

Shlach Lekhah 5778

All Of Them

In this week's Torah portion, the twelve spies get their first glimpse of the country that will become the Land of Israel. Ten of them fail to believe they can live there; but the promise is made that the children of the spies' generation, plus Joshua and Caleb, will enter the land eventually.

All of them.

And when the modern State of Israel was founded in 1948, the Law of Return provided that any Jew who wished to make Aliyah could emigrate to Israel. As modified in 1970, the law applies to those born Jews (having a Jewish mother or maternal grandmother), those with Jewish ancestry (having a Jewish father or grandfather) and converts to Judaism (Orthodox, Reform, or Conservative denominations).

All of them.

Last week I asked us to take fifteen seconds to try physically to experience what Israelis living on the Gaza border must have been feeling. It was a way of trying to express our deep connection to the body of Israel, that what happens there has a resonance here. The struggle for the body of Israel – its security, its borders, its relationships with the countries around it – continues, and as Jews, we attune ourselves to it.

But this week brought us a situation that exemplifies a struggle that is just as important, if not more so. It is the struggle for Israel's Jewish soul.

And it begins with a young man called Kibita Yosef. Kibita comes from the Abuyadaya community in Uganda.

The Abuyadaya are a small community of Jews headed by Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, with whom I studied in Los Angeles. They have identified and practiced as Jews for more than a century; they were converted en masse in the early 2000s by the Dean of my rabbinical school and with other leading Rabbis from the US Conservative movement. Those conversions fully satisfied the halachic requirements - immersion in a kosher mikveh, circumcision for men and acceptance of the 'yoke of the mitzvot,' the Rabbis' definition of a person's wish to live a full Jewish life and be part of the Jewish community everywhere.

The small Abuyadaya synagogue in Mbale is full of prayer and music; the whole community, spread over several small villages, stops work on Shabbat, leaving their food for the day ready under cover of plastic plates; they educate their children in Hebrew and in Jewish customs; their teens lead services; and their level of observance and commitment is greater than that of many Conservative Jews in this country. And they have exported their practices to our communities - this *kippah* was made by Abuyadaya women and the children in our Shul School love to sing their version of Hinei Ma Tov.

The Jewish Agency recognizes the Abuyadaya as a Jewish community for the purposes of the Law of Return.

Nonetheless, when Kibita recently decided that he wished to emigrate to Israel and remain on Kibbutz Keturah, the Israeli Ministry of the Interior rejected his request, ruling that his "conversion is not recognized for the purpose of receiving status in Israel." He has been ordered to leave Israel by June 14 or face deportation.

In its ruling the Ministry also disqualifies *any* member of the Abuyadaya community from making Aliyah.

Let me be very clear about what this means. The Ministry of the Interior, under the direction of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and in defiance of the Jewish Agency, is ruling *all* the conversions of the Abuyadaya community not kosher. It is ruling that Rabbi Sizomu's joyous, observant community is not Jewish. And it is ruling that Rabbi Gershom Sizomu does not deserve the title of rabbi and that the rabbis who converted his community - and, by implication, all the rabbis of the US Conservative movement - do not deserve it either.

It is almost too painful for me to express this thought - the only Jewish country in the world has turned on the Jews of the world.

Action is being taken. I can circulate links after Shabbat, or you can google. On a purely personal level I suggest friending Kibita if you're on facebook. He needs to know that even if Israel is trying to deport him, he has a wider Jewish community on which he can rely.

The Rabbinical Assembly has already condemned the decision and Masorti Olami is setting up a multi-pronged campaign that will include legal action, political advocacy, public education and worldwide engagement of Jews to support Kibita and the Abuyadaya.

And I hope very much those actions will serve to arrest this latest behavior.

Because behavior like this is harmful almost beyond description.

The Jewish mystics believed in the idea of 'soul families.' Each of us, the kabbalah teaches, can trace our origins back to one of the souls that stood at Sinai. Each of those souls budded and branched so that each of our souls today belongs to a group that instinctively understands us, with whom we feel comfortable, perhaps even with the sense that we've 'known them in another life.' This soul family is our support and our solace, cheering us on when things are going well and accompanying us with wordless comfort when we grieve. And the soul family transcends space and time.

But the soul of Israel is more than just a soul family among other soul families. Rather, it is a single, collective soul – one of which every Jew in the world is a part, one to which every Jew in the world is attuned, and with which every Jew in the world resonates. There is another ancient teaching that every convert that ever was or will be also stood at Sinai. So they, too, are an indivisible part of Israel's collective soul.

This action on the part of Israel's Ministry of the Interior will fracture Israel's collective soul. When a soul is fractured, the damage is acutely painful and often irreparable in the longer term. We must do everything in our power to prevent such a fracture from happening.

As well as adding our voices to the various campaigns I have mentioned, we can also pray. As we rise to pray for the welfare of the State of Israel this morning, I suggest we direct our *kavvanah* towards the integrity of its soul.

If Israel is truly a Jewish country, it needs to be a country for *all* Jewish souls.

All of them.