As Orthodox Rabbis, We Support the Israeli Supreme Court Decision

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AS ORTHODOX RABBIS WE SUPPORT THE ISRAELI SUPREME COURT DECISION

Avi Weiss & Marc Angel

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We are Orthodox rabbis who have served in Orthodox synagogues and taught in Orthodox schools for five decades. It is precisely because we love Orthodoxy that we speak in support of the Israeli Supreme Court's decision validating Conservative and Reform conversions done in Israel for Israeli citizenship.?

This move, we believe, will help foster in Israel a less coercive Orthodoxy and worldwide will embrace all of our people as part of?*Am Yisrael*, with a shared past and shared future.

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No doubt, the Chief Rabbinate will disagree with the position we've taken as they fiercely want to hold on to power, determined to be the sole arbiters on conversions, leaving no room for Conservative and Reform.

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We know as well from conversations with colleagues that there are Orthodox rabbis who agree with us, but are fearful to say so publicly, concerned that the Chief Rabbinate will refuse to accept any spiritual leader who disagrees with their position.

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Because we support Reform and Conservative conversions for citizenship in Israel doesn't mean we would accept their conversions as halachically legitimate. As in America, when individuals have come before us with non-Orthodox conversions, if they don't meet Orthodox standards, we would encourage another conversion.

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Truth be told, the Israeli Supreme Court decision doesn't change much. Based on the Law of Return, the Israeli Interior Ministry already accepts for citizenship those converted by Conservative and Reform rabbis outside of Israel. The inequity for those in Israel has now been resolved.

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Why accept the Supreme Court decision? Our teacher Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik wrote not only about the Covenant of Sinai, but the Covenant of Egypt, also called the Covenant of Fate. We part company with our Conservative and Reform colleagues on many halachic

matters going back to Sinai, but our fate as a people unites us; the enemy makes no distinction between levels of observance or denominations. We survive and thrive as a people together.

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More broadly, we are all part of what can be called the Covenant of Family – that family includes our co-religionists from other denominations. Recognizing their conversions in Israel will deepen the relationship between Israel and the majority of Jews in the Diaspora who are not Orthodox.

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With all our heart and soul, we believe the Supreme Court decision will strengthen Orthodoxy. Most Jews in Israel today have been alienated by the Chief Rabbinate, as they see it as coercive in nature. This kind of Orthodoxy alienates, as spiritual striving and religious coercion are antithetical. With greater choice, people may see Orthodoxy as less oppressive, more inviting.

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If Israeli citizens have a choice of where to go for a conversion, it may catalyze the rabbinate to be more open in their conversion policies, taking into account the whole corpus of Jewish Law which is more flexible than the current extreme Chief Rabbinate's standards.? Competition is always good as it encourages everyone to do better. This bill could create a dynamic which would prod the Chief Rabbinate to become less insular and adopt a broader view of?*Klal Yisrael*.?

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Notwithstanding our critique of the Chief Rabbinate, our feelings for those who hold its office remain warm. In the past, we were honored to have contact with Chief Rabbis – clearly lovers of Israel and the Jewish people. We have little doubt, too, that the Chief Rabbis today are people of goodwill. But the Chief Rabbinate as an institution no longer works. Whenever power coalesces in the hands of the few, it spells trouble.

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Perhaps the greatest threat to Israel is the lack of unity of our people. The Supreme Court decision has the potential to bring us closer, allowing Jews from all streams to feel part of the destiny of Am Yisrael, talking openly with each other, disagreeing agreeably, recognizing we are not only part of one nation, but one family – hopefully a loving family.

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