

Erev Rosh Hashanah:  
When Officiating at a Jewish Wedding Is a Crime

Tonight marks the start of the New Year, 5779. Next month, immediately after the High Holidays, I will leave for Israel to officiate at the wedding of my best friend's daughter. I plan to return to Kingston one week later, assuming I am not arrested.

I have known Stav all of her life. She and her fiancé, Oz, are Progressive Jews. Born and raised in Israel, they fundamentally object to the religious coercion imposed upon all Israeli citizens by the Orthodox. Stav asked me to officiate at her wedding, not only because of our deep personal connection, but also because she wishes to express herself and celebrate her wedding as a progressive Jew. Should this be her right? Because I am a Reform Rabbi, it is against Israeli law for me to officiate at Stav and Oz's wedding. The penalty for such a crime is two years of jail time.

Do I have your attention now?

This past summer, police arrived before sunrise at the home of Rabbi Dov Haiyun, a Conservative Rabbi in Haifa. They pulled him out of bed, arrested him, and brought him to the precinct for a full police interrogation. His crime was his having officiated at a Jewish wedding. Which oppressive regimes arrest clergy for officiating at weddings? Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia? Israel. The police defended their actions as merely executing orders.

The Conservative and Reform movements, American Jewish Committee, Federations of North America, United Jewish Appeal, and other Jewish voices around the world expressed shock and outrage at this incident. But we ought not be shocked. Rabbi Dov Haiyun's arrest is not an isolated occurrence. Discrimination against non-Orthodox Rabbis is rampant in Israel, inequities for citizens of different religious movements are the status quo, and blatantly unjust policies have become institutionalized. As long as we allow this to continue, we acquiesce to the shame and are part of the problem.

Who are we as a Jewish community? What do we value?

Have you or someone you love had a Jewish wedding at which I or another Reform Rabbi officiated? Have you or someone you love chosen Judaism, been guided through conversion with a Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist Rabbi? You *are* full-fledged members of our Jewish community. Your children *are* Jewish. Yet it is very likely that you, your child, your grandchild will not be considered Jewish by Israel, our homeland.

You, your child, or your grandchild may have recently returned from a Birthright trip to Israel. Birthright is a beautiful gift from philanthropists to deepen all of our connections to Eretz Yisrael. Birthright has traditionally partnered with all religious movements to make these trips happen. As of November 2017, however, Birthright no longer works with the Reform movement. Today, Birthright's partnerships are exclusively Orthodox. And with the cessation of Birthright's link to the Reform movement, its trips no longer travel to the security barrier to discuss its

complexities, no longer meet with Arab citizens of Israel, and no longer visit the Egalitarian section of the Western Wall where men and women can worship together.

To truly love Israel means understanding the totality of Israel.

This past April, I led a Congregation Emanuel trip to Israel. Working with our talented Susan Basch, we hand-selected an itinerary to see people and places few Israelis, no less Americans, ever experience. The trip was a raving success.

I need to share with you, however, that I felt conflicted about bringing my congregation to Israel at a time when her policies have become increasingly intolerant of diversity, trampled on basic human and ethical rights, and failed to recognize us as Jews.

As your Rabbi, it has been my practice to wear a *kippah*. I wear my *kippah* when I am here at the synagogue, leading services or teaching, meeting with the Mayor, doing interfaith work, or speaking at a rally. So why, as your Rabbi, in past trips to Israel, have I felt the need to subtly stow my *kippah* in my pocket. In anticipation of our trip this past April, I made a determination to wear my *kippah* in Israel, just as I would here in Kingston. I am no longer willing to conceal who I am. I am a proud, Reform Jew. I am a Rabbi of Israel.

Openly wearing my *kippah* opened the door to a broad spectrum of mixed reactions, from curiosity to rage. Once, on the sea walls in Acco, an Israeli man who had never encountered a female Rabbi or a progressive Jew, asked if he could participate with us when we counted the *omer*. In Jerusalem a reporter filmed our Congregation praying, men and women together at the contested Egalitarian section of the Wall and shared with me that I was the Rabbi that he had been looking for his whole life. While walking on a street in Tel Aviv, a man screamed at me for daring to denigrate Judaism. And in the bathroom of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, I was berated by another woman who was a secular Jew. Whether in bemusement or antipathy, I, as a Jew and Rabbi, was treated as the other.

Before we can worry about a Jew's right to wear a *kippah* in France or Germany, we must first tackle the right of any Jew to wear a *kippah* in the streets of Tel Aviv. If we are to assure the rights of Jews everywhere in the world to live freely and practice their Judaism, we, as practicing Reform Jews, must demand those same assurances in Israel.

For 30 years, Women of the Wall have been fighting for the rights of women to pray aloud, read *Torah*, and wear *kippot* and *tallitot* in public at a National Historic and Religious Site. The Wall is the archeological remains of the second Temple of all Jews, not just Orthodox. Yet 1,948 years later, the Orthodox establishment still refuses to recognize the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist communities right to having a voice or place in religious life in Israel.

We read about the fundamental inequalities increasingly surfacing in Israel today. We pay attention when Orthodox Jews refuse to sit next to women on flights, but did you know that there is an active movement to have all advertisements with women removed from public buses and kept off the streets in Jerusalem? In 2018, there are neighborhoods that unabashedly assign and

enforce gender-specific sidewalks. Religious coercion has gone beyond the pale and become intolerable when women riding on public transportation are told not only by the ultra-Orthodox, but also by the Israeli police, that they must move to the back of the bus.

The Israeli government's decision to renounce the compromise on the Western Wall which would have allowed all streams of Judaism to participate in decision making is shameful. Its backtracking on surrogacy rights for gay male couples and abject undermining of LGBTQ rights in Israel is unacceptable. And the Nation State Bill which formally de-legitimizes diaspora Judaism and institutionalizes minorities as second-class citizens is disturbing. These are all issues that need to outrage us as Reform Jews who love Israel.

How has this happened? This is the result of the abject surrender of the government of Israel to the ultra-Orthodox on issue after issue. This is the result of our surrender to the false notion that only Orthodoxy is the true faith.

While Rabbi Haiyun's arrest was just one of a series of indignities that unfurled in Israel throughout the summer months, it is imperative that everyone sitting in this room understand the personal nature of the affront.

Whenever we defer to the Orthodox as "authentic Jews" we are complicit. Whenever we allow the ultra-Orthodox to shape policies or posture as the public face and spokespeople for Judaism, we are complicit. Whenever we do not insist that we be recognized, that we have a place at the table, we are complicit.

The pretense that the Orthodox accept everyone is a fallacy. They accept everyone except those who have a firm faith that is non-Orthodox.

It is time to prioritize your identity as a Reform Jew. The existence of your congregation matters. Your voice in Israel, as a non-Orthodox Jew, matters. Your faith in a Judaism that teaches us human rights, justice, egalitarianism, and inclusivity matters. Believe in who you are. As Dr. King said, "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now." Believe every day in your authentic Judaism.

Today is the first of Tishri, the first day of the New Year, 5779. Immediately following the holidays, I will leave for Israel to officiate at the wedding of my best friend's daughter. I plan to return to Kingston one week later, assuming I am not arrested.