

## Israel Diaspora Relations – A New Equation

A Statement from Rabbi Julie Schonfeld  
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March 18, 2010 (New York, NY) – Israeli officials faced “coalition challenges” on three fronts this past week: (1) US-Israel relations; (2) the cohesion of the governing coalition; and (3) Diaspora-Israel relations. A seismic shift took place this week that should not be missed. The Diaspora community, that has been too silent on issues of religious freedom when challenges to Israeli security and internal political unity were present, strongly spoke out.

The US and Israeli governments are working through a major crisis in the wake of the controversial settlement announcement during Vice President Biden’s visit. At the same time, on a different issue, the coalition government seemed at risk of crumbling under the weight of the intransigent ultra religious parties. The catalyst was the Rotem Conversion Bill that began as an effort to open the system of religious conversion courts. The bill suddenly expanded to include possible changes to the Law of Return and further disenfranchisement of the majority of world Jewry.

As events unfolded, a shift occurred in the third coalition: Israel and Diaspora Jewry, which may come to be recognized as the most significant outcome of this week’s developments. The Diaspora community has become progressively more marginalized on issues of religious status and identity over the past two decades. As tiny ultra-Orthodox parties have become both more extreme in their religious outlook and more powerful in their political maneuverings, we deliberately restrained ourselves. Yet by doing so, we allowed fundamentalism imposed by the ultra-Orthodox to be enforced by the Israeli government.

By holding our tongues in the name of unity, we have become ever less unified. But this week, faced with the possibility of the Rotem Bill passing, Diaspora leaders looked at the familiar equation: SILENCE ON RELIGIOUS COERCION = UNITY = SECURITY and saw it doesn’t add up. The net result of this equation is that the younger generation sees Israel as an increasingly oppressive and fundamentalist society. We must act to reverse the growing disaffection among young Diaspora Jews who will not accept a society that allows a religious minority to treat their core Jewish values with contempt.

As tensions rose throughout the last several days on issues of US government relations and internal coalition stress, the Conservative and Reform Movements continued to issue calls for letters to Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Jewish Federations of North America sent a high level delegation to meet with MK David Rotem and others. Natan Sharansky, in his official capacity as Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, spoke publicly of his alignment with the Diaspora on

this issue and the necessity of Israeli consultation with us in the formulation of laws that affect world Jewry on conversion and the law of return.

Last week represented a sea change in Diaspora-Israel relations. Diaspora leaders recognized that any threat to our relationship with Israel is a threat to the strength and security of the Jewish state. We said no to religious coercion-- not despite Jewish unity and the priority of Israel's security-- but because of it.

The vast majority of world Jewry cannot relate to the Judaism of the ultra-Orthodox minority. During this eventful week, Conservative and Reform leaders, along with the Jewish Federations of North America, called out the Israeli government on the coercive power that coalition arithmetic has granted to the Orthodox. We proclaimed that it so harms Israel-Diaspora relations as to name it for what it is: a security threat. We set aside our other agendas and spent our week on this issue. We treated it with the level of seriousness and focused attention that we, as stalwart lovers of Israel, treat any threat to her security.

Diaspora Jewry derived a new axiom this week: ISRAEL'S FUTURE = SECURITY + RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

As over 100 Conservative Rabbis, over half of the total rabbis in attendance, prepare for the AIPAC Policy Conference, an annual highlight for supporters of Israel from across North America, we have ordered 1,000 blue wristbands with four simple words: ISRAEL \* SECURITY\* RELIGIOUS FREEDOM. Ask us for one. Help us carry the message.