

Alabama's Reform Jews need a progressive Israel

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Recent events in Israel and specifically at the Western Wall and the Temple Mount have focused the world's attention once again on the State of Israel.

This time it is religion which is the key dividing issue rather than -- or in addition to-- politics. In Alabama, the majority of Jews are Reform and most non-Jews are most likely to be familiar with Reform temples and to have visited Reform services on Friday night or Saturday morning.

So it is not surprising that we can easily forget that while Reform Judaism is most influential in the United States, it also exists in many other parts of the world, including Israel. In the Jewish state, Reform Judaism, called Progressive Judaism, has struggled to be recognized as legitimate.

It is time for us in the United States--Reform Jews and other Americans--to push the Israeli government to correct a religious inequality that is seriously inhibiting liberal Judaism's ability to thrive in North America as well as in Israel. But changing the political status of Israeli Progressive Judaism will take time. Meanwhile, the American Reform community needs a strategy to deepen our connection to Israeli Reform Jews, drawing on their faith and their talents to inspire a revitalized American Reform Judaism.

Israel's difficulty with Reform can be traced to the fact that most of its population originated in regions lacking a strong Enlightenment tradition. They arrived in the country with the perception that there was one authentic form of Judaism, Orthodoxy.

Some continued to follow the halachic dictates of Orthodoxy and others abandoned religious observance, but the terms of religious conceptualization were framed in black and white: "religious" meaning Orthodox versus "secular" meaning rejecting or ignoring all religious attachments.

The Israeli framework of religious experience has no room for those who would integrate the latest advances in science and technology--as well as philosophy, history, archeology, and biblical studies--into their understanding of what makes a religious person today.

The State of Israel recognizes only Orthodox Judaism, and only certain Orthodox leaders at that, as authoritative representatives of the Jewish religion. Only this self-selected group has the authority to perform civilly recognized weddings, for example.

Since there is no separation of church and state in Israel, a couple who wants to marry in a Jewish ceremony must go to one of these Orthodox rabbis and only these rabbis. If they don't want to or if the rabbi deems them insufficiently Jewish, not only can't they have their government-sanctioned religious wedding in Israel,

they can't even obtain a civil marriage license. The monopoly granted to these Orthodox rabbis stifles religious pluralism in Israel and makes life difficult for hundreds of thousands of its citizens.

Progressive Judaism has had a tremendous impact not only on religious life but on many aspects of society and culture over the past 150 years or so. To take one example, Reform Jews played a central role in the civil rights movement. Such positive influence of American Judaism on culture here benefits us all, and were liberal Judaism to decline, we would all lose out. But to be able to have a positive impact on society, it is necessary to be not only respected but also regarded as legitimate.

More and more Americans are traveling to Israel and finding that Reform is not endorsed by that state and is near to being dismissed as a cult by many, from citizens to political leaders. This does nothing less than undermine American Reform's influence in its home country.

Reform Jews from all over the world have struggled for the past several decades to build a movement in Israel under difficult circumstances. We understood how important this was. As Rabbi Richard Hirsch, then-executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, wrote in 1999, "If Progressive Judaism can develop and thrive only in a non-Jewish environment, if we cannot succeed in impacting on the lives and values of Jews living in the Jewish state, then the charges of our critics may be substantiated."

Therefore, he argued, the test of Jewish authenticity lies in whether we can build a vibrant movement in Israel: "If we succeed in Israel, we pass the test. If we fail in Israel, then doubt is cast on the authenticity of our Diaspora movement."

So far we are failing. As the relationship between American Jewry and the State of Israel continues to evolve, it would seem likely that American Jewish leaders will come under greater pressure to take further measures to push the Israeli government to change. The Israeli government, built on a fragile coalition, is likely to pay lip service to this, while maintaining the status quo.

Some have argued that this will lead to greater alienation, what has been called the "waning of the American Jewish love affair with Israel." But other outcomes are possible. The relationship between Israeli Reform leaders and those in the United States may become transformed, with the Israelis becoming spiritual mentors to the Americans. Alternatively, American Reform Jews may become further involved in pushing for political change in Israel, as an extension of their social justice advocacy.

If the Israeli Progressive movement could strengthen and acquire full civil and political status in Israel, this might have a tremendous positive impact on American Reform Judaism.

Obviously, Reform Jews in Israel are the only Reform Jews who speak Hebrew as their first language. They are the only ones completely immersed in a Jewish culture. They have other unique gifts. If the relationship can be transformed from a paternal assistance situation to a truly dual relationship of fully equal and thriving movements, there is the potential to reinvigorate the American Reform movement.

What is needed is a special *shaliach* program to bring young Israeli Progressive emissaries to American Reform congregations, rather than secular *shaliachim* who come to our communities primarily to encourage Israel advocacy. From what I see in my congregation in Mobile, Alabama, an energetic, charismatic emissary does generate excitement. But the impact is felt primarily in the area of interest in and support for the State of Israel.

Shaliachim with a different mandate could build interest in and commitment to Reform Judaism specifically, as well as build bridges to the Israeli Reform movement. In this way, Israel could truly become, as in Isaiah's words, a "light unto the nations."

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