



PERSPECTIVES

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Tensions Between the Israeli Government and Non-Orthodox American Jews Are Exaggerated

by Ariel Ben Solomon

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Warnings by American non-Orthodox Jewish figures and other observers about a strategic national security threat rooted in a breakdown in relations between Israel and American Jews is exaggerated and erroneous. The unbreakable connection of non-Orthodox American Jews and the Jewish state continues because of deep feelings that minor squabbles over the Western Wall and other domestic Israeli issues cannot hinder. In the long term, due to demographics, the growth and power of Orthodox American Jews will eclipse the shrinking importance of the non-Orthodox progressive organizations.

The American Jewish and Israeli media often publish declarations by American Reform and Conservative Jewish figures containing threats and criticism directed at the Israeli government for not giving in to their demands. These calls fall on deaf ears among much of the Israeli and American Jewish public.

American Jewish support for Israel is not going to significantly dissipate because of spats between the Israeli Orthodox establishment and American non-Orthodox Jewish organizations, including the “crisis” over arrangements at the Western Wall, where Reform and Conservative groups are making a power play for more control of the site after having been given a separate prayer area.

Since these groups have little support among Israeli Jews, their only option is to count on the media and American Jewish organizations to prop them up and pressure the government. The Reform and Conservative movements tend to be allied with the progressive political left, which opposes the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

According to [Pew statistics published in 2016](#), only around 5% of Israeli Jews identify with the Reform and Conservative movements, which are leading political attacks against Netanyahu's government.

Furthermore, Reform and Conservative numbers in America are trending downward. In the long term, due to demographic growth, American Jews are becoming more Orthodox and therefore more hawkish on Israel. This is gleaned from [a Pew poll published in 2013](#), which also found a lower average number of children for Reform (1.7), Conservative (1.8), and unaffiliated Jews (1.5) compared to Orthodox (4.1).

In addition, the survey found that the "emotional attachment to Israel has not waned discernibly among American Jews in the past decade," with around 70% saying they were either very attached (30%) or somewhat attached (39%) to Israel.

The progressive movements are disintegrating in America largely because of assimilation and a lack of authenticity, which is causing their congregants to lose interest. Yet this has not stopped them from playing an active political role by meeting with Israeli government officials and publishing op-eds in Israeli and American Jewish publications, the combined effect of which gives the impression that their power is greater than it really is.

Furthermore, these progressive organizations are becoming more hostile towards Israel and are moving farther left, even into BDS-boycott territory.

The Reform movement [announced recently](#) that it would be boycotting meetings with officials from the Prime Minister's Office unless it caved in to its demands regarding conditions at the Western Wall.

"We in the Reform movement have taken a decision to stop meeting with the prime minister – and this is unprecedented – as well as with our friend Tzachi Hanegbi, whom we consider to be a true friend, because we want the government to stop misrepresenting these meetings as attempts to resolve this crisis," said Rabbi Noa Sattath, the director of the Israel Religious Action Center, the advocacy arm of the Reform movement in Israel, *Haaretz* reported last month.

And earlier in November, Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely's [speech at Princeton University's Hillel was canceled](#) by the university's Executive Director and Jewish Chaplain, Conservative Rabbi Julie Roth. Unsurprisingly, it was the Orthodox Chabad movement's representative on campus [that held the event instead](#).

This past summer, [an article published by BESA](#) argued that the Israeli government's decisions at odds with the Reform and Conservative movements "have a direct bearing on national security" and that "Jewish commitment may have been put at risk by decisions" that favor the Orthodox interpretation of Judaism in the public sphere.

This argument is mistaken.

The growing tendency in America is for more Orthodox Jews to play key public roles such as in the White House, countering the claim that progressive Jews are the main power brokers in America. President Donald Trump has put a number of Orthodox Jews in powerful positions in his administration, such as senior advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner, new US ambassador to Israel David Melech Friedman, and Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt.

In the past, there was a feeling that a Jew had to stop being Jewish to make it to the top, but today the opposite appears to be the case. This is also evident in society, where, for example, the star right wing speaker and talk show host Ben Shapiro continues to impress while wearing a kippa.

The truth of the matter is that most American Jews – whether secular or assimilated – deeply care about Israel and are not too concerned about Israeli domestic religious or political matters such as who the chief Rabbi is and so forth.

Additionally, American Jews I know who attend Reform or Conservative synagogues do not appear concerned that Israel is dominated by Orthodox Judaism or that the Western Wall is administered by them. American Jews' relationship with Jerusalem is based on their identity as Jews – not whether they attend a Reform or Conservative synagogue on the holidays back home or on any expectation that the Reform or the Conservative movements will gain power in Israel.

Even secular and progressive-minded Jews come to the Western Wall looking for an authentic Judaism they can identify with, not to convert the site into a different kind of place.

Another common refrain among the progressive movements is that Israel's Rabbinate does not recognize their conversions, but this is more about personal frustration at the Israeli bureaucracy than hatred of the state. After all, even Reform and Conservative conversions can be used to immigrate to Israel.

These movements are selective in their own way, only converting those who meet certain standards (though not meeting Orthodox halachic ones), thus effectively agreeing that some rules need to be upheld. By and large, the Reform

and Conservative movements, as well as non-Orthodox American Jews, all tend to agree with the notion that Israel is a Jewish state, distinct from others.

The Reform and Conservative movements are seeking political power in Israel even as their movements are shrinking, and their pronouncements should be understood in that light.

Israel does not have to worry about the connection between American Jewry and the Jewish state. All the other commonly listed concerns, such as a possible drop in donations or a boycott on visiting the country, are unrealistic or insignificant.

Reform and Conservative Jews in America still care about Jerusalem and their connection to Israel is stronger than their leaders sometimes make it out to be.

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