

AN OPEN LETTER TO ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

From Rabbi Julie Schonfeld
Executive Vice President
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Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

I have good news and I have bad news.

The bad news is that rabbis all over the world are thanking you for giving them a Rosh Hashanah sermon.

The good news is that you get to write every one of them.

The sermon we all want to give, is one in which you, as a visionary leader make an unambiguous statement in opposition to this bill which divides Israel from the Diaspora. We hope that we can invoke your name, Mr. Prime Minister, with the same spirit of reverence we reserve for the great leaders of the Jewish people.

Regrettably, David Rotem has already brought us a tragically cynical Rosh Hodesh Av homily, when he unexpectedly reintroduced his bill, undermining discussions you set in motion with Natan Sharansky. Our Tradition teaches that the exile of our people was brought about by senseless fighting among ourselves. Please, Mr. Prime Minister, bring us a message for Tishrei that is redemptive.

Our opponents claim that this bill which alienates the Diaspora, will unify Israel. We have a few questions as to how the Conversion Bill will help Israelis from the FSU whom MK Rotem assures me will all be converted within a year after its passage.

First, since the local courts created by the proposed law still find ultimate authority with the same rabbis, what will change?

Second, Members of Knesset tell me this bill is too little too late. In Israel's free and open society where extremists have given Jewish religion a bad image, many young Israelis don't care whether a potential spouse is halakhically Jewish. The coercive ultra religious system is a total failure that spends tens of millions of NIS to yield only 1500 converts per year. Of those, 200 are Masorti, who receive no funding. The way to really "solve this problem," is to have options for multiple streams and for the indigenous Israeli expressions that will only flower in a non-coercive system.

Third, the newly revised bill includes a new provision that further strangles the Law of Return by explicitly defining the observance of mitzvot according to extremist rabbis who will now have sole legislative authority.

For the Knesset to vote on this is not only a mockery of democracy, it is an even deeper betrayal of 3,000 years of Jewish tradition.

Judaism's injunction to turn the prospective convert away three times is based not on suspicion, but on the historical Jewish reality of discrimination, ostracism and even death. That deepest desire of our people to find safe harbor from the mortal danger of Jewish identity found its fullest expression in the law of return.

What a bitter irony that this new provision which "turns away" the righteous convert, whether from the FSU or elsewhere, does not do so in order to seek that person's safety, but based on whether they are "religious enough."

On Rosh Hashanah it is written, but on Yom kippur it is sealed. The love of God for Israel is a love that both demands and encourages. We cannot allow this law to divide us, for we want nothing more, all of us, than to support you, the nation of Israel and *Am Yisrael*. Please Mr. Prime Minister, let us inscribe you in the book of the great leaders of the Jewish people.

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