

Earlier this week, I heard from one of our Introduction to Judaism students from last year, a young woman who is struggling to have her conversion accepted by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. She has had numerous interviews, presented the many documents requested of her, and still finds new roadblocks to her recognition in every communication she receives. Many of you may have met Nadine Wollner, as she was a regular at services, and shared her story with our congregation.

Nadine grew up in a Christian family in Germany and became an attorney working in the travel industry. After several years, she was given a mini-sabbatical and went on a cruise, where she met an Israeli from Beersheba and fell in love.

Eventually they married and she went to live in Israel. She investigated conversion to Judaism in Israel but felt that the difficulties of having a non-Orthodox Israeli conversion recognized were insurmountable. She decided to spend a year here in San Jose with her husband's cousins and complete her conversion in the United States. With that decision Nadine was counting on the Israeli Supreme Court and its defense of non-Orthodox conversions outside the land of Israel, which began with the Shoshanah Miller Case in 1986.

This legal history is long and complicated, beginning with the amendment to Israeli's law of Return in 1970, explicitly referencing those who have converted to Judaism. It has continued through numerous Israeli Supreme Court decisions supporting the recognition of various classes of converts. In recent months, the issue has reemerged in the American press, with articles about the challenge to a conversion by the American Orthodox Rabbi, Haskel Lookstein, who happened to also be the rabbi who converted Ivanka Trump.

Over these 46 years, since 1970, efforts to create a two tiered system of Jews and converts on Israeli identity papers have been fought back several times because of strong opposition by North American Jewry. Various compromises have been worked out, most notably during the period of the Ne'eman commission in the late 1990's, but all without resolving the issue.

Things escalated when in 2008 the Israeli Chief Rabbis' Rabbinical Court threw out a conversion by Orthodox rabbis and declared that the court could retroactively annul conversions, something unknown in Jewish law. The case concerned a woman who had been converted 15 years ago and was declared non-Jewish because she was no longer Orthodox. In 2012 this decision was thrown out by the Israeli Supreme Court.

An Israeli Supreme Court decision in May of 2016 forcing the recognition of Orthodox conversions by Israeli Orthodox rabbis who were not among the government sponsored rabbis is believed to open the door to Israeli Reform and Conservative conversions being recognized. However there has been a lot of backward movement as well.

Two very recent cases show that political pressure can be effective. The first concerns a woman, Karen Brunwasser, the child of a second generation Holocaust survivor and a woman who had converted to Judaism. When Karen made Aliyah to Israel, she happened to become literally the poster child for the Aliyah movement, as her photo was used in Israeli governmental promotional materials. However, the recognition of her status as a Jew was held up until the morning of her wedding, because two of the Orthodox rabbis who converted her mother in Philadelphia had allowed mixed seating in their synagogues, something that was fairly common in Orthodox congregations in America a generation ago but not today. Finally, political pressure allowed her wedding to go forward.

The other interesting example of political pressure is in the Ivanka Trump case. In July 2016 the Israeli rabbinic courts refused to recognize one of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein's conversions, throwing the legitimacy of Ivanka Trump's conversion

into doubt. Articles in Israeli and America press pointed to pressure from then candidate Donald Trump and later from the Presidential transition team, expressing concern about the recognition of foreign conversions. “An approval by the Chief Rabbinate is seen as making for a closer relationship between the incoming President and Israel,” one source reported.

Shortly thereafter, insisting that there had been no impact from the Trump team, the Israel Chief rabbinate announced a review and reform of the process for recognizing Orthodox conversions from abroad, allowing for a new look at Rabbi Lookstein’s conversions.

What is at stake here? It is not really about converts who make Aliyah, which is relatively small group of people. It is in part about the larger number of Jews in the Diaspora, not just in the United States but around the world, who are Jews by Choice and their children, as well as other adopted children who were converted to Judaism, whose absolute recognition as members of the Jewish people has historically been the only thing that rouses North American Jewry to oppose Israeli policy in one loud voice. It is also very significantly about the acceptance of tens of thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union, who, because of their

complicated history, do not conform to the Orthodox requirements for Jewish identity and suffer from legal disabilities because of that in Israel.

In this week's Torah portion, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Menasheh, children of an Egyptian woman whose father was a priest in the worship of pagan gods, are not only accepted as members of the Jewish people, but given important status both in Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. In the Bible, they are blessed personally by their grandfather Jacob who adopts them as if they were his sons, and then blesses them again among the 12 tribes of Israel. Because the Levites do not count as a tribe for the distribution of land, these two sons of Joseph are numbered among the 12 founding tribes of our people. Secondly, in later Rabbinic Judaism, these two young men become the role models of every Jewish child, as on Friday nights we bless our sons, "May God Make Your Like Ephraim and Menasheh."

It is this attitude of inclusion and acceptance which is at the core of Judaism and for which we must fight, perhaps even showing some of King David's grim determination, illustrated in Elana's Haftarah portion, to reward those on our side and to punish those who oppose us, insisting that for us this inclusion is a non-negotiable issue.