

July 18, 2010 – Rabbi Danny Allen

The atmosphere is probably on normal mode for typical Israeli politics. The budget has not been approved, the peace process is shaky, and there are threats to bring down the government. By the time you read this what I write may be old news. What is most fascinating is that we, and here I mean the vast majority of affiliated Jews in America and around the world, are part of the malestrom. (For a short video report go to RAC.org to hear from David Saperstein).

Many of us have seen this move before. The fights over who is a Jew in the early 70's, the crisis in the 90's that led to the Ne'eman Commission, and the court cases brought by IRAC. In 2002 the Israel Supreme Court ruled that Israel is not a religious state but a State of the Jewish People. As such, the civil government had a right to provide the means - whether through the Law of Return, the population registry or other means - for Jews to come to and live in Israel. The Court opinion, written by Justice Barak, clearly stated that the controlling factor for the Jewish people was not solely Jewish religion. One reason given was that there was not agreement on the religious questions.

The crux of the current Rotem conversion bill is the effort to wrest control of the definition of the Jewish people for state purposes from the civic government and place it clearly in the offices of the Chief Rabbis. We have not had a central Jewish authority since the time of the temples but if this bill passes we could well find ourselves with just such an authority, backed by the power of a state.

One of the more interesting meetings today was with the Secretary of the Government. The off the record conversation was an opportunity to hypothetically test information and strategies. If you happen to speak with x perhaps you might say the following. The meeting was held after Prime Minister Netanyahu had made a public statement that he was against the Rotem bill and urged all members of his party to vote against it. Does urge mean imposing party discipline so that MK's have no choice in casting their vote? So far there is no explicit answer to that question but many winks.

The PM said several weeks ago that what is needed is a table around which we can all discuss the broadest definitions of what it means to be a member of the Jewish people. Of course, every side would need to consider the needs of all parties. We are not known for reaching consensus opinions among Jews easily. However, if such a conversation can be engaged it is far better for all concerned than forcing the issue through legislation.

I URGE YOU TO THANK THE PRIME MINISTER FOR HIS LEADERSHIP BUT ALSO TO REMIND HIM THAT THE ROTEM BILL MUST NOT PASS, EVEN BETTER NOT COME TO A VOTE AT ALL.

The team assembled here is quite impressive. In addition to David Saperstein and myself, the heads of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Rabbinical Assembly, and the Jewish Federations of North America. Of course our colleagues here from IMPJ, Gilad Kariv, and IRAC as well as the Masorti movement are also participating. There are daily calls - usually at 10p.m. Israel time - to update a team that includes the lay and professional staff of URJ, WUPJ, CCAR, as well as the other movements leadership.

Whatever happens here this week(and I do believe the bill will fail), one thing is clear to me, the best way the growth of an open, pluralistic, democratic, Jewish Israel is for us to assist in building a strong Israeli movement. There are no serious barriers to our success. For sure we should

continue our efforts to find ways for the Government to assist us. However, most importantly, we must be the emissaries to our fellow Reform Jews in America; telling the story of the growth of IMPJ, the successes of IRAC, and working to provide the serious funds for growth. It will take patience, perspiration and perseverance but with renewed vigor ARZA can and must lead the way.

Shavuah Tov.
Danny