

An Israel Update: Progression of Progressive Judaism

Yesterday, the Reform Movement celebrated the ordination of its 100th Israeli rabbi. This historic milestone is representative of a more tolerant and more pluralistic Israel, an Israel where Jews are not solely labeled as "secular" or "religious," but an Israel in which the tapestry of Jewish expression is diverse and evolving.

Unfortunately, this occasion was overshadowed by violence that took place at the Kotel, the Western Wall, yesterday morning. Members of the Reform Jewish community, including the soon-to-be rabbis and the President of the Union of Reform Judaism, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, were accosted by private security guards who attempted to take a Torah scroll out of Rabbi Jacob's hands. Others threw punches, screamed and yelled, and outwardly condemned the Reform Movement's claim to Jewish authenticity.

Even more disturbing is that video footage of this violent protest revealed that Rabbi Jacobs and others were singing the words of *Od Yavo Shalom Aleinu*, a song of peace often connected

to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also symbolizes the hope that one day all of us will be at peace. Hearing these words pulled my heart strings, and reminded me that there is conflict not only between Israeli and Arabs, but between various Jewish denominational groups.

In 2016, there seemed to be hope that an egalitarian prayer space would be established and allow for men and women to pray together and bring Torah scrolls into the prayer space. However, after Prime Minister Netanyahu supported the decision to suspend this plan this past summer, the tensions between the ultra-Orthodox and non-ultra-Orthodox Jews have further escalated. Reform Jews have been called a "group of clowns who stab Torah," as well as heretics who "pray to new gods, the God of Sarah, the God of Rivka, and the God of Rachel."

Sadly, this type of aggressive hostility towards liberal Judaism from the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is not new. Recent comments and actions are unfortunately on par with the extreme

intolerance that has been demonstrated in the past. And, even though the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on Judaism in Israel may be declining, their voice remains to be loud and clear - any Judaism outside of their own has been deemed inauthentic and disingenuous.

Whether it be liberal Judaism in Israel or Reform Judaism here in the Silicon Valley, there are those who challenge our legitimacy as Jews. But I choose to believe that any external force can not take away this legitimacy. As so long as Judaism continues to be an integral part of our lives and we continue to express a desire to discover meaning within our tradition, our authentic Jewish identity cannot be stripped away from us.

While the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel may have the power to denounce non-Orthodox Jews and challenge their authenticity, they do not have the authority to deem whether or not one's Judaism is legitimate or not. As Rabbi Jacobs as noted, "Our sustenance as a people must from being a Jewish community

that values many authentic paths to Jewish commitment." In describing yesterday's incident at the Kotel, he said: "We had to with strength, assert that we can be in that place...a place of unity."

Eventually, Rabbi Jacobs and others succeeded in entering with its Torah scrolls and went to the upper plaza area of sing various songs. Once again, they turned to the words of *Od Shalom Aleinu* - a powerful statement that very loudly and clearly asserted that Reform Movement will fight for its right to be protected and pray at the Kotel.

Pluralism and Reform Judaism faces many challenges in Israel, including acceptance by the government of our rabbis, as well as respecting the role of women in Jewish leadership, there is something special about the fact that yesterday ended with the ordination of new Israeli Reform Rabbis. Despite the clouds that loomed as the result of the violent events at the Kotel, the celebration was surely a sign of hope and affirmation.

All of us are *B'nei Israel* - children of Israel. We are all part of what happens in Israel today. We all have a voice, a voice to applaud and criticize, urge, and nudge Israel to find and hold its moral voice. A voice of peace and acceptance, equality and inclusion, belonging and diverse. May this voice only continue to strengthen, so that one day, there will be Shalom - peace, wholeness, and unity. Ken Yehi Ratzon. Shabbat SHalom.