

Ki Tissa

This week, something momentous happened in Israel. The Reform and Conservative movements' converts were granted the right to become Israeli citizens. The Times of Israel reported, "...A non-Jewish non-Israeli living in Israel who converts to Judaism in the Conservative or Reform religious streams and then asks to become a citizen based on the Law of Return will have their conversion recognized by non-religious state bodies as conferring on them that right."¹

This was a tremendous victory, and we should all take great pride in it. Unfortunately, when Ben Gurion was Prime Minister, he made an agreement with the Orthodox leadership then living in the Land of Israel, and he gave them authority over the religious life of Israel. At the time, the Orthodox leadership's support was necessary for Ben-Gurion to govern. This decision has had ramifications for decades, and one of the ramifications is that those converted by the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel were not permitted to make Aliyah.

The decision takes Israel one step closer to formal recognition of the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel. Today, Israelis have limited options outside of Orthodoxy if they want to engage in religious life.

Regretfully, the culture war between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox in Israel, and perhaps throughout the Diaspora, will only grow in spite of – or perhaps because of – this decision. Now is the time that we begin to recognize that we have to choose a side in this struggle.

I have been reluctant for many years to engage in this culture war because of my commitment to Klal Yisrael. Klal Yisrael means that one must act with the welfare of the entire

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/conversion-ruling-ends-decades-of-official-shunning-of-reform-conservative/>

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Jewish people in mind. I'm afraid that the events of the last several months have changed my mind about Orthodoxy.

The resistance that so many Orthodox communities have shown to adhering to rules and regulations around COVID both in Israel and here in the Diaspora has given me pause. I wonder, How could a community that claims to be attached to the Torah, which is a teaching of truth, act in a way that is so contrary to truth? This question opened up a whole array of emotions for me bringing me back even to my childhood, during which I was raised in a Reform household.

As I grew more interested in Judaism, I gravitated to Orthodoxy and became very critical of Reform Judaism. The pendulum since COVID has shifted in the other direction. I no longer feel closer to Orthodoxy than I do to Reform Judaism.

I encourage you also to consider thinking about your place in the Jewish world in similar terms. We are proud to be Conservative Jews, and as Conservative Jews, we must recognize that the Orthodox community will never accept us unless we behave on their terms. That is not acceptable to me.

The Supreme Court's decision this week opens up the possibility of more advances, and I argue that we should begin to take seriously that we are in this culture war whether we like it or not. The side we are on may not even be the side we want to be on, but we are on it nonetheless.

The Jericho Jewish Center considers itself a traditional synagogue, but I believe that we should start to think of ourselves in more open and pluralistic terms, in part because of the exploration of our merger with the Woodbury Jewish Center.

The next big issue that I anticipate will rock Israel and the Diaspora in the culture war between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox is the status of the Kotel. Effectively, the Kotel has been turned into an Orthodox synagogue. This decision gradually took hold after the Six Day

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War when Israel conquered the Old City. As many of you know from experience, when you visit the Kotel, a mehitza, or divider, separates the men and the women. This practice must be altered. Jews who affirm egalitarian worship need to have a space at the Kotel as well.

The time has come for us to throw off the yoke that the Orthodox – not God – has imposed upon the Jewish people. Orthodoxy may be the future for some, but we know from experience that it cannot be the future for the majority of the Jewish people. We have a responsibility to work toward making Israel a more hospitable place for all Jews, not just those who practice Orthodoxy.

In this week's parsha, the Jewish people built a Golden Calf because they expected Moses to return sooner than he did. This is the paradigmatic idolatrous moment in the Torah. It reminds us that even those that who have been close to God, as the Jewish people was when it stood at Sinai, can be susceptible to the lure of idolatry nonetheless. I'm afraid that is true for a significant portion of our Orthodox brethren. The Halakha is a wonderful system of ritual practice, but it is not the totality of Torah. Torah is much larger than Halakha. The Orthodox, especially, the Ultra Orthodox have been susceptible to making Halakha the be all and end all of Jewish existence. This is simply not true.

I lament that we must participate in these culture wars, but we have to stand for the future. We cannot allow a group of Jews to continue to dominate the religious life of Israel and consequently to have an outsized influence on religious life in the Diaspora. A Rubicon has been passed, and we are on the other side.

In order to do this effectively, we have to be even stronger than we have been in our Zionism. Our affirmation of the Jewish state has to be louder than ever. We need to make clear to Israelis that they are our brethren, and just as we care that they have access to a wide variety of

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religious life, so too will we care about their well-being in the face of the defamation and threats that Israel is subject to.

This then is a way forward. We must recognize where we stand in the culture war and battle accordingly. In addition, we must double down on our commitment to Zionism since the Jewish state is the best hope that our people has of bringing Judaism forward in the world and enabling the Jewish people to have the impact on humanity that it is meant to have.