

Zionism in Real Life

The Fight for Religious Pluralism

Goals:

- USYers will discuss the issues of division and disunity that have emerged as consequences of *Medinat Halacha*- a State governed according to Orthodox Jewish Law.
- Using The Women of the Wall Incident of November 2009, The Status Quo Letter and the Rotem Conversion Bill as examples, USYers will explore the need for religious pluralism in Israel and the necessity for the State to recognize different streams of Judaism.
- USYers will understand how the Masorti (Conservative Movement in Israel) movement is fighting for all religious denominations to be recognized in Israel
- Overall, long term understandings include recognition of the complexities of "real Israel" and what it truly means to be a Jewish State or a Jewish homeland- a home for all Jews.

Materials to Copy:

- One copy of "A Wall for All"
- 2 page handout of "Medinat Halacha" for each person and 2 pages of USCJ/Masorti Movement Response (4 pages total)
- Instructions for teams (2 copies per sicha group)

Step 1: A Wall for All

Explain that you are all reporters for Erutz Shtayim (Channel Two News). One person will begin the report and pass it on to the next person. Each time it says "person 1" or "2" another person should read.

Preface the news headings with:

OUR REPORTER BRINGS YOU EXCEPRTS FROM DIFFERENT NEWS SOURCES REPORTING ON A MEMBER OF THE ROSH HODESH GROUP "WOMEN OF THE WALL," WHO WAS ARRESTED FOR CARRYING A TORAH AND WEARING A TALLIT IN HONOR OF ROSH HODESH. SHE COULD SERVE UP TO THREE YEARS IN PRISON FOR HER ACTIONS.

USYers should read the news headlines.

Step 2: reactions - pose questions

- What would you do if you were arrested in Israel, the Jewish state, for practicing Judaism as you do here?
- Had you heard this story before?

- How does it make you feel as a Jew? As a Jew who identifies with a movement that supports Egalitarianism? Are there laws like this in the U.S.? Why do you think this law exists?

Step 3: Background- why this law exists- the Status Quo Agreement of 1947, Law of Return, Medinat Halacha

HANDOUT- Medinat Halacha: a Union of Religion and State

Instructions: Where do these issues come from? In small groups of 3, skim the material aloud.

Summarize the Status Quo Agreement and the Law of Return in one sentence and explain what this means in terms of religious pluralism in Israel.

Ask them to think about how Israel is defined as a Jewish state according to these laws. What are the implications of these laws?

After they have had time to read, use the discussion questions provided to help them understand the roots of religious pluralism issues in Israel. What are these laws and what are the implications of them?

Step 4: What does this mean to me as a Conservative American Jew? The Rotem Bill

Now that they have the background on why Israeli law does not protect pluralism, they can discuss current issues and how Israeli Law would impact them as Jews.

Explain: Building a Jewish State: These issues of religious pluralism were issues that came up with Israel's establishment. They've worked it out, right?

Wrong. Religious pluralism debate continue today and is one of the biggest issues that divide the Israeli people and alienate non-Orthodox Jews worldwide. Most recently, we saw the impact of the rejection of the rights of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel, not just following the incident with Women at the Kotel but in particular, regarding the 2010 Rotem Conversion Bill which brought representatives from world wide Jewish Movements to advocate for Jews of all backgrounds, worldwide. The Masorti (Conservative) Movement in Israel and USCJ CEO, Rabbi Steven Wernick took an active role in advocating against this bill, uniting with Jewish leaders of other denominations.

Step 5: Learning To Stand up for Yourself: Fighting the Rotem Bill, Defending religious pluralism in Israel

You are a Masorti Jew living in Israel. You witnessed the arrest of the woman at the Kotel and now you read about the Conversion bill presented by Member of Knesset David Rotem.

**Split the group into 2 teams to form a plan of action for advocating against this bill.*

Instructions to teams:

1. Read what the Rotem Bill defends (beginning where it says "part II").
2. State the issue. Why would this upset or offend world wide Jewry. In other words, how would this affect you?
3. Read through the steps that were taken by leaders of religious denominations, some members of Knesset and other Jewish organizations.
4. Use this to come up with your own team game plan if you were to have advocated against this bill. What steps did they take? What would you have done?
5. How were/are these advocacy steps effective? This debate is not yet over. What else do they have left to do? What should they do from here?
6. Finally, what do you think is the role of the leaders of the Masorti movement in Israel? Why is their role important in order for religious pluralism to be taken seriously in Israeli law?
7. Be prepared to present the steps taken or steps you think would be necessary in order to attack this bill and fight it [highlighting the steps of religious and political advocacy]. Each team will have 2 minutes to present their advocacy plan.

Step 6: State your game plan

Rabbi Wernick and leaders from other Jewish denominations and community organizations fought against a bill that would restrict the rights of non-Orthodox Jews by choice in Israel. What would you have done had you joined the Masorti team?

Get each group to present their 2 minute advocacy plan, including some of the steps that were taken.

Step 7: Summarize and wrap up

1. Ask the group if they can explain the roots of this issue (Status Quo agreement, Law of Return)
2. How have these issues not yet been resolved- summarize the Rotem Bill
3. What was the role of the Masorti movement, USCJ and other Jewish Representatives in responding to this bill? What was their goal? What is their purpose in Israel (as advocates for religious pluralism)?
4. What steps were taken in advocating for religious pluralism?

Reiterate steps that were taken:

Unite with other groups - strength in numbers

Put it in writing- send a petition out to gain support and news

Set up meetings with people who can actually make a difference
Follow up- keep up the fight
Keep communities posted on steps taken, gain media attention and worldwide support (as much as you can)
Anything else that was mentioned

UPDATE: Explain to the group the most recent news update:

Conversion Legislation Update- January 10, 2011 (excerpts)

(letter from Rabbi Wernick and USCJ President, Richard Skolnik)

- Government of Israel has agreed to a further moratorium on the Rotem bill, the controversial bill that would increase the ultra-Orthodox establishment's hold on conversion, to extend until July 1, 2011. During that time no further action on this legislation, which we so strongly oppose, will take place. During this period, Masorti and the Reform movement also will suspend efforts related to certain pending litigation concerning the registration of those converted by the Masorti and Reform movements.
- Natan Sharansky, chair of the Jewish Agency, will continue efforts to develop a broad consensus.

There are two more significant points worth noting.

- One is that our representatives were told that Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beitenu party, agreed with this moratorium, and that it was the clear position of the government.
- The second is that the agreement includes the creation of an official professional working group that will address bureaucratic delays and obstacles encountered by converts whom the non-Orthodox movements believe already are clearly entitled to full status under existing Israeli law. This working group will be headed by the chair of the Jewish Agency and the cabinet secretary and will include representatives of various government ministries. It also will include representatives of the Masorti and Reform movements. The creation of this working group, and its official inclusion of representatives of non-Orthodox movements, is a positive development.

NEWS REPORT- A WALL FOR ALL?

A Wall for All - Women at the Kotel

Source: YNetnews.com

Police arrest woman praying at Western Wall

Person 1: Women of the Wall hold traditional monthly prayer service at holy site.

Person 2: Woman carrying Torah scroll detained for questioning by police. Western Wall rabbi says act was violation of law. WOW chairwoman: 'Citizen of State cannot be arrested for donning prayer shawl, holding scroll' Efrat Weiss

Published: 11.18.09, / Israel Jewish Scene

Person 1: Police detained a woman from the Women of the Wall (WOW) movement Wednesday after she donned a prayer shawl and held a Torah scroll at the Western Wall compound in violation of a court ruling. The woman's act caused a commotion during Rosh Chodesh prayers at the holy site.

During his weekly sermon, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef lashes out against 'stupid women who come to Western Wall, don a prayer shawl, and pray.' Women of the Wall in response: Rabbi invited to get to know us...

It should be noted that the High Court of Justice previously ruled that Women of the Wall must adhere to the site's customs.

Person 2: Every Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month) WOW members hold a festive prayer, common to both men and women, in the Western Wall square and later move to the adjacent Robinson Arch in accordance with a compromise reached by the High Court of Justice.

Wednesday morning saw 40 women participating in the event, including one woman who carried a Torah scroll brought from home, instead of keeping it in her bag. Inspectors of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation claimed that the act was a violation of the law and called a police officer who proceeded to arrest the woman and escort her to the police station for questioning. Consequently, the remaining

praying women arrived at the station in order to protest the arrest and later carried on with their prayer outside the station building.

Person 1: WOW chairwoman Anat Hoffman told Ynet, "This is the first time in 21 years that one of us has been arrested. The woman is a young med student who left Beersheba at 4:30 am in order to pray with us and now cannot stop crying."

Hoffman further stated, "It is unthinkable that a citizen of the State of Israel is arrested for donning a prayer shawl and holding a scroll. There were hundreds of people on the other side of the screen who did the same and nothing happened to them."

'Act of provocation'

Person 2: Hoffman claimed that the women praying only sought to take the Torah scroll to the Robinson Arch. Western Wall Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitz, on the other hand, claimed that the women had already prepared to read the scroll at the Western Wall site itself, thus breaking the law.

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, leader of the Progressive Judaism movement said in response, "Millions of women in the Jewish world enjoy the privilege of donning a prayer shawl and taking an equal part in public prayer.

"It is in the Jewish State and the holiest site for the Jewish people of all places that police forces are sent to arrest a woman who seeks to pray according to her conscience and conviction. It is a great shame to the Israel Police and the State."

Person 2: The Masorti Movement also issued a statement in response, which condemned "the scandalous arrest of one of its members." Executive Director of the Masorti Movement Yizhar Hess, said: "The Western Wall must be freed from the obstructionist orthodox establishment. It is inconceivable that a Western democratic nation such as Israel does not allow religious ritual freedom for its Jewish citizens. The Western Wall must be liberated."

Medinat Halacha: A Unification of Religion and State

There is a bumper sticker made in Israel that says "Medinat Halacha, Halcha HaMadinah" which means, "A State governed by Halacha...will make the State disappear." Religious disunity is tearing about the Israel people. How did this mess begin?

1. The Status Quo- the only legitimate Judaism is Orthodoxy. The Israeli *Rabbanut* or *Halachik* authority is governed only by Orthodox Law.

2. Law of Return: The Immigration Issue/Conversion Crisis- Who is a Jew? Only those who are Jewish by Orthodox Halachik standards or converted by Orthodox Rabbis.¹

- When Israel was established, its leaders had to decide what a "Jewish State" would look like.
- From the beginning, there were tensions between those who advocated a strict division between religion and state, those who believed halachic Judaism should be the guiding principle of the state and those who sought a middle ground.

The Status Quo Letter/Agreement: Because David Ben Gurion (Israel's first PM) was not a religious man himself, he didn't quite know how to handle the religious issues of religious Zionists and what it meant to be a "Jewish State."

- On the one hand, gain support of the religious parties in order to gain votes on other non-religious issues
- On the one hand formalize the Jewish character of the Jewish state
- RESULT: He therefore mandated that all Jewish legal decisions would maintain the "status quo" with regard to religious jurisdiction. In 1947, he drafted the **Status Quo Letter** which outlined all legal jurisdiction on issues of:

Shabbat, Kashrut, Personal Status Law² and Education would all be governed by the rules of Orthodox Halacha. No other kind of Halachik Authority would be legal in Israel.

¹ The Law of Return of 1950 (has been revised a number of times) grants full and equal citizenship to all Jews by Birth and those who converted by Orthodox standards. Anyone who does not fall into these categories and wishes to make Aliyah must first convert. This has become a major issue in particular for Russian and Ethiopian immigrants whose Jewish status has been questioned.

Questions:

1. How does the Status Quo law translate into real life in Israel? What are the wonderful things about it that make Israel a special place? What issues or implications does it have ? (example: Everything closed on Shabbat shows that Israel really is a Jewish State but what do Jews who don't keep Shabbat do if they want to grocery shop on Saturday? What about Personal Law? Why should my marriage only be recognized if officiated by an Orthodox rabbi?)
2. Personal Status Law- what does this mean? This law is probably the most controversial and affects the most people. What does this mean for someone who has converted to Judaism by Conservative Rabbinut and grew up as an active Conservative Jew? Would they be able to instantly become a citizen like other Jews? No. What does this mean if you wanted to get married by your own rabbi, but in Israel?

PART II

How Do These Laws Affect Us? The Rotem Conversion Bill (2010).

According to the Rotem Conversion bill, only Orthodox Conversions would be accepted according to Israeli Law. Non-Orthodox Jews-by-choice would be denied basic religious freedoms like conversion, marriage and birth rituals and public observance and religious practice.

Rotem Conversion Bill Controversy in A Nutshell:

David Rotem, a member of Knesset proposed a bill that was likely to pass and become law. The bill stated that only Orthodox Conversions would be recognized by the State of Israel, posing a dangerous threat to the rights of Conservative, Reform, and all non-Orthodox Jews, who comprise the overwhelming majority of world Jewry.

Why this matters/implications if this bill was to pass:

No other issue divides the Jewish people more than the 'Who is Jew' debate. World Wide Jewry must advocate for all Jews to be accepted as Jews if Israel were to fulfill the Zionism aim of being a Jewish homeland, a safe haven for all Jews. The Law of Return is supposed to offer equal opportunity for all Jews. For the first time, Israeli law differentiates between the rights of Jews by birth and Jews by choice.

² the members of the Executive will do all they can to satisfy the needs of the Orthodox, to prevent the division of the people. All matters of personal status (conversion, birth, death, marriage, etc.) will be determined solely by Orthodox standards

The Masorti Movement (Conservative Movement in Israel) and USCJ CEO, Rabbi Steven Wernick advocated intensely against this bill, joining together with representatives from other movements and pluralistic Jewish organizations.

If YOU were to join Masorti advocates, how would you proceed?

The USCJ/Masorti Movement Response (excerpts)

Source: http://www.uscj.org/Rotem_Conversion_bill8420.html

July 22, 2010, Jerusalem

Rotem Conversion Bill Briefing

by Rabbi Steven Wernick

- the Knesset session concluded without a reading of MK David Rotem's proposed conversion law. That it did not is a significant accomplishment of the North American and world wide Jewish community.
- I was in Israel when it happened, and took my place as part of the leadership group that opposed it.
- We, the liberal Jewish community around the world, sent more than 60,000 emails to Prime Minister Netanyahu, we mobilized Israel's friends at home and our friends in Israel to reach out to him personally,
- We hit the airwaves and newspapers and with our partners in the Masorti movement in Israel, the Rabbinical Assembly, the Reform movement and the Jewish Federations of North America
- We lobbied the Knesset vigorously, explaining what we objected to in this bill, why those clauses not only would not solve the problem they were meant to solve...but also threatened to drive a wedge between the Diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities.
- We met with virtually every member of the Likud, Labor, Kadima and Meretz parties, probably 75 percent of the Knesset. And we were heard.

Response to the advocacy:

- One government minister told us how impressed he was with our community's response to the crisis and how awed he was by our effectiveness. Others said they were glad that we were able to explain to them elements of the bill they had not considered, while still others said how relieved they were that we came to ensure that this bill, as it was written, would be defeated.
- Thank our partners and friends, the leaders of the Masorti movement in Israel, Yizhar Hess, lay chair Emily Levi-Shochat, and Rabbi Andy Sacks for all their incredible work. They fight the battle for religious pluralism in Israel every day as they seek to build a vibrant and meaningful

modern Judaism in the state of Israel. In the long run, the only way these issues will be resolved is by building the institutions and communities that support dynamic alternatives to the Orthodox establishment in Israel [MASORTI MOVEMENT]

Though we have succeeded in freezing this legislation for the moment, there is still much to do before the Knesset resumes October 11.

- What comes next? We have already begun to consider the possibilities. Dialogue is already underway with the government and the Jewish Agency about what process we might need to reach consensus in easing the process of conversion while not relinquishing our rights to convert non-Jews to Judaism in Israel according to a Masorti understanding of halachah.
- We also know that we must continue to educate the Israeli public, public opinion makers and political leaders about the divisions this bill would cause and the possibilities that true religious pluralism provides for enriching the Israeli Jewish experience. And we know that we must keep the North American Jewish community informed, updated, and prepared to act should consensus not be reached and the bill put forward in the future.

Rabbi Steven Wernick

Instructions to teams:

- Read what the Rotem Bill defends (beginning where it says “part II”).
- State the issue. Why would this upset or offend world wide Jewry. In other words, how would this affect you?
- Read though the steps that were taken by leaders of religious denominations, some members of Knesset and other Jewish organizations.
- Use this to come up with your own team game plan if you were to have advocated against this bill. What steps did they take? What would you have done?
- Discuss: How were/are these advocacy steps effective? This debate is not yet over. What else do they have left to do? What should they do from here?
- Finally, what do you think is the role of the leaders of the Masorti movement in Israel? Why is their role important in order for religious pluralism to be taken seriously in Israeli law?
- Be prepared to present the steps taken or steps you think would be necessary in order to attack this bill and fight it [highlighting the steps of religious and political advocacy]. Each team will have 2 minutes to present their advocacy plan.

To present: State your game plan

Rabbi Wernick and leaders from other Jewish denominations and community organizations fought against a bill that would restrict the rights of non-Orthodox Jews by choice in Israel. What would you have done had you joined the Masorti team?