

## Being Jewish... Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771

My name is Galina Sherpova. Thirty five years ago my visa came through. After years and years of struggling against rampant discrimination - even losing my job and being barred from my profession, all because of the “Yevrei” on the fifth line of my identity card. A “Y” word, and I didn’t even know what it meant to be a Jew. Like so many in the Soviet Union I was raised in a secular home. As for religion - the State was our religion.

But somewhere deep within I knew different. Somewhere deep within, somewhere in occasional odd comment and the subtle hint that crept into my father’s and paternal grandparents’ conversations, I knew there was more. And then, there was always that “Y” word. It haunted me through school, prevented me from attending my chosen university and sabotaged my career again and again.

I joined the cause. Along with other Refusniks we protested and worked together to free ourselves and others from the yoke of discrimination. Intimidation, beatings, imprisonment - all worth it in the name of Zionism. But we also sang, wrote poetry, prayed together, tried hard to learn what this Judaism was. Why did I care so much about it? Why did I choose to give up the familiar and safe and immigrate to Israel? Freedom - freedom to be whom I wanted to be - a Jew, a real Jew.

Only it wasn’t so easy. On my way to Israel, as I passed through Rome, I was told that despite the “Yevrei” I was not a Jew because my mother was not born to a Jewish mother. “But I am,” I pleaded, “I have struggled and fought and spent time in prison...”

“Sorry! We will allow you through but you have to promise to that you will convert when you get to Israel.”

And so I did. Working with an “approved Rabbi” appointed by the Office of the Chief Rabbi, I learned and practiced and underwent a full, traditional conversion. I endured a Soviet prison, this too I could endure.

It is thirty years later. I have been married to an Israeli man for twenty six years. Our two children have served in the Israeli army and the oldest may soon have children of her own.

Yesterday, I was informed that I am no longer Jewish. For all my life I have carried that “Y” word, for the last twenty eight of them it was rubber stamped by the Chief Rabbinate. Now, I am no longer Jewish. My conversion, according to a Rabbi I do not know and have never met is invalid. Neither I nor my children are Jews any more.

Although the name is fictional this and similar scenarios have been played out in Israel over the past few years. Thousands who considered themselves Jews, from the former Soviet Union, from Ethiopia, from a myriad of other countries, all of whom were not considered Jewish enough by the Religious Authorities in Israel and then went through an “official” conversion under the auspices of the Special Conversion Court, have been declared non-Kosher!

It is not just the opinion of one radical Haredi Rabbi that has sent shockwaves through the Jewish community both in Israel and in the Diaspora. For a while now, under pressure from the Ultra-Orthodox, the Chief Rabbinate has been delegitimizing conversions performed in both places. In 2008 the Rabbinical Court of Appeals retrospectively annulled all of the thousands of conversions done under Rabbi Haim Druckman, the Orthodox head of the Special Conversion Court set up by the Sharon government.

Reform and Conservative Conversions, even if done in strict accordance with Halacha, are not surprisingly dismissed by the Chief Rabbinate (although not by the State). But even Orthodox conversions, unless they are supervised by a Rabbi on the officially approved list kept by the Chief Rabbinate, are not considered valid. And of course, the criteria for getting on the list or being removed there from are still a mystery.

For the past three decades or more the Reform and Masorati movements in Israel have fought on behalf of many individuals who have run foul of the arbitrary decisions of the Chief Rabbinate and Ministry of the Interior, taking these cases all the way up to the Supreme Court. They have won some convincing victories and have forced the authorities to take steps to recognize Reform, Conservative and even Orthodox conversions done both in Israel and the Diaspora.

It now appears that all this work, all this progress can easily be undone if the bill introduced by MK David Rotem succeeds.

The bill would place all conversions done in Israel under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate, thereby zeroing any chance that Reform and Conservative conversions would be recognized not only by the Rabbinate but also by the State. And to make matters worse, there are those who are trying to make it retroactively apply to all conversions!

Why would a politician, belonging to Yisrael Beiteinu, a party that had as part of its platform the introduction of civil marriage, which would totally undermine Orthodox hegemony over matrimony, consider giving the Chief Rabbinate so much power?

Actually in a way, this bill decentralizes the power of the Chief Rabbinate. Presently all conversions have to go through the Rabbinical Court in Jerusalem. Rotem's bill will allow local Orthodox Rabbis who are appointees of the Chief Rabbinate, to approve conversions and subsequently certify couples for marriage. It also prohibits the retroactive annulment and non-recognition of any of these officially sanctioned conversions.

Yisrael Beiteinu's constituency consists in the main of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many of them are not Jewish according to the Orthodox Rabbinate and therefore cannot get married in Israel or be buried in a Jewish Cemetery, even if they died fighting for Israel.

Rotem's bill, will allow these potential converts to "shop around and look for an amenable local rabbi" which he hopes would make the process easier for this group.

However, another clause in the bill modifies the Law of Return to say that those who convert to Judaism while resident in Israel will not be automatically granted citizenship, but will have to apply to the Ministry of the Interior for citizenship, as would any non-Jewish immigrant.

This would not apply to those converting in the Diaspora and although it is still unclear as to whether the Chief Rabbinate would have to endorse Diaspora conversions before the Law of Return would apply.

Just in case you thought that there is Orthodox consensus on this bill...Rotem forged the deal with Shas, the Sephardic Orthodox party and not with the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbinate and its political arm, the National Religious Party, and it now appears that they are not too pleased at having been left out of the negotiations.

And if they are not too pleased, you can imagine just how upset the Reform and Conservative communities are. They, along with several of major Jewish organizations, have lobbied long and hard, meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Cabinet members several times. Netanyahu has agreed that the bill will not come to a vote, but both Shas and Yisrael Beiteinu, his vital coalition partners, have already voted against the proposed budget and have threatened to bring down the government by leaving the coalition.

What is most intriguing is that many Israelis, Rotem included, cannot understand why the American Diaspora, or at least about 70% of it, are so upset by this bill. According to Rotem, it doesn't affect Diaspora conversions and so...Apparently our distress at being further delegitimized and our concern for the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel is misplaced.

But it goes far deeper than this! In the past, Israel felt it was necessary to cultivate a relationship with the Diaspora. American Jewry could ensure both Governmental and public opinion support for Israel and that was regarded as being crucial.

Not any more. Over the years it has become more and more apparent that the majority of Israelis don't seem care what American Jews think and feel. Israel no longer depends exclusively on Jewish support and often they get more consistent support and less criticism from right-wing Christian groups than they do from American Jews and, especially, the more liberal American Jews.

In 2006 A. B. Yehosua, a well known Israeli author, incensed the American Jewish community by declaring to the audience at the centenary celebration of the American Jewish Committee "Those who do not live in Israel and do not participate in the daily decisions that are made there and that are entirely Jewish, do not have a Jewish identity of any significance.... You are just playing at Jewishness." As an arch-secularist, he sees Jewishness and Israeli-ness as being inseparable: being Jewish is a nationality, being part of the nation of Israel and religion has little or nothing to do with identity.

What is in fact being challenged by both the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and Yehoshua is our Jewish identity here in America. The Rabbinate and its allies are focussed on undermining our

religious identity while Yehoshua and those who mirror his attitudes negate our historical and cultural Jewish identity.

While their attacks have provoked much anger and protest in the American Jewish community, they do raise an important issue. What does it mean to be Jewish in America in 2010?

In an article in response to Yehoshua's remarks published in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, said "As a secular Jewish nationalist, he (Yehoshua) does not understand at all the role of Jewish religion in the history of the Jewish people. He does not recognize that Jewish peoplehood and Jewish religion are intimately related and inextricably intertwined, and it is the interplay between the two—however fraught with tension and hostility—that has maintained Jewish existence for 3,500 years. He refuses to see that the concept of the Jews being one people with a deep connection to the Land of Israel is a religious idea, rooted in Torah and covenant, and not an ethnic or political one. As a result, he does not understand the resilience of Diaspora communities that have built a strong religious life, and neither does he comprehend the vulnerability of an Israel in which religion has been marginalized and where many Israelis follow his example and view religion with ill-conceived contempt."

Rabbi Yoffe goes on to say "As a Reform Jew, I believe in a diverse, pluralistic Judaism, but that is not the same as saying that Judaism can be stripped of its religious character and can become whatever you want it to be. If Israelis lose all connection with Jewish religious practice and belief, and assume that simply living in Israel is enough to make them Jewish, there is every reason to believe that Israelis can and will assimilate, even if it takes them a bit longer to do so. There is no reason logically or historically to think that Israel could not find itself fifty years from now populated by Hebrew speaking, once-Jewish nationals who are perfectly content to separate themselves from the Jewish people around the world."

Indeed, if we honestly examine the American Jewish Community we see that Rabbi Yoffe's warning to Israelis about assimilating and separating from the Jewish people is unfortunately based on his experience here in the US.

While there is a concern over how many Jews are unaffiliated with any Jewish organizations and how many Jews no longer identify themselves as Jews, dwelling on this in my opinion does not help us understand what it means to be Jewish. Also although always aware that we are a small minority, we have also learned that victimhood and guilt are no longer incentives to be Jewish in America.

While we probably would not go so far as to hide our being Jewish, we would also choose to not carry it around like a banner for all to see. Most are probably quite happy to be Jewish, some are even proud, but it just is. We do not think about it much, we are certainly are not pre-occupied with the responsibilities and obligations of being Jewish. We do what we think we need to in terms of belonging to synagogues and the JCC and sending our children to Religious School. There maybe occasional glimpses of Jewish values in some of the decisions we make, in how and where we make charitable contributions and that's about it.

So what then is being Jewish in America?

Being Jewish in America means being part of something much bigger than ourselves. A something that emerges out of a glorious but troubled past. A something that is complex and multifaceted, that evolves and develops in every moment of the present. A something that holds promise and fulfillment in the future.

Being Jewish in America demands engagement. It demands grappling with God, wrestling with Torah and striving with Israel. It demands individual spiritual growth, involvement in community, concern for the other. It demands that we understand the burdens of the past, shoulder responsibility for the present and nurture and train those who must assume it in the years to come. And along with all this, it demands that we celebrate our successes and look forward to the future with genuine optimism even in times when that seems foolish and unwarranted.

Being Jewish in America is all encompassing. It is in our hearts and homes, in the decisions we make and the way we treat each other and the world around us. It is reflected through our conduct and the values we espouse and is expressed in our moral and ethical choices.

Being Jewish in America is... I can go on, but honestly how relevant is this to most of us?

How relevant should it be?

Would you be interested in exploring what it truly means to be Jewish? Would you be prepared to dedicate some time to learn how Judaism can help you grow spiritually as well as individually? Are you curious about how Judaism can inform the way we make decisions and shape our relationships with those around us? Would you spend some precious time tapping into the rich and varied resources that our tradition readily has available - wisdom and insights that have guided and inspired Jews for generations?

Over the next months and years I hope that all of us will embark upon this journey. In groups or as individuals, at home or here at Beth El, let us begin or continue upon the path that leads toward a more fulfilling Jewish life here in America. This is how we can give “being Jewish in America” real meaning and demonstrate to those who would deny our “Jewishness” that they themselves have a great deal to learn from our example.

Amen

Rabbi Brett R. Isserow  
Beth El Hebrew Congregation  
3830 Seminary Road  
Alexandria  
VA 22304

703 370-9400  
bisserow@bethelhebrew.org