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## **Israel and American Jewry: Stepping Back from the Brink**

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Jerusalem's holy sites have a way of asserting strategic significance far beyond what their simple physical presence would suggest. Events in the aftermath of the shooting of two Israeli police officers on the Temple Mount highlight this truth.

So it was with respect to the Kotel (Western Wall) a month earlier, albeit in a non-security context. Following the Israeli government's decision to reverse course on an agreement with the liberal streams of Judaism and Diaspora representatives to establish a third section of the Kotel for egalitarian prayer, a crisis erupted that has called into question Israel's very relationship with Diaspora communities, first and foremost the American Jewish community, which has been steadfast in its support of the US-Israel bilateral relationship. The sense of crisis was deepened further by a separate government decision to advance a law on conversion that could call into question the validity of conversions when Jews converted by Reform and Conservative rabbis overseas come to Israel.

Merits of the Israeli decisions aside, the Kotel and conversion controversies underscore the key divides in Israeli-Diaspora relations. Israelis, who see themselves as living in the center of Jewish life, can be puzzled by the insistence of Jews who do not live in Israel that they have the right to influence decisions taken by Israeli governments that exist and act within the realities of Israeli politics. The liberal streams of Judaism, despite a growing presence in Israel, still seem foreign and do not speak to many Israelis, whether Orthodox or secular. Their attitude to Jewish liberals abroad is often summed up by the practical advice: if you want to wield influence in Israel, come live here. For Diaspora Jews, there is pain in the notion that Israel, which they see (and which describes itself) as representing the Jewish people as a whole, would act against their interests. They argue that Diaspora communities support Israel in tangible and political ways, including by

defending it against a campaign of delegitimization, but now Israel is acting to delegitimize them.

The reversal on the Kotel agreement, which was the product of nearly four years of painstaking negotiations, raises another critical question for Diaspora Jews: Can they trust the Israeli leadership?

As was evident in the sharp exchange of statements and the vigorous lobbying of American Jewish leaders in the immediate aftermath of the decisions, much is at stake. When American Jews no longer feel that the Israeli government respects and honors their Judaism, how long will they continue to provide such consistent support? These tensions only exacerbate existing trends of younger American Jews distancing themselves from Israel, and put at risk one of the strongest pillars of support for the US-Israel strategic partnership.

While not the predominant view, some influential voices can be heard in Jerusalem these days suggesting that Israel need not be troubled by these trends. These Israelis assume that Israel is already losing the allegiance of young, liberal American Jews. Given intermarriage rates, the argument goes, many of their children and grandchildren will not be Jewish, so Israel needs to let them go, or at least not chase them. They believe Israel will manage well by consolidating its base of support among the Orthodox Jewish and Evangelical Christian communities. In the Trump era, it is even easier to rationalize this calculus, as those populations tend to vote Republican.

But such thinking is both politically unwise and questionable in moral terms. When the pendulum of American politics swings back again, the US-Israel relationship will be best protected if it has retained its traditional bipartisan basis. And Israel's self-definition as the nation-state of the entire Jewish people is hardly served by writing off the vast majority of the largest community in the Diaspora, even as it struggles with issues of continuity. Indeed, Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs is investing millions of shekels in trying to assist efforts to keep young Diaspora Jews, particularly in the United States, connected to Israel.

As attempts to heal the breach advance, there are lessons to be drawn from the recent breakdown. Some Israeli officials feel that the liberal streams tried to spin the result of the Kotel negotiation as official recognition by the Israeli government, for the first time, of the Reform and Conservative movements, due to seats granted to those movements on the governing board of the new prayer space. Yet, these officials maintain, this interpretation is incorrect, and then-Cabinet Secretary Avihai Mandelblit, who drafted the agreement, made clear to all parties that the Kotel agreement did not entail official

recognition. Any claims to the contrary would make it virtually impossible for ultra-Orthodox politicians to allow implementation of the deal – including the Shas Minister of Religious Affairs, whose signature was required to carry out the agreement, effectively giving him a veto.

But Israeli officials must understand that the newly-strained relations between Israel and American Jews cannot be rebuilt on restarting the Kotel negotiations from scratch. Nor is it realistic or reasonable to expect parties to the deal to accept only partial implementation, namely a physical expansion of the prayer site (and even that done without proper consultations with the key parties affected) while two other critical elements – the direct entrance from the Western Wall plaza and the governing board – remain stalled and remain “to be discussed.” A deal is a deal. It remains a deal even if it becomes politically difficult for one side to implement what was agreed – as it apparently became after an explosion of criticism on haredi blogs and Twitter. The principle guiding the talks that Minister Tzachi Hanegbi has been tasked to lead must be that the deal will be implemented in full as agreed, and the discussion should be around what additional elements can be added to make it easier for haredi leaders to lift their objection. Anything short of that makes the prospects for such talks even starting very remote. If acceding to Israeli government requests to make no public comment for a period while implementation proceeds is accompanied by a credible plan to complete full implementation, that may be a price worth paying by the Reform and Conservative movements.

On the conversion bill, the six month freeze agreed upon is wise, giving time for tempers to cool and a committee to be appointed to try to head off the crisis. The committee (if and when it is appointed) must be broad-based and look for consensus solutions. Following the report that the Chief Rabbinate maintained a “blacklist” that delegitimized dozens of Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and even ultra-Orthodox rabbis from the Diaspora as sources of authority about their congregants’ Jewish status, no solution on the conversion issue can be accepted that would permit a similar result. It may well be that the ostensible concerns about foreign workers seeking citizenship that gave rise to the proposed legislation can be resolved through consensus regulation that vets candidates for conversion and the conversions themselves, rendering new legislation unnecessary. The committee should review a range of options, including non-legislative ones such as these.

The crisis over the Kotel and the conversion bill took many Israeli political leaders by surprise, which itself is evidence of a deep disconnect between Israeli leaders attuned to Israeli voters, and the attitudes of American Jewish leaders and activists. Anyone who spends time these days in American Jewish communities cannot fail to take notice of the

anger, disgust, and feelings of personal betrayal. It is a raw moment, which requires careful handling by leaders on both sides to pull Israel and many of its key supporters back from the brink of a potentially irreparable split.