

U.S. Reform Jewish Leader Warns of Crisis Between Israel, U.S. Jews if Western Wall Mixed-prayer Space Scrapped

Netanyahu 'likes to say he's the prime minister of the Jewish people, not just the State of Israel - if you want that role, you have to deliver here, not just talk about it,' says Rabbi Rick Jacobs

Amir Tibon Jun 22, 2017 10:40 PM



Orthodox put up a temporary divider in the Robinson's Arch section of the Western Wall to challenge the site's designation as a place for Reform and Conservative prayer, October 20, 2016.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism - the largest Jewish movement in North America - warned of a new crisis on Thursday between Israel and large segments of the U.S. Jewish community if the Israeli government backtracks on its commitment to create an egalitarian prayer area at Jerusalem's Western Wall - Israel announced Sunday it would indeed suspend that plan.

A number of reports in the Israeli media over the last week indicate that the Israeli government, following a number of delays, is looking for a way out of the agreement. A source involved in the discussions of its implementation told Haaretz earlier this week that Prime Minister Netanyahu has "decided not to decide."

In a statement issued on Wednesday, Jacobs said that while such reports were "deeply alarming," they were "sadly, not surprising." In an interview with Haaretz on Thursday, he explained that supporters of the agreement, which was crafted in early 2016 but hasn't yet been implemented, have gotten used to seemingly endless delays.

"The government kept asking for more and more time, until the Supreme Court intervened," he says. "There has been delay after delay."

Now, the concern is that under pressure from the ultra-Orthodox parties in his coalition, Netanyahu will either walk away from the agreement all together, or try to find a creative way to win more time without making any progress. Jacobs says that when a delegation from his movement visited Israel earlier this year and met with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Israeli leader and his advisers explained that there are coalition complications that make it hard to move forward with the plan.



Non-Orthodox rabbis bring Torah into Western Wall: Conservative Rabbi Steven Wernick (L), Reform Rabbi Rick Jacobs, Women of the Wall's Anat Hoffman (C), Reform Rabbi Gilad Kariv. Nov. 2, 2016

"My answer to that," says Jacobs, "is that leadership is always about taking a principled stand. I understand that there are pragmatic considerations, but leadership on any level - local, national and international - is also about being able to stand firm on matters of principle." Jacobs added that Reform and Conservative Jews, in North America and in Israel, "understand we're not going to get everything we're asking for. But right now, we're getting next to nothing."

According to Jacobs, the constant delays in the implementation of the Western Wall agreement is just one part of an increasing trend of bills and decisions in Israel that are driving a wedge between the Jewish state and large parts of American Jewry.

"There's the conversions bill, which is still being discussed and will set us back dramatically, there are local struggles against the non-Orthodox movements, there's the issue of the Mikvaot [women's ritual baths], there's the new entry bill; decision after decision, Knesset bill after Knesset bill, that are creating a growing sense of disaffection."

Jacobs says that he expects Netanyahu to "stand up to the Haredim" on at least one of these issues. He wants to emphasize that his statement shouldn't be perceived as a threat - "we're not going to stop encouraging love and support for Israel in our community. But the Prime Minister knows that there is a

problem." He also mentions that the head of the Jewish Agency, former Israeli minister Natan Shransky, has described the relationship between Israel and North American Jews as a "national security issue," one that demands urgent attention and strategic planning that looks beyond immediate coalition considerations.

Rabbi Jacobs still hopes that the prime minister will honor the agreement and that the government will work to implement it. "I understand that he has to maintain a coalition," he says. "But the Haredim are a minority in Israel and a minority in North America, their interests do not coincide with those of the entire Jewish people worldwide. The prime minister likes to say he's the Prime Minister of the Jewish people, not just the State of Israel - if you want that role, you have to deliver here, not just talk about it."



Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, left, met U.S. Jewish religious leaders, including Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Rick Jacobs, in New York, Dec. 11, 2015.