

Tour of U.S. Jewish Communities educates Israeli Lawmakers previously unaware of local anger about conversion legislation

UJA/CJF sponsored tour shows eight Knesset Members potential for rift between Israel and U.S. Jews over religious pluralism in Jewish State

NEW YORK - Previously unaware of the strong emotions among U.S. Jews over a proposed Israeli law governing conversions to Judaism, eight Knesset members have said that a tour of local Jewish communities has inspired them to work to strengthen Israel-Diaspora relations. After hearing "unprecedented criticism" and seeing "clear signs of a deepening gap between the State of Israel and American Jewry," the MKs have returned home intending to tell their colleagues about the importance of the issue to U.S. Jews.

The tour from Sept. 21-27, sponsored by the United Jewish Appeal and the Council of Jewish Federations, exposed the eight MKs from different parties to previously unknown aspects of U.S. Jewish life and Jewish concerns. At a Sept. 26 closing luncheon with the professional leadership of UJA and CJF, the MKs issued a historic statement expressing their changed viewpoint.

"The group felt that passing the law will cause a serious split in the Jewish world and, therefore, action should be taken to prevent the legislative process and instead find a just and fair compromise that the Jewish world would accept...The Knesset members plan to hold an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister on this issue," the MKs said in their statement. Four members of the delegation indicated that they would consider changing their position on the proposed legislation.

The tour to Chicago, Baltimore, Richmond, Atlanta and New York exposed the MKs to the vibrant diversity of American Jewish life, of which they had been previously unaware. "In some ways, I was very jealous about Jewish life in Chicago compared to Israel...we don't know each other, Israel and American Jewry," said Likud MK Ze'ev Boim at the closing luncheon. "Maybe if we knew before, it would have prevented this [crisis over the conversion issue]. We

have to think how we enlarge connections, especially between people to people."

Tsomet MK Eliezer Sandberg agreed. "We need to continue this type of dialogue and make these issues more known to Israelis. The [religious] streams have to be represented in Israel and they are not doing that well there."

With the Israeli public poised to learn more about the U.S. Jewish community efforts must be made here as well to bring the two sides closer together, said UJA Executive Vice President Bernard Moscovitz and CJF Executive Vice President Martin Kraar. "Israelis and American Jews may be one people, but they remain unaware of many elements of each other's lives. UJA and CJF are working to change that," Moscovitz said.

"U.S. Jews have an opportunity to learn and teach by becoming involved in activities such as missions to Israel and dialogues with our partners in the Middle East," Kraar said. ✧

Israeli Knesset Members Pledge to Attempt to Stop Conversion Law, Citing Potential for Division Between Jewish State and American Jews

NEW YORK, Sept. 26 - The following statement was issued by eight members of the Israeli Knesset at the end of their tour of U.S. Jewish communities. The tour was sponsored by United Jewish Appeal and the Council of Jewish Federations, and the statement was issued at a luncheon with the organizations professional leadership.

"Unprecedented criticism and clear signs of a deepening gap between the State of Israel and American Jewry were central themes heard during the visit of a delegation of eight Israeli Members of Knesset from the coalition and opposition in the U.S. The delegation closely examined issues that are on the agenda for American Jewry, including the deeply troubling problem of assimilation and the efforts to cope with it.

The Knesset Members felt that a deep gap is growing between large groups of Jews who adhere to different practices and the State of Israel,

especially in regard to the Conversion Law in Israel. After lengthy discussions, the group felt that passing the law will cause a serious split in the Jewish world and, therefore, action should be taken to prevent the legislative process and instead find a just and fair compromise that the Jewish world would accept.

The Knesset Members decided to work among their colleagues in order to gain a majority of MKs who will work towards this effort. The Knesset members plan to hold an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister on this issue."

MK Ze'ev Boim - Likud Party, MK Roman Bronfman - Yisraeli B'Aliyah Party, MK Dalia Itzik - Labor Party, MK Addisu Messele - Labor Party, MK Ofr Pines-Paz - Labor Party, MK Eliezer Sandberg - Tsomet Party, MK Dr. Yuri Shtern - Yisrael B'Aliyah Party, MK Yona Yahav - Labor Party. ✧

OPINION PIECE

A Primer on Pluralism

By Mandell Ganchrow, M.D. President, Orthodox Union

Pluralism is a sensitive topic that has generated intense, passionate debate, yet basic information about its origins and ramifications has been scarce. I would therefore like to issue this primer on pluralism.

What is "pluralism?"

The United States of America is a pluralistic society, a secular country that guarantees freedom to every religion and ethnic group, thus enabling all Americans to thrive. Without pluralism, the American Jewish community could never have prospered to the extent that it has. While America was originally founded on belief in God and the primacy of religion, if this country were to be created today, I believe the Congressional sessions would not begin with a prayer, nor would the words "In God We Trust" be minted on our currency.

Indeed, I would suggest the America of today is a religion-neutral country. While religious neutrality may work well for a country, it dooms a faith. How can we be neutral of mitzvot? How can we be neutral on the 13 principles of faith as defined by Maimonides? How can we be neutral on conversions, divorces or "alternative" lifestyles? While we have lived with a pluralistic approach in America, it is with the realization that Torah is not the religion of our country. To introduce "religion-neutral" Judaism in Israel as an acceptable alternative to what already has been a 50-year commitment to authentic Judaism is destructive.

What is the role of the Chief Rabbinate?

The position of Chief Rabbinate dates back to the British Mandate in Palestine. When the State of Israel was founded, the Chief Rabbinate

became an instrument of the government, with the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Chief Rabbis elected by a national electoral college. The Chief Rabbis serve all of the people of Israel. The Chief Rabbinate's authority extends to include one standard of kashruth in the army as well as issues of personal Jewish status such as marriage, divorce and conversion.

... the America of today is a religion-neutral country.

While religious neutrality may work well for a country, it dooms a faith...

To introduce "religion-neutral" Judaism in Israel as an acceptable alternative to what already has been a 50-year commitment to authentic Judaism is destructive.

What is the "status quo" in Israel and what are its origins?

In 1948, then-Prime Minister David Ben Gurion understood that the survival of a Jewish State depended upon some sort of compromise between conflicting political, religious and nationalistic forces; a compromise that would be acceptable to the overwhelming majority of citizens. Ben Gurion solicited answers to the "Who is a

Jew?" question from Jewish intellectuals representing varying levels of observance. They almost unanimously concurred that the Orthodox standard should be maintained so as not to divide "one people." Ben Gurion was a renowned secularist with a pragmatic appreciation of the fact that secular Judaism will never secure our people as one. In short, a pluralistic-based theology will divide and not endure.

This status quo endured until last year, when cases were brought before the Supreme Court asking for approval of Reform and Conservative conversions performed within the State of Israel. The Supreme Court stated that although it was prepared to respond, and that it might indeed rule that such conversions were valid, the Court believed that since this issue has such far-reaching consequences, the Knesset was urged to legislate. If the Knesset refused, then the Court would be prepared to act.

To proceed with the status quo — or to create an ever-changing, self-defining standard — is the issue that now faces the Jewish community. It is the proposed enactment of status quo as law that the Reform and Conservative leaders have been trying to prevent.

Is Orthodoxy trying to delegitimize Reform and Conservative Jews?

No! All Reform and Conservative Jews born Jewish, or converted halachically, are Jews. Halachah (Jewish law) requires that the prospective convert accept *ohl alchut Shamayim* the conviction to live a life based upon accepting the yoke of servitude to God and His commandments. The 613 mitzvot are not a pick-and-choose smorgasbord. Torah observance

dictates an "all-or-nothing" approach to enter the Jewish nation. It is far from pluralistic — but it is this unswerving loyalty to Torah law that has secured our existence for over 3,000 years.

Do Conservative Jews accept all Reform conversions?

Interestingly enough they do not; and it is quite difficult to understand how Conservative leaders can ask the Knesset to validate Reform conversion, when they themselves do not accept all Reform converts as Jews. Conservative leaders in Israel were also critical of the recent marriage of two women performed by a Reform rabbi in Eretz Yisrael. Nor does the Conservative movement accept patrilineal descent. I am certain that no matter how pluralistic Reform leaders may be, certainly they would not consider Messianic Jews as part of the Jewish people. In short, an approach in which one considers oneself Jewish with a self-defined baseline, while "pluralistic," leads to the destruction of the Jewish nation.

(Continued on page 5)



YOUR "RESULTS" SPECIALIST



ANN LANGMAN
"Serving your real estate needs since 1972"

Multi Million Dollar Producer



6618 Fairview Rd.
Charlotte, NC 28210

364-6400 (O)
364-1691 (H)



- Estate and Personal Financial Planning
- Group Medical and Life Programs
- Individual Life, Disability, and Health Insurance
- Profit Sharing and 401(k) Retirement Plans
- Voluntary Employee Benefit Programs

125 Cottage Place

376-7434