



Opinion

What Israel Owes American Jews

The nation-state of the Jews must recognize Conservative and Reform Judaism.

By Michael B. Oren

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JERUSALEM — The massacre of 11 worshipers in a Pittsburgh synagogue has profoundly shocked Israelis. Though seemingly desensitized by years of terror on our buses and streets, much of this voluble country has been left speechless by the news of Jews being gunned down during Shabbat prayers by a ranting anti-Semite.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuben Rivlin fiercely condemned the massacre and expressed full solidarity with our American brothers and sisters. Naftali Bennet, the minister for diaspora affairs, flew immediately to Pennsylvania. And yet, for all these expressions of sympathy, Israel still refuses to recognize the Conservative movement to which all 11 victims belonged.

Conservative as well as Reform weddings and conversions performed in Israel are not accepted by the country's chief rabbinate. The Tree of Life synagogue where the massacre took place was not even a real synagogue according to Israel's chief rabbis. The victims, murdered solely for being Jewish, practiced a brand of Judaism that, along with all other liberal streams of Judaism, is not deemed sufficiently Jewish for the Jewish state.

Such disrespect contrasts starkly with American Jewish contributions to Israel. The record is everywhere: The names of American Jewish philanthropists are emblazoned on our ambulances, university dorms, homes for the elderly and centers for disabled veterans. American Jews have helped forest our hills and raise up our poor, unearth our past and forge our technological future. According to Israeli government statistics, investments

and contributions from Jews living overseas — the bulk of them Americans — accounted for 6.35 percent of our gross domestic product, the equivalent of Israel's defense budget.

Given all of this, why would Israel refuse to recognize the Conservative and Reform streams, which represent the majority of American Jews?

One reason is democracy. Though steadily growing, the Reform and Conservative communities in Israel remain small, while the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox together account for 20 percent of the electorate and are rapidly expanding. Most of them view the liberal strains of Judaism as a heresy.

Such views are not shared by the majority of Israelis, yet Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox parties wield enormous political weight in our parliamentary system. Their support gives Israeli coalitions the stability necessary to grapple with our complex social and security challenges. Confronted with Orthodox opposition to the liberal American Jewish streams, Israeli governments must often choose between acknowledging their legitimacy and effectively managing and defending the state. Accordingly, not only our current government but also every coalition going back to 1948, right and left, has refrained from recognizing the Reform and Conservative movements.

Another reason for the current situation is longstanding disagreements over core Jewish issues. For decades, the world's two largest Jewish communities differed over the definition of "who's a Jew" — the Israeli government hews to the traditional requirement of matrilineal descent and Orthodox conversions, while liberal American congregations admit members born only of Jewish fathers and even those unwilling to undergo any conversion — so-called Jews of choice.

More recently, numerous American Jews supported the Iran nuclear deal, which Israelis viewed as disastrous to our security, and opposed moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem, celebrated by Israelis as a long-awaited acceptance of our eternal capital.

These schisms and more have eroded the willingness of many Israeli legislators to please American Jews at the price of political instability. The June 2017 decision by the Israeli

government to withdraw from those parts of the Western Wall agreement that would have guaranteed equal status for all the streams at our holiest site reflected this tension.

But such disputes cannot be allowed to fracture the Jewish unity on which Israel is predicated. Beyond the financial, political and even strategic considerations, Israel is morally obligated to preserve Jewish peoplehood. Even before we received the Ten Commandments, as slaves in Egypt, we were a people — as Moses demanded: “Let my people go.”

Israel was founded as the nation-state of the Jews, irrespective of where they live or how they practice — or do not practice — their Judaism. All Jews should regard Israel as their ancestral homeland, the realization of thousands of years of yearning, devotion and dreams, no less if they live on Long Island than in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. And if Israelis expect Reform and Conservative Jews to consider Israel as their spiritual homeland, then the recognition must be reciprocal. It fulfills our *raison d'être*.

It is also mandated by law. Last July 19, our Knesset passed the “Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People.” Though controversial in Israel and abroad, the nation-state law commits Israel to uphold its role as the national home of all Jews and to strengthen ties with the Jews of the diaspora, especially those threatened because they are Jews. It calls on Israel “to preserve the cultural, historical, and religious heritage of the Jewish people,” including those in America. The nonrecognition of Conservative and Reform Judaism is incompatible with both the intent and the spirit of the law.

In the aftermath of this horrific massacre, the Israel government must do more than express condolences. Threatened by rising anti-Semitism, American-Jewish communities need to know that Israel is behind them and not only in words. Now is the time to realize our historic mission, comply with our own law and reinforce the unity that has sustained us for thousands of years, through exiles, expulsions, genocide and rebirth.

By recognizing Conservative and Reform Jewry, Israel will not only defy the anti-Semites but also, more important, reaffirm itself.

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