

That news leaked yesterday that a delegation of AIPAC leaders had flown to Israel to meet with the Prime Minister to “inform him” on the issues raised by his recent actions, is an indication, that it has not been business as usual.

In order to secure the support of the Ultra-Orthodox parties in his very narrow coalition, 13 of his 66 votes, the Prime Minister has reneged on a compromise worked out to allow egalitarian prayer in an area along the Western Wall, but south of the current Kotel Plaza. He had also allowed a restrictive law curtailing the acceptance of converts to move forward in the Knesset.

Perhaps the Prime Minister had calculated that this would go unnoticed because it was summer, or because of other news stories but that was not the case. The response was immediate and across a wide spectrum both in Israel and around the world.

Avigdor Lieberman, a member of Netanyahu’s governing coalition from the Yisrael Beiteinu Party, which has the support of many Jews from the Former Soviet Union who have had their own struggles with the Orthodox religious establishment, spoke out critically as did Natan Sharansky, head of the Jewish Agency which promoted past failed compromises as well.

Outside of Israel, Reform and Conservative leaders as well as Federation Agencies like the JCPA, the national body of local Jewish Community Relations Councils, have spoken out expressing the anger of their constituencies who were invested in the compromise and who see the change in the conversion law as a reopening of the “Who is a Jew?” controversy.

Netanyahu has already attempted to walk back his remarks, claiming that it was not a cancellation of the Kotel compromise but only a postponement. In addition, after the AIPAC meeting, he placed a six month hold on the conversion bill, promising that nothing would happen for the next ½ year. The bill had been scheduled to come to the floor on the Knesset tomorrow, Sunday July 2nd.

The other interesting fall out has been that David Friedman, the US ambassador to Israel, who in the past has been dismissive of Reform and Conservative Jews has changed his tune. It seems American Orthodox converts his people, would also have been excluded by this new legislation, which put all conversion in the hands of hands of the Chief Rabbinate. Friedman released a statement to the effect that he recognized that his previous remarks had caused division within the Jewish community and that he needed to change his ways.

This battle is hardly over and there are quite a range of strategies being proposed, ranging from increased delegations of American Jewish leaders to Israel to a boycotting of visible symbols to the American Israeli Jewish relationship like Birthright. We have been in touch with our sister congregation in Rush Pind offering them continued support in their struggles.

A discussion followed on the questions: How important is this to you? What do you feel is the best way to convey to Israel how strongly we feel about these issues?