

Contra Adam Bronfman: No, We Are Not All Jews

Posted At : July 27, 2010 7:05 PM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: denominations, peoplehood, identity, pluralism, religion and state, diaspora relations, conversion, values

Seagram heir and Jewish pluralism advocate Adam Bronfman took to the blogosphere today via the JTA, declaring that "**We Are All Jews,**" and denouncing the recently-tabled Israeli conversion bill, which critics charge would solidify Haredi control over Israeli government recognition of conversions, to the exclusion of non-Orthodox (and non-Haredi Orthodox) conversions. Bronfman writes:

[M]y interaction with the Jewish community and my engagement with Jewish foundations and organizations revealed the problematic use of the term "Jewish peoplehood," or "klal yisrael." **I often despair and wonder if those words have lost their meaning. Is "Jewish peoplehood" a mere fantasy rather than a reality?** The Rotem conversion legislation, that recently caused such an uproar, revealed an ongoing and ugly battle. We have narrowly averted a schism.

As a Jew, I was outraged by the proposed legislation. **The State of Israel has no business in affiliating with or endorsing one religious group or dogma over another.** When it does so it becomes complicit in the internecine strife that plagues our Jewish discourse and abdicates the responsibility it assumed at the time of its creation. That creation was meant to guarantee existential survival for all Jews, regardless of affiliation, style of worship, or geographic location. Regarding Jewish status, it is the government's sole responsibility to secure and guard that guarantee...

It is high time for the government to get out of the business of legislating religious preference. Mr. Netanyahu must lead us to a decisive conclusion: ALL Jews enjoy equal status in the eyes of the Israeli government. Anything less is failure.

Bronfman's concern for Jewish unity, and his criticism of schismatic interdenominational battles, are noble and correct. I also share the concern of many critics that the Haredi monopoly on Israeli government definitions of Jewish identity (not to mention marriage) has been harmful, and should be revised. And while I am reticent to take a hard position on a bill I do not fully understand, I trust the judgment of many critics who say that the bill in its most recent form would have exacerbated these problems.

But on the most fundamental level of the issue of Jewish peoplehood, Adam Bronfman is unfortunately, simply, deeply wrong: **we are not all Jews.**

I am not arguing in favor of the current system, much less of the Rotem conversion bill itself. Nor do I disrespect the impulses behind this position. Bronfman and like-minded commentators take a stance which is wrong, but which is also deserving of real consideration. They speak up on behalf of the values of personal choice, pluralism, mutual respect, and acceptance. These are important values, to be sure, and the status quo in Israel is undeniably detrimental to all of them. But these values are not, cannot be, the *only* values for which we stand. Sometimes values conflict, and difficult choices must be made.

I share Bronfman's "despair," wondering along with him if the words *klal Yisrael* "have

lost their meaning." That value, the meaning of being Jewish, is the very value which, in this case, conflicts with personal choice and complete pluralism. **Either being Jewish has a specific meaning or it doesn't. There can be no neutrality on this matter; not to take a position is to take a position. Something that can be defined as anything is nothing.**

If being Jewish is nothing more than a nominal affiliation, which can be chosen by anyone under no particular set of standards, devoid of commitments and obligations -- or, if being Jewish entails powerful commitments to morality and justice, but these commitments are *all* universal, and identical to general values of societal and personal responsibility -- then participation in Jewish life is trivial, and the creation of a Jewish state in the first place, with all the very real problems that nationalism entails, is irrational and dangerous.

Indeed, there is a serious case to be made for the scrapping of all tribal and national identities. Why persist in defining ourselves in groups at all? Why not document all the beautiful contributions of Judaism in our libraries, museums and universities, alongside the contributions of other extinct tribal identities, and let all individuals simply unite as citizens of the world? Many people, and indeed, many secular Jews, do make this argument.

But I suspect that Bronfman is not among them, since he is passionately and deeply involved in the Jewish communal world. I cannot help but assume, therefore, that Bronfman shares my belief that Judaism brings something vital and specific to the world, not only in the past but in the future, and that therefore there is important and unique value in living a Jewish life. And if living a Jewish life has specific value, must it not also have a specific range of content? Is playing frisbee a Jewish activity, if Jews do it? What about reading the telephone book? What about practicing Islam, or Christianity?

One might argue that I miss the point here -- that while Jewish denominations themselves should indeed create definitions of what it means to be Jewish, the Israeli *government* ought to take a neutral position between those definitions, allowing anyone to define themselves as Jewish, so that the Jewish state can be a home for all those who identify as Jews.

This policy sounds fine in theory. But here I must ask the obvious questions -- the questions which are dragged into this argument often enough to be tiresome, but which I dare not avoid because they remain powerful: are Jews for Jesus to be counted as Jews by the Israeli government? What about Christians completely unaffiliated with Messianic Judaism, but who claim that, in accordance with their theology, the Christian Church is God's new Israel, and that therefore they ought to be counted as Jews by Israel's government? If the answer is to make a policy defining anyone as Jewish who identifies as Jewish, except for those who believe in other religions, then who gets to decide what counts as another religion? The problem is not solved; the can is merely kicked down the road. **Either someone in the Israeli government makes some kind of definition of what it means to be Jewish -- which means giving up on the ideal of complete pluralism -- or no one in the government makes such a definition, and literally anyone in the world can qualify for the Law of Return.**

This question is not purely abstract. With Israel currently confronting a number of issues related to immigration, it is not at all out of the realm of possibility that people who have no Jewish ancestry and no genuine interest in becoming Jewish will claim

Judaism purely in order to qualify for the Law of Return, for the sake of escaping poverty. (One could hardly fault such a person in desperate circumstances for taking this course of action.)

Perhaps Bronfman doesn't really mean what he says about the Israeli government getting "out of the business of legislating" religion. Perhaps he recognizes that there is a point at which religious definition must be legislated, but he simply wishes that Haredi rabbis did not have a monopoly on this power. If that was his intended point, then I agree.

But the way we frame our arguments matters a great deal. Critics of the current system should be careful not to mount a high horse from which they decry Orthodox insistence on deciding for other people what being Jewish means, unless they are willing to follow their arguments to their logical conclusions and throw open the doors of Jewish identity to all manner of antisemites who claim to be "the real Jews". If these critics are willing to exclude even a single claimant to Jewish identity, for any reason, then that constitutes an endorsement of "one religious group or dogma over another," and the difference between the position of such critics and the position of the Haredim themselves is a difference of degree, not of essence.

If this is the case, it is only honest and proper to admit as much, and to acknowledge that if the torch our people have carried for these thousands of years is worth carrying further, it will require some concessions from the values of complete autonomy and individualism, some willingness to draw lines. That doesn't mean surrender to the Haredi position; the Jewish world can, and should, have real discussions and seek real compromises about where to draw those lines as a community. But in our denominations, in our synagogues, in our organizations -- and yes, in the Israeli government -- draw lines we must, or we are no community at all.

For more perspectives on the question of who is a Jew, [click here to see related BJPA-archived articles](#). As always, this opinion is mine and not the BJPA's. And as always, I welcome all feedback, either of support or of dissent, in the comments section below.