israel’s marriage equality battle to be important, but perhaps not personal, let me paint the fuller picture. How many of us sitting in this room are interfaith families? How many of us have a Jewish dad, but not a Jewish mother? How many of us have the orthodox-signed ketubah of our parents or grandparents readily available? How many of us have children or grandchildren who are in interfaith homes? Almost two-thirds of the next generation of American Jews are descendants

of converts to Judaism or intermarried couples. As long as the current Orthodox control over personal status persists, none of them will have the legal right to marry in Israel. In the words of Rabbi Uri Regev, a leader in the fight for pluralism in Israel, “Israel, today, is essentially telling the majority of the next generation of American Jewry: You are not Jewish, or not Jewish-enough!”

Only through making a place for the non-Orthodox in Israeli life—whether we are diaspora Jews or sabra Israelis or Russian born immigrants- will Judaism truly thrive in Israel. A Pluralist Israel is an Israel we have a continued stake in. But I speak to you about pluralism this morning because right now, after many years, there are real and positive responses coming from Israel. This last year, we have seen most dramatically that when American Jews demand pluralism in Israel, our voices are heard. The most vivid case has to do with the status of the Kotel. Responding to pressure from the heads of diaspora Jewish communities all over the world, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Culture Minister Natan

Sharansky crafted a pluralistic compromise that allows Kotel access that is sensitive to the needs of the Orthodox and the rights of non-Orthodox Jews like you and me to have a respected place to pray according to *our* customs. Ongoing pressure- from people like you and me- to find a pluralistic solution has been heard. Two weeks ago, Naftali Bennett, Minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs, unveiled a temporary upgrade to the egalitarian platform at the Robinson's Arch section of the Kotel. The non-Orthodox community made it clear that this platform was not good enough, it did not fulfill the Sharansky compromise. In recent days, open letters from Minister Bennett, from Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, our own Consul General David Siegel, with whom we spoke about this very issue last June in this sanctuary- all of their responses tell us they are listening to the demands for pluralism to have an equal and equitable place in Israeli life. Our experience and guidance in pluralism is crucial in helping create the quality of Israeli Jewish life its people are looking for. In other areas too, there is indication that

the rights of non-Orthodox are being heard. But make no mistake: these are still uphill battles. The right for Jews to pray as they want, and to marry as they want will not happen overnight, and there are powerful forces fighting against it. We must keep our voices loud and our expectation firm for what is acceptable in a Jewish democratic state.

In the meantime, we will continue sending our kids on NFTY trips, birthright, Masa programs, EIE and College semesters to Israel, we will continue to raise money to sustain social programs and take congregational trips to Israel, all to build and strengthen the bonds between us. But let there be no doubt. Sara Torf Fulton, is not the first TBT child to be told she wasn't Jewish enough in Israel. Our work as a sacred community is to advocate for the day when Sara Torf Fulton has the same rights as our Sarah Mehrnia, as our Sara Flam, as our Sara Heller, as our Sara Goldstein...when every one of our children and grandchildren are embraced as citizens and as Jews in the state of Israel. In this we embrace Theodor Herzl, whose

vision for pluralism and whose words continue to inspire us: If we will it, it is no dream.