

June 28, 2017
4 Tammuz 5777

Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister's Office
3 Kaplan Street Hakiryia
Jerusalem, Israel 91950

Dear Mr. Netanyahu,

Let me begin by saying that I know how difficult it is to be a leader in today's turbulent and uncertain times. As a leader of a small Reform congregation in Seattle, WA, I know all too well how a leader has to balance the many different perspectives, needs, concerns, temperaments, and more of those whom he or she leads. I know that while I may have my own opinions, my role is to be the leader for the whole of my community—which includes people at all different places along the political and religious spectrum. They have all chosen to make our congregation their spiritual home, and I want to make sure that they feel that they belong, regardless of their ideological beliefs.

It's a bit like the situation in Israel, isn't it? You are the Prime Minister for *all* who live there—Orthodox Jews, Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, secular Jews, Christians, Muslims, Palestinians—all those who have—for a variety of reasons—chosen to call Israel their home.

So I must say that I was very upset and saddened to learn that you reneged on a promise you made to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel. Just three years ago, when I led a congregational trip to Israel, we visited the space that was to be set aside for egalitarian prayer. Frankly, at the time I didn't think it was the best solution; I, like others, wished that a more prominent space would have been designated for those in the Jewish world who believe that men and women should be able to pray together, equally, in a way that best reflects their own religious beliefs and commitments. But as a leader, I understood that sometimes compromises are necessary, and was willing, albeit reluctantly, to accept the choice you and your government had made.

To learn that you had gone back on that promise demonstrated that you clearly are NOT the Prime Minister for *all* who live in the land of Israel. You are only the Prime Minister for a segment—the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox, who think that they have the right to impose their interpretation of Judaism on others. Not only am I upset and saddened, but I also wonder, once again, if Israel is truly a homeland for *all* Jews, as it purports to be. Given that, I find myself increasingly reluctant to bring members of my congregation to visit, and to spend their money to support a system and a government that does not represent them, or many other Jews, throughout the world.

I was also saddened to learn that your government backed legislation that solidifies the ultra-Orthodox Rabbinate's control over which conversions are recognized or not in Israel. During my first year in rabbinical school in Israel, I worked for the Reform *Beit Din L'Giyur*, and met with many people who—for a variety of reasons, all legitimate—chose to convert with non-Orthodox movements. Mr. Netanyahu, there are many interpretations to what it means to be a Jew. They are all *interpretations*. Jews have been discussing and wrestling with how to determine Jewish identity for thousands of years, and hopefully will continue for thousands more. You could certainly more nobly use your role as Prime Minister to ensure that there is room in Israel for *all* Jews, including those who have converted through non-Orthodox movements. Let that be your legacy, Mr. Netanyahu. If it is, I will certainly return to visit time and again, and ask those I lead to visit and support the country as well, with their financial as well as their moral resources. Israel is and should be a homeland and a place of refuge for all who are part of the Jewish People, not just a select few.

In the meantime, please know that I will continue to support those organizations that are working hard to ensure that there is religious pluralism in Israel—not only for us, but also for future generations.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Zari M. Weiss