

Reading Material

for

JFNA Board Session on Israel-Diaspora Relations

Israel & Overseas Letter November

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A Message from Rebecca Caspi, Senior Vice President, Israel and Overseas

These last few months in Israel have certainly been eventful. The incredible return home of Gilad Shalit, ongoing doctors' strike, controversial legislation under discussion in the Knesset and, unfortunately, security threats, are only some of the topics grabbing headlines. Through all this, Federations – both individually and collectively – continue to find creative and meaningful ways to connect with Israel.

At JFNA Israel, we see the impact of these efforts every day – from summer camps for Carmel fire victims to employment initiatives that help integrate the ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations into Israel's workforce; and the arrival of Ethiopian immigrants to innovative programs designed to enhance life in Israel's geographic periphery. Continued flare-ups in the South mean that JFNA remains in close contact with our partners at JAFI and JDC, as well as national and local government to ensure that we maintain a high level of emergency preparedness.

Of course, we are always thrilled by the opportunity to welcome Federation missions and visitors to Israel. Thanks to all of you – this has been a “thrilling” period and we are anticipating a high number of visitors between now and the new year!

GA2011 was a great opportunity to gather and explore a wide range of Israel and overseas subjects. We thank those of you who joined the Israel and Overseas Institute or the exciting Israeli breakfast focused on this summer's social protests – and hope that everyone on site in Denver took the opportunity to attend sessions designed to highlight and build on Federations' incredible work in the field.

We are excited about the new Global Planning Table which was approved by JFNA's Board of Trustees at their post-GA meeting. Look for an announcement coming soon re two webinars that will provide you with the opportunity to sign on and learn more about this important new initiative.

It is with reluctance that I bid farewell to Shep Remis, outgoing Chair of Israel and Overseas, who is leaving his role after three years in the position. I cannot thank Shep enough for his tireless work and wise counsel throughout his tenure.

With that, it's my privilege to welcome our incoming Chair – Saby Behar of Miami. The JFNA Israel and Overseas team join together in wishing wish Saby a successful and productive term!

In closing, please enjoy this edition of our I & O Newsletter. And, please feel free to share your comments and suggestions about this publication, our [web site](#) and our ongoing efforts. We welcome your input and appreciate the opportunity it provides to ensure that we bring you the most relevant and useful information and engagement opportunities.

Shalom and best wishes,

Becky Caspi

The Audacity of Nope

20.12.2011, by Tal Becker

By **TAL BECKER**

There is so much anguish these days in the Jewish discussion about Israel. The sheer ugliness of the attack by a group of settlers on an army base last week brought home for many the distance between Israel as it is and Israel as we want it to be. Whether we are debating internal issues (like controversial laws in the Knesset or ultra-Orthodox measures to exclude women from public spaces), or external challenges (like Iran or the "peace process") our language is often tinged with a sense of essential pessimism about Israel's fate.

For too many, the miracle of Israel has faded. It has crashed against the rocks of prolonged conflict, the harsh reality of the Middle East, and the interminable power struggles between competing groups within Israeli society. The redemptive promise of Israel and its incredible achievements have given way in the eyes of many Jews to Israel as a source of worry and disappointment, and for some, of embarrassment and despair.

There is for too many this sense of inevitability about the negative direction the country is headed. The term "existential threat," whether from external danger or internal strife, has become a staple of our conversation. And many speak as if it is only a matter of time before the next war, only a matter of time before peace becomes impossible, only a matter of time before demographic realities render a Jewish and democratic state unsustainable.

It is as if this alarmist language ignores our capacity to influence events, ignores the repeated tendency of our history to surprise us with unexpected changes and new opportunities. The debate seems to have settled on the depressing conclusion that time is inexorably against us, when it is surely more accurate to say that time is primarily against those who do not use it in their favor.

Even if one believes, as I do, that Israel faces immense challenges, the net effect of allowing this kind of doomsday rhetoric to dominate Jewish discourse is profoundly harmful and often misleading.

It is time to realize that the public obsession with the precariousness of Israel's existence can only strengthen those who seek to threaten it. People like Khamenei in Iran and Nasrallah in Lebanon thrive on the idea that Israel's presence in the region is temporary, that wiping Israel off the map is somehow a realistic objective. Belief in our invincibility, and projecting that sense across the region (alongside concrete measures to enhance our deterrence) is critical to undermining the extremists, as well as to assisting more pragmatic forces in the Middle East to make the case that dreams of destroying Israel are fanciful and self-defeating.

As dangerous as Israel's predicament may be, we are surely in a better place strategically than we were before 1948 or on the eve of 1967. We are not going anywhere. There are many compelling reasons to be confident in our ability to protect ourselves and advance our interests even if the challenges are complex and grave. Israel is strong economically and militarily and it has a reservoir of human talent and a record of achievement that would be the envy of most nations. In the era of Jewish sovereignty, we have the responsibility and capacity to initiate solutions to our problems, not just complain about how severe they are.

Countering this defeatist language is also critical to nurturing the moral fiber and national character of the Jewish people and to cultivating a conversation about Israel that is rich and serious. There are, of course, advantages to concentrating on our vulnerability - not least in the appeal for world sympathy, as well as in the ability to spur Jewish unity and philanthropy. But we pay a high price for this message. We pay it in a young generation that seems increasingly disconnected from engagement with Israel which is too negative and too focused on survival for survival's sake. We send a demoralizing message to Israel's citizens and soldiers that its leaders lack faith in its future. We produce a shrill, unhealthy debate in which opposing sides demonize each other by essentially arguing that, since we are on a knife's edge, the standard rules of respectful and pluralistic debate cannot apply.

From a Jewish perspective too, this approach is deeply counterproductive. The Jewish people are 3,500 years old. We have seen it all. Our tradition believes that human history is ultimately a story of

human progress (even if that progress is uneven). And our record as a people is testament to the enduring truth of the idea that " - "נצח ישראל לא ישקר" - "the eternity of Israel will not lie" (Samuel 1, 15:29). Naturally, we can never afford to be complacent about our future, but we have little chance of securing it if we do not believe in it ourselves .

Jewish leaders can, through their example, dampen this fatalistic tone and discourage the sense of inevitability and the "can't do" attitude that is so contrary to the Zionist spirit. This does not mean that the challenges and threats facing Israel are not genuine or daunting. But we need to realize that our attitude and self-belief are not simply reactions to the reality we face, they are themselves central factors in shaping that reality, and in determining our chances of improving it.

As we approach Hanukkah - where we celebrate the improbable triumph of the few against the many - we need to reclaim the spirit of the Maccabim. Those "ancient Zionists" refused to succumb to fatalism, to the "audacity of nope," and not only sought to regain control of Jewish history, but also believed in their ability and their duty to do so. Our tradition, our potential and our interests oblige us to do the same.

Dr. Tal Becker is a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, an International Associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a member of the Hartman Institute's Engaging Israel Project. Dr. Becker hosts the Shalom Hartman Institute's Engaging Israel monthly live video webinar series.

Our World: Is Israeli society unraveling?

By CAROLINE B. GLICK
01/02/2012 22:09

We have far more that unites us than separates us. If we focus on this, there is no force either within or without our society that can defeat us.

On balance, Israeli society is extremely healthy.

Unemployment is at record lows. At a time of global recession, the Israeli economy is growing steadily.

Israeli Jewish women have the highest fertility rate in the Western world with an average of three children per woman. Education levels have risen dramatically across the board over the past decade with dozens of private colleges opening their doors to more and more sectors of the population.

Israel's diverse Jewish population is becoming more integrated. Sephardic and Ashkenazi intermarriage has long been a norm. Secular Jews are becoming more religious. A new educational trend that received significant media attention in recent months involves secular parents who send their children to national religious schools to ensure that they receive strong educational grounding in Judaism.

And as secular Jews become more religious, both the national religious and ultra-Orthodox sectors are becoming increasingly integrated in nonreligious neighborhoods and institutions. Ultra-Orthodox conscription rates have increased seven-fold in the past four years. In 2010, 50 percent of ultra-Orthodox male highschool graduates were conscripted.

The IDF assesses that by 2015, the rate of conscription will rise to 65%.

While this is still below the general conscription rate of 75% among male 18-year-olds, the rapid rise in ultra-Orthodox military service is a revolutionary development for the sector.

With military service comes entrée to the job market. The trend towards employment integration was blazed by ultra-Orthodox women. Over the past decade, ultra-Orthodox women have matriculated en masse in vocational schools that have trained them in hi-tech and other marketable professions and so enabled them to raise their families out of poverty.

These ultra-Orthodox women, who are now being followed by their IDF veteran husbands, are part of a general trend that has seen women fully integrated in almost every sector of society and the economy. The fact that women make up the senior leadership echelons in both business and government is not a fluke. Rather it is a product of the largely egalitarian nature of Israeli society.

True, as is the case everywhere, Israeli women suffer from male chauvinism.

And like the rest of the world, Israel has its share of sexual abusers, rapists, and criminal and social misogynists. But imperfection does not detract from the fact that women in Israel are free, educated, empowered and advancing on all fronts.

As for the national religious community, its youth remain committed to serving as pioneers in strengthening Israel as a Jewish democracy. Not content to limit themselves to national religious communities in Judea and Samaria, more and more young national religious families are moving to poor towns and communities from Dimona to Ramle to Kiryat Shmona to strengthen their educational, economic and social underpinnings.

Modern Orthodox women are taking on expanded roles in religious councils, synagogues, religious courts and other bodies. Soldiers from the national religious sector remain overrepresented in all IDF combat units and in the officer corps.

Israel's growing social cohesion and prosperity is all the more notable as we witness neighboring states

afire with rebellion and revolution, extremist Islamist forces voted to power from Morocco to Egypt and economic forecasts promising mass privation.

And in the Age of Obama, with cleavages between liberals and conservatives growing ever wider in America, and with the future of the European Union hanging in the balance as the euro zone teeters on the edge of an abyss, the fact that Israeli society is becoming increasingly fortified is simply extraordinary.

In light of these integrationist trends, the media circus in recent weeks that has portrayed Israeli society as frayed through and through has been startling. With women in Israel presented as underprivileged victims, national religious youth presented as terrorists and the ultra-Orthodox community presented as a gang of misogynist, violent crazies set to transform Israel – in the words of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton – into another Iran, an average news consumer can be forgiven for wondering how he missed his country's demise.

What explains this sudden flood of gloom and doom stories? Certainly it is true that in a highly competitive news environment, media coverage tends to over represent marginal social forces. Sensational stories make for banner headlines. And it is at the margins of society that a reporter is most likely to find sensational stories.

So it is that when reporters wish to push a socialist agenda, they descend on urban slums and talk to people hanging out on the street doing nothing. As a rule, these stories will not feature visits to vocational training schools that are educating poor people out of poverty.

Just as poor, uneducated single mothers in Lod can be depended on to blame their troubles on an insensitive government, so groups of ultra- Orthodox extremists in Beit Shemesh, whose own communities decry them, can be trusted to treat nonreligious women poorly.

None of this is to say that we should stand by and allow poor single moms and their children to go hungry or that we should accept abuse of women by ultra-Orthodox bullies. The former is an issue for social services. The latter is an issue for law enforcement bodies. And to the extent that these institutions are failing in their missions, they should be required to improve their performance.

But just the majority of single mothers, who are not impoverished, don't deserve to be placed in the victim column, so, too, the majority of ultra-Orthodox Israelis do not deserve to have their reputation besmirched because of the bad behavior of a small, vocal and easily provoked minority.

ALL OF this brings us to the issue at hand. Stories highlighting the deviant behaviors of marginal social forces tend to be simplistic and misleading, and to serve identifiable political forces. And so, with our national discourse suddenly dominated by stories describing the demise of Israeli democracy, women's rights and the rule of law at the hands of modern and ultra- Orthodox Jews, we need to consider who benefits from the stories.

It is notable that the seam lines being opened by all of the stories, which are again, about deviations from the norm of Israel's social cohesion, all fall within the governing coalition. Stories of "Jewish terrorists" set the security hawks against the ideological hawks. They set the likes of Defense Minister Ehud Barak and his supporters against the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria and their representatives in the Likud, Israel Beiteinu, Habayit Hayehudi and other coalition parties.

Stories about ultra-Orthodox misogynists make it politically costly for the Likud and Israel Beiteinu to sit in the same government as ultra- Orthodox parties such as Shas and United Torah Judaism. They also serve to weaken Shas among its nonultra- Orthodox voters. The fact that the ultra-Orthodox bus lines were inaugurated with the support of the Kadima government in 2007 is beside the point. It is the Likud that is now being blamed for their existence.

The current media-supported outcries against the national religious and ultra-Orthodox sectors follow the pattern of last summer's social justice protests in Tel Aviv. The purpose of those protests was to discredit the government in the eyes of working class voters and young people.

The current protests also follow in the footsteps of the protests of 1998 and 1999 that brought down Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's first government. Those protests pitted his Russian immigrant coalition members against Shas. They pitted secular Israelis against his ultra-Orthodox coalition members. They alienated young voters from his leadership.

They set his socialist partners against his capitalist partners.

The cleavages wrought in Netanyahu's coalition made members of his own party as well as his coalition partners fear the electoral cost of maintaining their membership in his government. And so one by one, they bolted his government until it finally fell.

Notably, many of the same forces – from the New Israel Fund to various political consultants who work for the Israeli Left to European NGOs – who were active in the protests in 1999 and in the social justice protests last summer are also playing a role in the current protests. The New Israel Fund raised NIS 200,000 in “emergency funds” to pay for buses to transport protesters to Beit Shemesh last week.

It also paid for two rallies in Jerusalem attacking religious bans on female vocalists earlier last month.

Last summer, Israel's New Left movement led by leftist political consultant Eldad Yaniv took credit for organizing the anti-free market protests. Yaniv and his colleagues were assisted in conceptualizing the protests by US Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg, who was also the architect of the social protests in 1998-99.

Indications of how the political Left has been impacted by the current wave of demonstrations are mixed. A Shvakim Panorama poll from last week, which posited the existence of a new anti-religious party led by popular television personality Yair Lapid and a new anti-capitalist Sephardic party led by former Shas leader Arye Deri, indicated that the Left as a whole has been strengthened against the Right. While Kadima would lose most of its Knesset seats to Lapid's party, it is Deri who would be the undoing of the Right.

The poll claimed that Deri, who since his release from prison has strengthened his bonafides as a secular- friendly political dove, would win seven mandates. Shas would drop from its current 11 seats to five. Deri's rise would decrease the political Right in all its various forms from its current 67-seat majority in the 120 seat Knesset to a minority of 57.

The media have trumpeted this poll as the first harbinger of spring for Israel's political Left. And certainly it provides some reason for celebration among leftist political forces. Like the protests in the late 1990s, and like last summer's anti-capitalist protests, the current batch of anti-religious campaigns serves to turn Israeli against Israeli by feeding on and inflaming sectoral envies and insecurities. And given their success, we can certainly expect them to continue.

For the benefit of society as a whole, we must hope that the basic health and cohesion of Israeli society that has grown so miraculously over the past decade will prevail in the current contest. We have far more that unites us than separates us. If we focus on this, there is no force either within or without our society that can defeat us.

But if we give in to the forces of contention and chaos, we risk endangering everything we hold dear.

caroline@carolineglick.com

Prophets and Guardians

Posted By [Daniel Gordis](#) On January 6, 2012 @ 5:35 am

There is, it seems, a bit of an occupational hazard to this column-writing business. It probably holds for all sorts of topics, but it's undoubtedly true when thinking aloud about Israel. Here's the choice: You can either plant yourself firmly on one side of the political divide, being predictably "right wing" or "left wing," or you can, depending on the issue, say what you think but appear a bit less consistent.

The advantages of the first option are clear.

Once you are tagged as a "right winger" or "left winger," people assume that they know what you're going to say. If you're "on their side," they read and nod approvingly, feeling ever so validated by yet another column that says precisely what they already thought. And if they assume they'll disagree, or worse, that the column will annoy them, they can just skip it altogether or sharpen their proverbial pencils and bang out the inevitably dismissive talkback. Either way, though, we know what we'll think of an argument – and of a writer – before we've even read a word. Ah, the eternal quest for a predictable and comfortable life.

But I've never thought that thinking, or citizenship – or love – work that way. If we love our children, do we validate them or criticize them? This is the wrong question, obviously, for the answer should depend on the context. Parents who never have a kind or defending word to say about their child probably don't love them enough. But parents who never critique their children are incompetent.

It's true of marriage, too. None of us would want to be married to someone who never had a kind word to say about us or to us, or who never made clear that they were proud of us.

But if all we want is that validation, we're probably better off buying an iPhone 4S and talking to Siri than being in a real relationship.

A functioning relationship is one in which our partner wants us to be better than the person we now are and can lovingly suggest, pretty regularly, how we might get there.

It's an anemic conception of love that would describe our role as parents, spouses, lovers, friends – or citizens, no less – as assuming a position of constant validation or of relentless criticism.

That's why some of us who write about Israel take a different approach. We don't care about being neatly classifiable as "left" or "right"; because to love a country is not that different from loving a person. It means defending but also critiquing. It means loving unconditionally but knowing that love does not mean overlooking serious flaws. To love Israel, I believe, is to know that the Jewish state is not just a flag or an army or some holy place. To love Israel is to love the real Israel, with all its many warts and imperfections. And to love Israel is to know that there is a difference between a wart and a serious disease; when an imperfection is so serious as to threaten the entire enterprise, then the most loyal thing that one can do is to insist that Israel be better.

But this approach makes life complicated for readers because they don't know, up front, precisely what they're going to get. They will have to read, and then think.

Not everyone responds so well to that sort of challenge. In recent weeks and months when I've defended the very legitimacy of the idea of a Jewish state, or pointed to the

Palestinians' obvious disinterest in peace, or stated my abiding belief that none of us (tragically) are going to see this conflict resolved in our own lifetimes, then one entire set of readers trots out the "he's a peace-talk-pessimist" line. He must be in Bibi's pocket. He doesn't care about peace.

But the opposite is also true – critique this government's entirely unimaginative mishandling of the so-called peace process, or point a spotlight at the medieval religious leadership that has Netanyahu wrapped around its pinky, and the opposite camp goes berserk. One regular reader wrote to say that he used to like my columns, but now I'm "beginning to sound a bit like a Meretznik, or even worse – like Thomas Friedman!" (Except for those three elusive Pulitzers, I guess.) Meretz is mostly gone, of course, but the derisive label seems likely to outlive the party. If you ever sound like them then you obviously don't care about Israel. You're hostile to Judaism. Or you're blind to the dangers of our enemies. And if you ever sound like Likud then you don't care about peace. And if you occasionally sound like both then you don't know how to think. Eventually Leonard Fein will write a column in *The Forward* (June 23, 2011) called "Will the Real Daniel Gordis Please Stand Up?" Because you either seek peace (or care about social justice) or you defend Israel.

But you obviously can't do both. Right? At a recent conference of the American Jewish Committee in New York one participant noted that she prefers, instead of "left" and "right," the labels "prophets" and "guardians" – for those labels each cast the "other" in the best possible light. This nomenclature reminds us that "prophets" are more than mere leftwing social critics – they reflect a critical dimension of the Jewish tradition, Judaism's classic vision of social justice. And "guardians" is better than "hate-mongers" or "peace-pessimists," or "Bibi-supporters," apparently, because every people needs "guardians," as does every state. To be a guardian is not to be a dinosaur, but rather to recognize that the State we're discussing is sacred, in desperate need of protection.

As I thought about it, though, I realized that "prophets versus guardians" still isn't good enough. For the distinction nonetheless implies that either you're a "prophet" or a "guardian." You choose one. And then you write, vote, agree or disagree.

But life doesn't work that way. We dare not force people to pick a camp, no matter how elegant the terminology. The Hebrew prophets railed against the injustices of ancient Israelite society but they were desperately concerned about the survival of Jewish sovereignty. And guardians need to protect against not only the obvious threats from the outside but also against the cancers that threaten to devour us from within. Will the Jewish people be any better off if Israel falls because of Jews than if it is undermined by the Palestinians? Either way, we'd be done for.

Genuinely loving this country means that there will be moments when we defend it and other occasions on which we bemoan its grievous shortcomings. Is that muddled thinking? Does that merit the cynical demand that our "real" self "please stand up"? I think not. It reflects, I think, the real messiness of life, of love and of hope. Imagine our world, and our discourse, if every one of us found the renewed courage to read, to think and to recognize that those with whom we instinctively tend to disagree might still have something to teach us.

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We Can't Say This

Editorial – The Jewish Daily Forward

Published July 13, 2011, issue of July 22, 2011.

- We could get in trouble for this. Not in New York City, where this editorial is being written, because legitimate comment is protected under the First Amendment. But our editorials, along with many other stories and columns in the Forward, also appear every Sunday in the English edition of the Haaretz newspaper in Israel. And now, with a new anti-boycott law approved by the Knesset and due to take effect in less than 90 days, the boundaries of free speech and legitimate expression have grown unpredictably and suffocatingly tight.

So, for example, if we say something like: — well, if we say something like that, we could be sued and held liable in civil court. And that court could award financial recompense to the plaintiff not according to actual damage done to his income if, for instance, , but according to what he thinks he *might* lose in the future.

Unpack this for a moment. We didn't boycott, we just expressed sympathy in a way that could be seen as advocacy without taking the leap from speech to action. We didn't target a product manufactured in Tel Aviv or Hadera or within the undisputed borders of Israel, or in any way seek to delegitimize the state. We surely didn't advocate violence or express a destructive opinion about Israel or its government and leaders.

But it could get us in trouble.

Which is why we have stricken the potentially offending words. Just in case.

It may be that when the Israeli Supreme Court hears the inevitable legal challenge to the anti-boycott law, it will rule it unconstitutional and prove, again, that a democratic system of checks and balances exists in the Israeli polity. It may be that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — who stayed away from the impassioned Knesset debate on the bill, even though it was sponsored by a member of his own party — will signal his displeasure and work to get it repealed.

This, however, may all be wishful thinking. The Israeli government has to answer to its own people before it answers to Diaspora Jews, and the inability of a weak political opposition and a tepid public response to stop this disturbing new law could mean that it is actually what Israel wants. It may think putting limits on free speech and outlawing calls for boycott are the best way to counter its growing diplomatic isolation. After all, Israel is not the only country in its neighborhood to use drastic measures to curtail political protest, and the prospect of a civil case for damages contained in this new law is far more palatable than the punishments meted out by ruthless leaders elsewhere in the region.

Yet, comparing Israel to its struggling neighbors sets such a low standard of democratic performance that it hardly seems worth the trouble. The threat of “delegitimization” — real in some instances, overblown in many others — should be countered with forceful, positive action to solve real problems, not silence them. No attempt to threaten or censor can hide the fact that, for 44 years, Israel has ruled another people with its own legitimate, national aspirations, and it is in everyone's interests, including those of the United States, to negotiate an end to this impasse.

The fear and frustration that prompted this new law are to be acknowledged, but they cannot justify such a dangerous move. Some boycotts are ruthless and discriminatory, true, but in other circumstances, . A boycott of West Bank products could fall into the first category.

But we can't say that.

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Steinhardt: A response to the fundamentalists in our midst

By Rabbi David Steinhardt

Florida Jewish Journal
10:15 AM EST, January 11, 2012

Yeish G'vul. There is a boundary. There is a time to draw a line. It's time to speak about something that has been plaguing our communities and the world in various forms. The issue of the impact of religious fundamentalism on others must be called out.

An event took place last week that has disturbed my community. And, unfortunately, it is reflective of a trend in Israel, in the United States and throughout the world. It needs a response from us; we need to speak about it.

An eight year old girl, the daughter of American immigrants living in Beit Shemesh, Naama Margolese, was terrorized. Ultra-Orthodox men spat on her, insulted her, called her a prostitute because her already modest dress, was not modest enough. It did not adhere to their more rigorous dress code. After a protest emerged, the Ultra-Orthodox gathered shouted "Nazi" at the police trying to maintain order. They screamed the derogatory "shikse" at female news reporters. The concern is that these were not simply isolated events. They were reflective of the growth of Ultra Orthodoxy and fundamentalism and its imposition on the non-fundamentalist world. And with it comes a great concern regarding the repression of women.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has responded and President Shimon Peres made an impassioned speech. In it, he defined a cultural war for the soul of Israel. He spoke about the need for Israeli society to defend and promote the state as a just Jewish democracy.

This battle is larger than the incident in Beit Shemesh. Women's pictures have been banned from bus advertisements in Jerusalem. And women have been, either denied access to seating on "all male" busses or pushed to the back of the bus. This is not limited to a few neighborhoods in Israel. It has become a distinguishing feature of religious neighborhoods. There have been attempts to deny women access to the same side of the street as men. And this is not limited to Israel. This is happening in communities like New Square and Morristown New Jersey. Here, in Boca Raton, it has used its influence to prohibit women from singing at our annual Yom HaAtzmaut celebration.

Modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform colleagues cannot perform conversions. And while Liberal religious institutions fight for minimal governmental support while the Yeshivah world continues to receive heavy governmental funding, often in exchange for votes. This has a corrosive impact on the democratic nature of the State.

Last summer thousands of Ultra-Orthodox protesters outside a school protested Israel's supreme court decision to allow an orthodox Sephardic girl entry into an Ashkenazic Yeshivah. This little girl came from a religious household deemed by local rabbis, not religious enough. They decided she could not attend the school. The court judged this illegal. Many in that community do not uphold the authority of the Supreme Court. Today, even Tzahal is challenged by extremists who believe the authority of their rabbis supersede the commands of their officers. The authority of

the State is being threatened.

This is not just about Ultra-Orthodox. This is about all fundamentalisms. This is about those who believe that they know exactly what God has determined for them and us and everyone else.

Fundamentalism is certainly not a Jewish phenomenon alone. We see it here with the entry of religion into politics; we see it around the world. And when it gets too big it becomes violent and it threatens lives.

Fanaticism is an irrational devotion to a belief. It's what allows a man to blow up a Planned Parenthood clinic and kill a doctor because he is pro-life. It's what allows a parent to feel pride in a child who straps a bomb on his body and blow himself up. It's what allows the Jewish Yeshivah student to ask a rabbi if it's permissible to pass by an Arab lying hurt on the road.

It is dangerous to any and all who are different, other than. It can be driven by political ideology or theology. Within the believer, is not just certitude, but great fear.

Certainty allows the fanatic to say that they know absolute truth. They have a value system that cannot stand up to question or uncertainty. And neither science nor historical truth comes in the way of their system. With fanatics nothing makes a difference except their ideal, their theory, their belief.

Our Torah tradition provides for a reasonable Judaism. There's room for debate and compromise. There's a demand to understand the image of holiness in "the other." More than that, we can demand reason, we can demand critical examinations of truth, we must use science to understand, we use history to understand, we view the social conditions of man, we take values and allow them to evolve. And we see spiritual, religious truth is not ours alone.

So what do we do about it?

Israel needs our support to be the best values nation it can. It was created as a response, not only to oppression but to the aspirations for a nation where the best of Jewish values, human respect and dignity can be lived. It was created as a Democratic Jewish homeland.

There is a boundary. It's time that we affirm that boundary and say no to fundamentalism and fanaticism, not only in other communities but also in our own.

Rabbi David Steinhardt is spiritual leader of B'nai Torah Congregation in Boca Raton.

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State of Her Own

Posted By [Ariel Beery](#) On January 10, 2012 @ 7:15 am

*by Erin Kopelow and Ariel Beery
for Tablet Magazine*

If all goes according to plan, this March we're going to bring a daughter into the world. Specifically, we're going to bring her home to our apartment on Chen Boulevard, in the center of Tel Aviv, the city we've made our home, though we were born in the United States and Canada.

Had you asked us six years ago where we dreamed of raising a family, we'd have answered "Israel" without hesitation. But recently we've begun to doubt whether we should raise her in the Jewish state.

It's not the escalating situation with Iran that gives us pause, or the fact that our daughter will one day serve in the army: We decided to live in Israel with full knowledge of the security threats it faces. The reason we are concerned about raising a daughter here is that the government is standing by as war is waged against girls and women.

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, the Orthodox have had the power to decide who is a Jew and how a Jew can live and die by controlling the mechanisms of marriage, divorce, and burial. What this means practically is that the government body that oversees all major life-cycle events – as well as regulating food production – is a religious institution, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Orthodox religious law is the law of the land: Only a man can marry a woman, only a man can grant a divorce. And because of Orthodoxy's systemic exclusion of women from positions of power – its refusal to allow women to be rabbis, or to recognize female Reform and Conservative rabbis – the interests of women have been disregarded.

The Orthodoxy of the rabbinate has caused friction in Israel before, but the well-publicized events of recent weeks have brought tensions to a boil. Though some had heard of the gender-segregated public buses now common in cities like Beit Shemesh, the other incidents of discrimination against women and girls came as shock: a 28-year-old woman asked to ride in the back of a public bus, an 8-year-old child called a "whore" and spat on by grown men, and a gynecological convention that barred women speakers. These incidents, carried out by ultra-Orthodox Israelis and tolerated by the ultra-Orthodox leadership, provided the majority of Israelis with clear evidence that the rabbinate's power has helped create a rotten attitude toward women in major segments of Israeli society.

If this sort of discriminatory behavior were isolated in a few neighborhoods of the country, it would be a shame, but we would hesitate to tell others how to live their lives. Increasingly, though, it's not isolated, and the discrimination and marginalization of women are tacitly permitted by the state. If we allow this trend to continue, Israel will cease to exist as a strong and vibrant democracy.

Due to Israel's coalition-based government system, where coalition partners are given control over ministries in return for voting as a bloc, governments from David Ben-Gurion's to Benjamin Netanyahu's have preferred to add an ultra-Orthodox, non-Zionist party to

their coalition rather than create a coalition without parties such as United Torah Judaism. Such a non-ultra-Orthodox coalition could, in one vote, break the rabbinate's power. But the major parties are stuck in a kind of prisoner's dilemma: Each party fears that if it votes against Orthodox control, while the other does not, the Orthodox would ally with the opposition to crush it. So, the status quo persists.

In this context, our daughter will not be considered Jewish by the state. That's because Erin's mother had Conservative Jewish conversion in Canada before Erin was born, and because we decided it was insulting to ask Erin, who lived her whole life as a Jew, to "convert" just because a state-employed rabbi decided she is not Jewish enough.

We could not be married in Israel because of Erin's official lack of Jewishness, despite the fact that we are observant Jews who keep Shabbat and a kosher home. (Our marriage certificate is from the state of Illinois.) Likewise, our daughter could in the future be legally barred from marrying the person she loves in Israel. If the laws continue as they are, the two of us will not be able to be buried in the same state-run cemetery, and our daughter would be excluded from burial in a Jewish cemetery when her life is spent. She'll be a citizen, just as we are, and she'll serve in the army, just as Ariel did. But if the status quo persists, she will go from cradle to grave knowing that in the eyes of the government of the state of Israel she is not a Jew.

For us, nothing is more painful. Our grandparents devoted their lives to supporting the state and its establishment, and we've devoted ours to building Israeli organizations that have connected thousands to Israel. But all of that is irrelevant in the eyes of the bearded men who have power over critical aspects of the lives of this country's 6 million Jews.

This is not what the pioneers who founded this state worked toward, and it isn't what generations of Diaspora Jews fought for.

It is time that the world Jewish community knew about this systemic bias in Israel – and time for Diaspora Jewry to act. It is amazing to think that while American Jews raise money for the state, lobby their political representatives to support Israel, and send their children on Birthright, the rabbinate denies the Jewishness of many of these Diaspora Jews.

This schism between who is a Jew in the Diaspora and who is considered a Jew by the state of Israel will only grow, considering that close to 50 percent of Jewish students entering the first grade in Israel this year are ultra-Orthodox, as Dan Ben-David, director of the Taub Center in Jerusalem, has noted. This means that if want Israel to be a Jewish state for all the Jewish people, as well as a Democratic state that respects the individual rights of its citizens, we have a small window to break the Orthodox monopoly on the Israel's core institutions.

Next year's Israeli election is the perfect opportunity for the American Jewish community – and the rest of Diaspora Jewry – to act. Diaspora leaders need to demand from the leadership of the Israeli political parties that they make liberalization of the rabbinate a priority. It's no secret that Israel's political leaders and Israeli government programs depend on financial and political support from Diaspora Jews.

The Jewish Federations of North America, the Jewish Agency, the United Jewish Appeal, the American Israel Public Action Committee, the Jewish National Fund, and so on, should give the Israeli government a 90-day window to enact legislation to protect the rights of women and the non-Orthodox. Jerry Silverman, Sheldon Adelson, Howard Kohr, Ron Lauder, and other leaders of powerful Diaspora Jewish groups: Enough with the back-room diplomacy. It is time for Jewish leaders, especially in the United States, to make it clear that no money or lobbying support will flow to the government of Israel, or government-sponsored programs,

if the state's official institutions discriminate against non-Orthodox Jews. No pluralism and no recognition of women's rights equals no cash and no lobbying support.

Our grandparents, parents, and peers did not work so hard or sacrifice so much to be judged unfit by official representatives of the government of Israel because of the crime of being Modern Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform. Our women do not deserve to sit in the back of buses, or to be spat on by those who cover themselves in black from head to toe. We need to use the means at our disposal to pressure the state to protect the future of the Jewish people. Our daughters demand it.

Erin Kopelow is the admissions director for Tel Aviv University's Soafer International MBA program. Ariel Beery is co-director of the Presentense Group.

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Come visit Israel. Before it's gone.

You're going to have to hurry.

By Bradley Burston

I have a nephew who's never seen Israel. I have young cousins, and friends and children of friends, who have never been here, but who have long wanted to come visit.

I want them to come soon. Before it's all gone.

The Israel I want them to see is dying by the day.

It's the Israel I saw when I myself once came to visit. A place which had a calm but breathtaking belief in a better future. A place that still had a shot at just that. It was this Israel that convinced me to stay.

This is this Israel that this government, and this parliament, has decided, once and for all, to finish off, precept by democratic precept. As they see it, the sooner, the quieter, and the more permanently, the better.

My nephew is going to have to hurry.

I want him to see what's left of a place of quietly extraordinary people who dreamed of decency and peace, who envisioned making a place in the world where both we and our immediate neighbors could live together: no longer hated, no longer hating.

It was a place where there was an overriding belief that democracy was sacred, that minority rights should be respected more and more, rather than less and ultimately not at all.

This was the place I came to so many years ago, unfamiliar with its rude clamor and its face-slap smells, the directness of its language and its unfamiliar concepts of personal space.

Foreign. It was a place that believed that affordable housing and quality health care and reasonable living costs and reliable employment should be available to the poor as well as the well-off, to the elderly and infirm and the pre-existing condition, to the Arab as well as the Jew.

I want my nephew to know that there was once a place that his great-grandparents, believers in social justice who had been anarchists in Bialystok and became anarchists in Boyle Heights, could take pride in.

I want him to see it before they kill it. Kill it with settlements. Kill it with privatization and Social Darwinism and the lie they call the free market. Shred by shred, what is good is being drained away, voted away, diluted away in secret, or torn away by force.

Every morning we wake to it. Dreading it. Every morning, a new abomination, an obscene policy proposal, a rabbinical outrage, new plans to expel Palestinians from homes in Jerusalem, new plans to drive Bedouin from homes in the Negev, new steps taken to insult the United States, new ways of threatening a free press, new permits to expand settlements, an endless stream of opaquely worded legislative assaults on democracy, from ravenous middle and back-bench politicians on the make.

Last week, as Israel marked the watershed of the assassination of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, I was thinking about the place this could have been. The Israel, for example, that was the promise of the Rabin government.

A government that related seriously to the needs of Israeli Arabs. A government that more than doubled the education budget for all Israeli children. A government that fostered construction of thousands of homes for young couples and families within Israel, that invested millions in depressed outlying towns rather than new settlements, that dramatically expanded ties with the Muslim world, and with developing nations.

I want my nephew to meet my heroes, the people who have made it through wars and tragedy and this government and who still believe in that Israel whose future is one of social justice and peace.

I want my nephew to know that most Israelis believe that settlements do little other than ruin their lives, stain their country, and block the way to peace.

I want my nephew to see that people here have let down their guard and have let the people in power run and ruin their lives. When scouts in the Book of Numbers called this a land that eats away at its inhabitants (13:32), they knew what they were talking about.

I want my nephew to meet my heroes, the people who still believe in the Israel that can endure. Not one big ghetto of a doomed settlement, but one modest jewel of a country. People who hope for good, people who see all people as deserving of respect, safety and freedom, are heroes. And, for the time being at least.

Haaretz.com Published 17:21 15.11.11

December 2, 2011

Minister Sofa Landver
Minister of Immigrant Absorption
Kiryat Hamemshala
Jerusalem, Israel

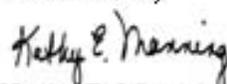
Dear Minister Landver,

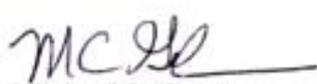
It is with great concern that we contact you about the new Ministry of Immigrant Absorption advertising campaign in the United States aimed at convincing Israeli citizens to return to Israel. While we understand the intentions behind this effort, we have already heard from our leaders and supporters who find the messages that American Jews do not understand Israel deeply insulting and simply outrageous.

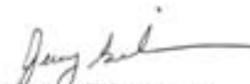
We fear this campaign will only backfire, and rather than simply bringing Israelis back, will alienate and divide Diaspora Jews from Israel. Rather than playing Israeli Jews against American Jews, we should be seeking to reinforce our shared love of Zion and to build the bonds of Jewish peoplehood worldwide. We strongly urge you and the ministry to stop this initiative at once and to rethink this strategy. We would welcome helping play a role in this process.

In addition to this letter, we are making our strong concerns known to Israeli government representatives in the United States as well.

With thanks,


Kathy E. Manning
Chair, Board of Trustees


Michael C. Gelman
Chair, Executive Committee


Jerry Silverman
President & CEO

Kathy E. Manning
CHAIR, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Michael C. Gelman
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Copy:

Prime Minister Netanyahu
Minister Yuli Edelstein



Jewish Federations Condemn Wave of Religious Extremism and Violence in Israel

December 27, 2011

The Jewish Federations of North America today expressed strong condemnation of a recent wave of religious extremism and violence in Israel.

The situation has been highlighted in the media in recent days, which has focused on the verbal abuse of an eight-year-old girl in the city of Bet Shemesh, by a group of ultra-Orthodox men. Other issues have included the forced segregation of genders on some public bus routes – despite the fact that the Israeli Supreme Court has outlawed this practice – and the unofficial ban on any female image in advertising in some areas.

“Our movement includes Jewish people from all streams and persuasions. Yet, despite our differing backgrounds, we unite today to strongly condemn, with one clear and loud voice, all acts of violence, intimidation, coercion and extremism, especially those that are undertaken, incredibly, in the name of Judaism,” said Jerry Silverman, president and CEO of JFNA. “We know that ‘*deracheha darchei noam*’ – the Torah’s paths are ways of peace. We stand firmly and resolutely behind the voices of reason and moderation in Bet Shemesh and throughout Israel.”

As a result of significant media attention in recent days, many members of the Israeli Government, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have spoken out publicly to condemn the extremist behavior. Similarly, the police have stepped up efforts and made a number of arrests.

“We applaud Prime Minister Netanyahu and other members of the government for their strong words condemning recent acts of extremism, and urge the government and the Israeli police to work hard to stamp out this stain on Israeli society,” said Rebecca Caspi, JFNA’s senior vice president for Israel and Overseas.

Earlier today, thousands took to the streets in Bet Shemesh to protest the acts of extremism, drawing increased media attention and scrutiny to the city.

Michael Gelman, JFNA’s chair of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, said, “We reach out to the Ultra Orthodox community, and in particular, their spiritual leaders. We plead for them to break their silence and speak out firmly and decisively. An act of this nature can help heal Israeli society and restore their image as moral, upstanding, Torah-abiding citizens.”

Stuart Kurlander, president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, which has a relationship with the Bet Shemesh/Mate Yehuda Region through the Jewish Agency for Israel’s Partnership Together program, also condemned the recent violence, intimidation and other extremist acts. “We have been working in partnership with the city of Bet Shemesh for 10 years and have come to know the community and its people very well. We stand with the law-abiding population of Beit Shemesh, and especially those groups working at conciliation and moderation in the city,” said Kurlander. “At the same time, we urge Bet Shemesh’s mayor, Moshe Abutbol, to put a stop to this religious extremism and violence, and help to rebuild a harmonious and thriving community.”

For more information, please contact: Dani Wassner at dani.wassner@jewishfederations.org

Israel & Overseas

Blog Posts from Rebecca Caspi, JFNA Israel | Jewish Federations of North America

Letter from Jerusalem, January 6, 2012

The shocking use of Holocaust imagery by extremists from within the ultra-Orthodox population last Saturday night provided a unique backdrop for a week of fact-finding and close consultations with Israeli leaders and social activists by The Jewish Federations of North America. Jerry Silverman, president and CEO of JFNA, joined JFNA Israel office staff and members of the local Federation community in a series of meetings and field visits designed both to convey growing concern about worrying trends within Israeli society and to reinforce the North American Jewish community's abiding commitment to the Jewish State.

As we've already come to understand, what happens in Beit Shemesh doesn't stay just in Beit Shemesh. And, it's far too easy to misunderstand or misinterpret what's happening in that troubled city. So it was obvious that this past week needed to include a solid block of time dedicated to listening and learning from a wide variety of residents, including leading activists, top-level municipal employees and the city's mayor. Karen Katzman, director of the Israel Office of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, which is partnered with Beit Shemesh through the Jewish Agency for Israel's Partnership 2Gether framework, was instrumental in arranging and facilitating these discussions.

Without question, a small group of fanatics living in their own world have crossed the lines of decency and abandoned Jewish values. Nothing else can explain their actions – actions that have rocked Israel down to its core. It is heartening that leaders from across the country – including from within the mainstream Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox community – are now speaking out strongly against these acts and the extremists who perpetrate them. While we might have wished to see this happen sooner, we applaud that those who may have been at first too passive in their responses are now taking proactive and public positions against the disgraceful behavior of the zealot minority.

Much of the tension that has led to the current crisis seems almost unavoidable. The rapid population growth within the ultra-Orthodox community is compelling them to integrate more fully into the general community than many might wish. A severe housing shortage and lack of public facilities means that those who would rather live apart are being forced to vie for assets and live together. This situation is very threatening to their highly traditional way of life, and they are deeply worried about the impact that this intermingling may have on their society.

In addition, there are political aspects to the situation on the ground that flow from the current coalition agreement. Promises were made by national leaders that are playing out on the local stage, particularly with regard to the allocation of some 30,000 housing units planned for the city. Recent attempts to intimidate the modern Orthodox community in the city may in fact lead to them gaining ground in their efforts to ensure that new construction takes into account the needs of all sectors of the population.

Yet, despite all of the complexity surrounding today's challenges, the love and pride that residents feel in their city is unmistakable. It was extremely encouraging to hear the commitment of leadership from across the spectrum sharing a common point of view: Beit Shemesh is a great city, and this crisis must serve as a stimulus to get everyone working even harder to realize its full potential. Rather than becoming enshrined as a symbol of intolerance and hatred, Beit Shemesh can and must become a model for successful integration and coexistence. Steve Rakitt, executive vice president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, arrives in Israel next week and will be devoting significant time and energy to working with their sister city to help lead this effort.

Concerns about Beit Shemesh, "anti-democratic" legislation under discussion in the Knesset and other worrying trends impacting the very fabric of Israel's civil society provided key themes for JFNA meetings with representatives from Israel's top political and business echelons. From these discussions, it seems we may be nearing a tipping point – where the magnitude of the challenges is forging a common agenda across the political spectrum focused on reinforcing the values at the heart of the Jewish and democratic state of Israel. A key session exploring these issues, featuring Member of Knesset Nachman Shai, has been scheduled during JFNA's upcoming Board of Trustees meeting Jan. 22-23 in Orlando.

One of the last stops on this whirlwind tour was to the Yitzhak Rabin Center, Israel's national institute commemorating the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which promotes dialogue and tolerance and seeks to instill democratic values within Israel's diverse society. Perhaps no place could have brought home more painfully or more clearly the lurking danger of failing to actualize this vision.

Meanwhile, Federations are working to nurture a more diverse and inclusive society in Israel. Collective Federation funding via JFNA does not fund ultra-Orthodox yeshivas, but does promote greater diversity and inclusion through grants to the religious streams via the work of the Jewish Agency and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Their efforts include facilitating the integration of Israel's ultra-Orthodox community into both the army and the work force.

Reflecting on his week in Israel Jerry Silverman said, "As the North American Jewish community, we know full well that Jewish and democratic values can be combined successfully. At Federation after Federation, we make decisions to come together in ways that honor one another and our diversity as a people. Now, we must do more to share this model with our Israeli family and demonstrate our faith in the underlying capacity that Israeli society possesses to tolerate and celebrate its own diversity. We should look to create and harvest critical opportunities for dialogue that will advance this goal when traveling to Israel on missions and in small groups, and working through our partnership projects with cities and towns across the country."

Shabbat Shalom.

Mounting tension with Israel's Ultra Orthodox Community - A Direct Perspective from Rebecca Caspi

Sometimes it seems as if there are no more red lines to cross. Yet, more than 1,000 members of the Ultra Orthodox community found a way to do just that when they chose to demonstrate in Jerusalem last night wearing yellow patches with the word Jude inscribed on them, and dressing their children in the uniforms of concentration camp prisoners in order to draw attention to their growing sense of isolation and persecution. And while it's widely accepted that these extremists are not representative of the mainstream Haredi population – some of them have previously met with Ahmadinejad and are now hoping to gain permission to settle in Jordan since they find life in Israel intolerable – their latest ploy has certainly grabbed center stage.

The imagery invoked at last night's demonstration hit a nerve – shocking Israeli society and moving it closer to dealing with two concurrent trends. On the one hand, there's a rapidly growing sense shared by many Israelis that they've had enough and are no longer willing to pay the high price of conciliation necessary to maintain the religious status quo – or accept increasingly intolerant views of all but the most Orthodox interpretations of Jewish life and Jewish values. On the other hand, the Haredi population feels more and more defensive – that a small group within the community has succeeded in making most Israelis blind to all but the worst extremists among them.

As the situation becomes increasingly polarized, voices calling for moderation are now being heard from across the religious and political spectrum. Rather than allowing things to spiral completely out of hand, the hope is that Israelis – leaders and citizens alike – will seize the moment to work together and build a renewed sense of understanding and tolerance, finding livable compromises which bridge the very real concerns that threaten to divide Israel society irrevocably.

Jewish Federations can have a role in this process – to provide a wider context based in Jewish peoplehood and love for Israel that is steeped in democratic and pluralistic values. Jerry Silverman and I will be meeting in the coming week with top government officials and political leaders to share our concerns about the damage that recent events can have on the Israel–Diaspora relationship and to offer our help and support to those seeking to heal these gaps.

We will keep you posted as these issues continue to unfold, and follow up with a Leadership Briefing later this week, including recommendations on how we can make a difference and ensure our collective voice is heard.

Rebecca Caspi, Senior Vice President, Israel & Overseas, Director General, JFNA Israel



JFNA WELCOMES SIX-MONTH DELAY ON CONVERSION BILL ISSUE

July 22, 2010

The Jewish Federations of North America hailed a new agreement today to delay by six months any conversion bill in Israel, in exchange for a moratorium on any legislation by the liberal religious streams.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has shown strong leadership in opposing the conversion bill as being damaging to the unity of the Jewish People. JFNA thanked Netanyahu for his advocacy on this issue.

The prime minister has appointed Jewish Agency for Israel Chair of the Executive Natan Sharansky to lead a dialogue of all concerned parties in the Diaspora and Israel to reach a compromise during the six-month freeze.

JFNA's President and CEO Jerry Silverman welcomed the agreement as "significant."

"We truly support this process of a dialogue table, which allows the participants time to discuss this important issue appropriately and reach a solution that protects the bonds between Israel and the Diaspora," Silverman said. "We are also thrilled that Natan Sharansky will be leading the process."

Silverman said the Jewish Federations appreciated the work of the entire advocacy coalition opposing the bill, ensuring it would not reach the Knesset floor for a reading this week. Leading the coalition partnership was JFNA, JAFI, the Conservative and Reform movements, Orthodox rabbis and a range of Israeli legislators.

According to the agreement delaying the bill for another six months, the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism (the Israel arm of the Reform movement) and the Masorti Movement (the Israel arm of the Conservative movement) will freeze any pending legislation in Israel's high courts dealing with religious issues.

In return, Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beitenu Party, which raised the conversion issue, agreed not to advance any conversion legislation for that period.

Ynet, the website of Israel's daily newspaper Yediot Aharonot, first reported the late-breaking agreement.