



## PERSPECTIVES

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# A Sad Decision That Might Haunt Us All

by Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Government decisions that snub the non-Orthodox denominations of the Jewish faith are not only a matter of identity and morality. They have a direct bearing on national security. One of the foundational aspects of Israel's strategy of survival in a hostile environment is the special relationship with the US, which turn rests on three pillars: a commonality of strategic interests, facing the same threats; an affinity of moral and democratic values; and the organized support of American Jewry. Both the affinity and the Jewish commitment may have been put at risk by decisions that enshrine the monopoly of the Orthodox (in effect, the ultra-Orthodox) interpretation of Judaism in Israeli political life.

The government's decision on June 26 to snub, in practice, the non-Orthodox denominations of the Jewish faith, to bar the implementation of the compromise on prayer arrangements in the southern segment of the Western Wall, and to advance legislation on conversions that enshrines the monopoly of the Orthodox (indeed, ultra-Orthodox) establishment has serious and potentially tragic consequences.

It threatens the unity of the Jewish people, which the political leadership of Israel should treat as a sacred trust. It is bound to lead to serious clashes, once again, over egalitarian prayer practices, which would not add to Israel's reputation. And above all, it poses a long-term threat to one of the foundational pillars of Israeli national security: namely, the willingness and ability of American Jewish organizations to stand by Israel in her hours of need, as they have done again and again since 1948.

The special relationship with the US, which every Israeli leader since Ben-Gurion has recognized as central to our prospects of surviving and prospering in a dangerous and hostile region, cannot and must not be taken for granted. True, it reflects a degree of commonality of interests – which is another way of saying we have the same enemies. But this should not lead us to forget or dismiss the other two pillars on which it rests: the moral affinity of two democracies, and the organized power (well, let us call it the reach and influence) of organized American Jewry. Both are now under threat. When the day comes when we need them, amidst the vicissitudes of the changing American political landscape, we may rue the day the Israeli government took decisions that undermine their essence.

To delegitimize the religious practices of a very large proportion of the Jewish people – certainly a majority of North American Jews – is not only an insult. It violates the basic precepts of religious freedom that are dear to so many Americans. It will make it increasingly difficult for Americans at large to look upon Israeli society and politics as kindred spirits.

Moreover, to deliberately and brazenly alienate the non-Orthodox denominations – to force their rank and file to question whether their commitment to Israel and to Israel's needs has won them any claim to attention amidst the rough and tumble of Israeli politics – is to jeopardize the prospect of mobilizing their help when (and it is when, not if) we will call on their help on issues central to our very survival. This is literally an act of sawing off the branch on which we sit.

It should come as no surprise that two ministers with a keen awareness of our national security needs voted, alone among their colleagues, against this sad and potentially tragic mistake. They surely know that our relationship with the North American wing of the Jewish people is not just an issue of values and peoplehood: it speaks to vital national interests that have now been put at risk.

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