The Struggle for Jewish Pluralism Is Just Beginning

By Rabbi Dr. Reuven Hammer

Without for a moment diminishing the significance of the historic agreement concerning the Kotel reached on Sunday with the government, it is important to point out that there are two dangers inherent in the way in which this agreement may be perceived. The first danger is that it may lead to the belief that the battle for religious freedom and Jewish pluralism in Israel has been won so that now we can relax and claim victory. The truth is that that struggle has hardly begun. To paraphrase Churchill, this is not the beginning of the end but it may be the end of the beginning.

For decades now we have had the right to pray in mixed minyanim at the southern end of the Kotel, even if in a limited way. In a sense this is the third step in a long history of recognition of non-Orthodox groups by the Israeli government. The first such recognition was gained when Prime Minister Netanyahu officially appointed representatives of the Masorti and Reform Movements in Israel to the Neeman Commission to deal with non-Orthodox conversion in Israel. Unfortunately that Commission failed in its task. The second step was when the Israeli government granted the Masorti Movement to right to conduct services at the Robinson’s Arch area of the Western Wall, which we have been doing successfully even since. This was done to avoid the near riots that took place in the Plaza when we held mixed services there. Even then the agreement stated that we did not give up our rights to pray at the plaza, even though we would do so for the sake of peace and the avoidance of violence. The problem with that has always been the limitations that were put on Robinson’s Arch regarding times and numbers of people allowed without payment. Now, this third step goes much further and is therefore to be welcomed since it will place this area on a par with the other part of the Kotel, grant access at all times and support it financially. (Incidentally, the great losers in this are the modern Orthodox rabbis and laypeople who have conceded the Kotel to the power of the Haredi Chief Rabbinate).

Non-Orthodox prayer at the Kotel is important, but it is certainly not the end of the struggle. The essence of the battle is for the Israeli government to officially recognize Masorti and Reform Judaism in Israel for all religious purposes, to put them on an equal basis legally and fiscally with Orthodox Judaism and to end the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over Judaism here. Only then will there be true freedom of and for religion for Jews in Israel. That struggle has to be pursued with even greater vigor now. To relax our guard at this point because of the victory at the Kotel would be a tragedy. On the contrary, this should serve as a spur to begin serious work towards changing the status quo. The most important place to begin would be marriage. The current situation in which any couple that does not want to or cannot be married by the Chief Rabbinate and wishes to be recognized by the State as married has to go abroad for a civil marriage. If they want a Jewish marriage they can also have a ceremony performed by a Masorti or Reform rabbi and hundreds do each year, but it has no legal status and, according to the current law, the performing rabbi could be put in jail. This has never happened, but considering the make-up of the current coalition, it is not impossible. This absurd situation is a violation of religious liberty and a stain on Israel’s democracy. It should be put to an end and the sooner the better.
The second danger is that this agreement is being seen as a concession to and a victory for Diaspora Jewry rather than as a struggle within Israeli society for the rights of Israeli Jews and the future of Israeli Judaism. I find it very disturbing that as quoted in the Jerusalem Post (February 1, 2016), Natan Sharansky told the cabinet that this arrangement should be approved because since the majority of American Jews identify with the Reform and Conservative Movements they feel that the present situation discriminates against them and alienates them from Israel. Therefore it was important to change the situation. That may be true, but by not saying one word about the needs of Israelis for a change and the rights of Israelis to pray at the Kotel in a pluralistic way, the focus has been turned in the wrong direction. The fight for the Kotel is not a struggle between Israel and the Diaspora. It is a struggle within Israeli society for its very nature.

Arye Deri’s statement that “the State of Israel runs according to traditional Judaism. The whole problem of the Reform and Conservatives has not existed in the State of Israel until now, and I have no intention that it will occur now. There is nothing to compromise over here” is exactly the problem. The State of Israel must not be run according to traditional – by which he means ultra-Orthodox – Judaism. Conservative and Reform, for his information, have existed here since at the least the 1930’s, before the existence of the State, and the struggle for full recognition and equality will and must continue with greater force than ever until victory is achieved.

Let us welcome this agreement for the achievement that it is and let it serve as an opportunity to continue the struggle for full religious freedom in Israel so that, in the words of Hatikvah, we can truly become “a free people in our own land.”

Reuven Hammer, a former President of the International Rabbinical Assembly, was the Masorti representative on the Neeman Commission and one of the negotiators of the original agreement for mixed prayer at Robinson’s Arch.