

JEWISH RELIGIOUS EQUALITY COALITION

Ma Nishtana? Why is this night a night to think about religious pluralism in Israel?

By Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, The Rabbinical Assembly

1. The Torah teaches that the *B'nai Yisrael* went forth out of Egypt as a gathering of 12 distinct tribes, but all united as one people. So too are Jews today, in Israel and around the world, a diverse group of people whose varied approaches to deeply personal questions such as God and Torah deserve to be respected and valued. As we learn in *Pirke Avot*, “care as much about the dignity of others as your own.”
2. There are many ways we express this challenge—religious freedom, religious pluralism, and religious equality. When Jews are not free to marry and divorce, to worship in sacred places, or to bury their loved ones in accordance with their own interpretations of Judaism, they are deprived of the freedom gained by *B'nai Yisrael* at this season—freedom to worship God as they choose and to take on Jewish religious obligation voluntarily.
3. The religious establishment in Israel, which will likely be a significant part of the new governing coalition, is the beneficiary of a religious monopoly that was recently estimated to benefit from over \$600 million *each year* in governmental subsidies. The exclusive and excessive funding of the religious programs and services of the ultra-Orthodox prevent any other Jewish religious expressions from receiving support. While some believe that there should be separation of synagogue and state, if it does continue then such funding must be made equally available to all religious streams in order to provide attractive, non-coercive religious options for all Israelis.
4. These violations of Jewish freedom of religious expression are in direct contradiction to Israel's Declaration of Independence which explicitly states that Israel will: “guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture.”

This Passover, as we recall the beginning of *B'nai Yisrael's* journey to religious freedom, let us remember the precious gift of our generation, a Jewish national homeland in Israel, and let us work to ensure it serves as a beacon for Jewish religious equality and freedom.

The Four Children

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The Torah spoke of four children: one wise, one wicked, one simple and one who does not know how to ask.

What does the wise one say? What are the laws and statutes that God has commanded you? How do you believe Jewish life should be lived? While we may differ in our interpretations, we share many of the same sacred texts, history and commitments. I become a better Jew myself when I learn from those around me who hold varied opinions.

What does the wicked one say? What is this worship to you? To you—which is to say, the wicked one passes judgment on the decisions of others in highly negative and self-righteous ways, seeking not to understand but to denigrate and alienate. The wicked one questions the integrity of anyone who interprets tradition differently, and thus denies the essence of a unified and pluralistic Jewish community. You should set this wicked one's teeth on edge, and say: "This is what God did for me, when I came out of Egypt," as a varied and diverse community, to worship God in manifold ways.

What does the simple one say: "What is this?" And you say: "With a strong hand and an outstretched arm, God brought us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." Taking away the rights of another to worship in freedom is anathema to God. Let us work to ensure that it does not recur anywhere in this world.

And the one who does not know how to ask? Monolithic interpretations of religion ultimately disenfranchise Jews who might be open to Judaism and push them farther away. So long as Israel does not embrace religious freedom, we can be sure that many more will never learn how to ask. Let us open up the subject, as it is written: "and tell your child on that day, saying: 'It is because God did this for me when I left Egypt.'" In Israel's initial redemption, God gave each of us the freedom to build our own unique understanding of Jewish life.

Passover, our season of redemption and freedom, reminds us once again of the world we seek to build—a world of respect for diverse Jewish approaches, in Israel and around the globe. As we celebrate God's deliverance so long ago, let us remember that we must always actively protect religious freedom. Redemption is not an act that happened once and is complete, rather let us make it an ongoing process around which our community can come together to build a world of fairness, respect and justice for all.

About Us

The Jewish Religious Equality Coalition (J-REC) is a broad-based initiative advocating for religious freedom and equality as a means of strengthening Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state that assures its ties with global Jewry. J-REC is a coalition of American organizations and individuals working with like-minded Israeli organizations that would mobilize support to create alternatives to the exclusive control of the Chief Rabbinate over personal status issues, notably, marriage and divorce, and once resolved, conversions to Judaism.