

There's 'unbelievable ignorance' in Israel, including in the government, about non-Orthodox Judaism

Sharansky: We may solve Western Wall and conversion crises. I'm not sure we can rebuild trust

Jewish Agency chairman, at forefront of incendiary dispute between Israel and Diaspora, decries PM's actions, laments collapse of a painstakingly constructed relationship with Reform and Conservative leaders

BY DAVID HOROVITZ | June 28, 2017, 7:34 am |

Natan Sharansky, the chairman of the Jewish Agency, said he believes the two profound crises that have erupted in ties between Israel and much of the US Jewish community — over prayer at the Western Wall and conversion — can and will be resolved.

In an interview with The Times of Israel, he said the legislation on conversion approved by ministers on Sunday — which would cement an ultra-Orthodox monopoly over conversions to Judaism in Israel — would likely not go through in its current format. From his contacts with ministers and Knesset members, he said, he does not believe Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu can muster a majority to pass the legislation in its current form.

As for Netanyahu's shock decision to freeze implementation of a painstakingly negotiated agreement to give non-Orthodox streams of Judaism a recognized, formal role in the oversight of a permanent, pluralistic prayer area slightly to the south of the main Western Wall prayer area, Sharansky said he believed a "formula" would be found to enable the agreement to go ahead.

"You don't have to call it 'recognition,'" he posited. "But you do have to allow representatives of the Reform and Conservative to run the place where they pray. That's the minimum condition from which all the negotiations started." Sharansky said he couldn't say what precise "formula" would be found, but "I believe that very quickly" it can be resolved.

At the same time, he expressed deep disappointment in Netanyahu's handling of the affair — saying the prime minister had put narrow coalition interests above the wider needs of the Jewish people. He noted, incidentally, that he did not believe the government would have fallen if Netanyahu had resisted ultra-Orthodox pressure on the issues.

And he said that the precious trust that had been established between Israeli and Diaspora leaders, as the Western Wall compromise took shape in recent years, may have been damaged irrevocably.

He also highlighted staggering ignorance among Israeli government ministers about Reform and Conservative Judaism — streams of Judaism with which [the majority of American Jews are affiliated](#). “When I said to the government a year or two ago, Do you know that 85% of AIPAC supporters are Reform and Conservative Jews, half of the government were shocked. They really thought they were supporters of boycotts of Israel, all these crazies from J Street, Breaking the Silence. That’s all.”

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wouldn’t have fallen**

Lots of Israelis are similarly ignorant, he added. “There are many Israelis, good Israelis, good Zionists, loving Jews, who believe that Reform is a kind of sect which destroyed Judaism from the inside in America and now they are looking for more places to destroy, because that is how they live, by destroying. That now they are trying to come

here.

Added Sharansky: “I say to them, You know, that’s exactly what anti-Semites were saying about Jews in Russia.”

The Times of Israel spoke to Sharansky at his Jewish Agency office late on Tuesday afternoon. The following is an edited transcript:

The Times of Israel: Do you think this crisis can be solved? And if so, how?

Natan Sharansky: Look, this crisis *has* to be solved, because it’s too important for the future of our unity.

On the one hand, it was very upsetting, it seemed awful, that just when our (Jewish Agency) Board of Governors started their meetings here, and were coming for a short visit with the government, these two decisions were taken, one after another — maybe the most painful decisions you could imagine for the American Jewish community.

On the other hand, the timing could not be better, when you think about it: Imagine if it had happened two weeks later, or five weeks later. You wouldn't have had angry representatives here of all the main communities, who immediately mobilized to work.

We have a lot of big challenges — budget challenges, organizational challenges. These were all put aside. Everybody was mobilized. And we delivered a message.

All of these (US Jewish leaders) were receiving a lot of emails from people in their communities who are angry, and were saying, Enough is enough. They had to make those messages heard. They were speaking to the ministers and members of Knesset, and explaining.

What's the solution — on the conversion law, and on the Western Wall?

As regards the law, it has to be stopped. And yesterday, we had meetings with (Ministers) Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked. I was speaking to all of them 15 minutes before the vote on the bill (in the cabinet on Sunday), and they didn't understand (what the implications were). Now they understand and they've started looking for ways to change something (in the planned legislation).

They say it is important to stop foreign workers coming here (and converting). But there are much simpler ways to deal with that.

So it will be amended?

We were in the Knesset today. Half of the people who were speaking to us about this were from the coalition. I don't really understand how the prime minister is going to have a majority for this law. So I think it can be stopped.

As to the Kotel, it's more difficult, because it's not Knesset legislation.

But Tzachi Hanegbi (the minister charged by Netanyahu with resolving the crisis) who came today to speak to us, he changed tone. He said, the physical part (of the pavilion for pluralistic prayer) we will start implementing immediately. He said the other part (regarding its formal oversight), which is the problematic part, we'll have to negotiate on how to implement it.

That's already different from 'We'll freeze it, we'll stop it, we cannot do it.'

(The difficult part) is the question of recognition (for non-Orthodox Judaism in the oversight of the pluralistic prayer area). The prime minister says, I recognize (the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism), but as a government, I cannot do it.

He said, 'My government can't'?

Bibi was very frank. He didn't try to... (Sharansky wiggles his hands.)

He said: I do believe that all the Jews are pulling for us, and I recognize all of them. But what to do? We have a coalition. Some of our (coalition) partners can't recognize them. And they demand from us to cancel all the agreements (about the Western Wall). I'm not ready to cancel. I'm ready to freeze.

Well, cancel or freeze, that's just playing with words. I can't explain that to a Reform rabbi in St Louis.

So how do you solve it?

I've already heard from the ministers, never mind members of Knesset, that we have to go back and talk about it. You don't have to call it "recognition." But you do have to allow representatives of the Reform and Conservatives to run the place where they pray. That's the minimum condition from which all the negotiations started.

I believe that with public opinion understanding this better and better, the pressure will grow, and it can be implemented.

Whether it will be this or that (precise) formula, the thing is that it will be a respected place of prayer, where they don't have to hide from anybody, and where they will be able to run their own prayer, and not have to depend on this government minister or that bureaucrat who today changes his opinions. That's the minimum which is demanded.

At this moment, the government decided not to implement it. I believe that very quickly, it can be changed.

What is clear is that, despite the fact that this topic was so widely discussed in recent years, the majority of Israelis don't understand it, and some people in the West don't understand what we are talking about. We have now to accelerate our campaign of explaining.

In the last couple of years, I was speaking a lot in Israel. I discovered unbelievable ignorance (when it comes to non-Orthodox Judaism). The prejudices...

What do Israelis not know about non-Orthodox Judaism?

There are many Israelis, good Israelis, good Zionists, loving Jews, who believe that Reform is a kind of sect which destroyed Judaism from the inside in America and now they are looking for more places to destroy, because that is how they live, by destroying. That now they are trying to come here.

I say to them, You know, that's exactly what anti-Semites were saying about Jews in Russia.

When I said to the government a year or two ago, Do you know that 85% of AIPAC supporters are Reform and Conservative Jews, half of the government were shocked. They really thought they were supporters of boycotts of Israel, all these crazies from J Street, Breaking the Silence. That's all.

And what do you say? The truth is...

The truth is that in the conditions of the Diaspora, to survive and not be assimilated is a big challenge. From the beginning, 200 years ago, when Jews started living among gentiles, and those of them who wanted to continue living actively among gentiles but to feel themselves Jewish at home, some of them went for different forms of Judaism.

It's not the place where I pray, the place where I talk to God. But it is the place where a lot of Jews, who want to stay being Jewish, are gathering.

So the State of Israel, if it continues to say that it is home for all the Jews, definitely has to say to them: We want you. But we also want your communities, we want your rabbis, your grandchildren.

So many Jews in the Diaspora say (to Israel), Be democratic like us. But they don't understand that we're doing something much (more challenging) than them: We are trying to be democratic in the Middle East.

Equally, many Jews in Israel say (to the Diaspora), Be not assimilated like us. We're religious or secular. But they don't understand that (Diaspora Jews) are doing something much more difficult. How to not be assimilated in America is not the same as how to not be assimilated in Israel.

They are using these tools (of different streams of Judaism). If we could invent tools now, at a time of the existence of the State of Israel, maybe we would invent different tools. But these are the tools that exist.

Our prime minister, however, *does* understand the Diaspora. He does understand the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. He does understand how much of a commitment there is to Israel. He must have known how this would play out. And I'm not sure his coalition would have fallen over this. He could have told the ultra-Orthodox parties: This is the deal.

I'm sure his coalition wouldn't have fallen.

His advisers really failed, by not even telling him the timing was so bad. Which (paradoxically) is good. God forbid they had told him, and he'd done it two weeks later.

But still...

Still. I told him at this government meeting (on Sunday), which is what I say all over the world: Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than any other prime minister in Israel what is American Jewry. And that's why you worked harder than any other (on this). Don't undermine your own work.

And he answered: I believe it. I feel it. I want it. But at this moment part of my coalition demands to do this. I'm doing something to save my coalition.

That's not exactly what he said, but that was his message. Very open.

So he behaved like a politician who has to respond to the immediate need of the coalition.

That contradicts with him as a Jewish leader who really knows, who understands the historical process and the importance of keeping the deep contact (with the Diaspora).

I'm particularly sorry, because he had succeeded — and we did our best to help him — to build relations with the leaders of the Reform and Conservative movements during these negotiations which never before existed. There was a lot of trust. Direct telephone calls. Meetings. Cooperation. Coordination. And I felt great pride in this.

I do believe that we can overcome these (current) crises. I'm not sure we will be able to restore this type of relationship and trust. And that's a big loss.