



Conservative Olim: Is There a Place for Us In Israel?

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Goals:

- Chanichim will recognize that Conservative Jews who make Aliyah, may not find it easy to fit in as Conservative Jews in the Jewish State due to the nature of *Medinat Halacha*- a State governed by Orthodox halachik authority.
- Chanichim will understand that getting to Israel as a Jew making Aliyah, is not an issue, rather living as a Conservative Jew, once a citizen, becomes a challenge in a State governed by Orthodox Jewish law.
- Through discussion on the *Status Quo Agreement*, chanichim will understand the roots of issues of religious pluralism in Israel and recognize the need to advocate for non-Orthodox jurisdiction to be counted under Israeli law.

Enduring Understanding:

One of the core tenets of the Conservative Movement is Zionism and a commitment to the State of Israel. Aliyah and living in Israel is an expression of this Zionist commitment. But when Conservative Jews go to Israel, they see that it is not so easy to be a Conservative Jew in the Holy Land.

In this pe'ula we will address this issue and ask 3 important questions:

- What is the Law of Return, Status Quo Agreement and what are its implications for Olim who don't identify with Orthodox Judaism?
- Are Conservative Jews eligible for Aliyah by the Law of Return? How are they affected by Personal Status laws such as marriage, birth and divorce?
- Is it possible to lead a Conservative Jewish life in Israel? What happens when legal matters of Jewish significance need to be handled such as personal laws and definitions of public vs. personal observance (example: Women of the Wall, women wearing Tallit)?

Duration: 90 min (can be made longer with deeper discussion, or shorter by cutting out certain steps).

Materials:

Weekday: laptop, projector, speakers, video of Conservative Olim downloaded or you will need Internet Connection, Pens (everything else needed for both weekday and Shabbat)

- Thoughts on Aliyah (1 per person) handout
- Tape or stickers if you choose to post the provocative statements of Aliyah on the wall
- Print out of provocative Statements of Aliyah or statements written out on large poster paper
- "Jessica Doesn't Live Here Anymore"- Jpost
<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=176018>



- Women of the Wall “Women Take on the Orthodox”
<http://ipsnews.net/text/news.asp?idnews=52349>
- Status quo info on page labeled as “Medinat Halacha” (brief)

Introduction:

Explain: In America we have a separation between church and state, but Israel is a Jewish state (Medinat Halacha- a state governed according to Halacha) and there are many religious issues that the government controls: immigration, marriage, Kashrut, Shabbat, holy places and more. In this pe’ula we will see that given that Israel is governed according to Orthodox halacha, we will decide if we, as Conservative Jews, have a place in Israeli society.

Body of activity:

Materials: Thoughts on Aliyah - (personal perspectives on Aliyah) list

Warm Up (if you have less time, skip this step and go to step 3)

Step 1: Give out the sheet "My personal thoughts on Aliyah" one for each person with a pen. If it is Shabbat, you can pair the group into pairs and they can discuss it instead of writing it.

Ask them to go through the list and reflect on their own personal opinions/perspective on Aliyah. (not just how they feel about Israel but also how they feel about living in Israel).

Weekday: write a few words or phrases of response to each statement

Shabbat: discuss with a partner.

Step 2: Discuss

- What did you recognize from this exercise? How do you personally feel about Aliyah? Were these questions difficult to answer? Easy? Do you think your responses could ever change?
- People with different opinions- like anything in Jewish life, there are always more than 2 opinions. Ask for 2 different answers/perspectives to the same statement.
- As a Conservative Jew, if you made Aliyah, do you think you’d be comfortable living and practicing as a Jew there as you are here in North America.

Step 3:

Explain: There are personal perspectives on whether one would ever consider Aliyah, but also personal perspectives on issues of Aliyah.

Materials: Statements (provocative sentences on Aliyah)

Before the Peula write each of the statements on a big paper for all to view or you can read them aloud if you don’t want to waste paper. Hold up one statement and ask for 2 people to stand up. One who agrees with the statement and one who disagrees. Each one will have to



explain why they agree or disagree. (Use the statement of being a Conservative Jew in Israel as the last one).

Another method to use for this activity is to post these statements on the wall or floor around the room and to ask each of the participants to stand near the statement that they react to strongly (in agreement or disagreement). Then go around the room and ask why each stood near this statement and discuss these provocative sentences about Aliyah. (Use the statement of being a Conservative Jew in Israel as the last one).

Summarize: Some of you support Aliyah as Conservative Jews. But, does Israel support Conservative Jewish Aliyah? Yes and No.

Step 4: Real Voices of Aliyah

Materials: Movie or Character descriptions (see links below) - Faces of Conservative Olim

In this part of the pe'ula we want to show that there are real Conservative Jews that choose to make Aliyah and live a Masorti (Conservative) life in Israel.

Ask: Does anyone know a Conservative Jew who has made Aliyah?

You may recognize someone from these videos of real stories of Conservative Olim in Israel.

Video: <http://linktoisrael.org/link/you-tube-aliyah-videos.html>

If it is Shabbat, you can print out these stories before Shabbat begins:

<http://www.linktoisrael.org/link.html>

Discuss video clips/stories:

Which character did you relate to?

Why do you think he or she made Aliyah? Because of Ideology or real life?

What is he or she not telling you about his/her Aliyah experiences?

KEY QUESTION: Can you lead a Conservative Jewish life in Israel (what is known in Israel as Masorti Judaism)?

Explain: What these people may not be telling us, is that it is often difficult for a Conservative Jewish life to be validated in a state where Judaism is either black or white according to the State. Israeli law is governed according to Orthodox Halacha. Therefore, Israelis tend to identify in two different camps- **dati** (Orthodox or religious) and **chiloni (secular)**. There is no in between or shades of grey. This all stems from the 1950 Law of Return and the 1947 Status Quo Agreement, which expresses that only Orthodox Halacha will define Jewish life in Israel.

To understand this, think about:

- How do you feel when you go to the Kotel and are expected to wear a long skirt (girls) or pray separately from the opposite sex?



- for the girls: how do you feel wearing a Kippa or a Tallit? Did you know that a woman was arrested for wearing Tallit at the Kotel and for carrying a Torah on Rosh Hodesh?
- Did you know that someone who grew up in the Movement, participated in USY programs, day school and Camp Ramah may not be considered fully Jewish if his/her mother converted to Judaism by a non-Orthodox Rabbi? He/she would therefore, not be allowed to marry in Israel by the Orthodox Rabbanut (FYI: In the campaign to advocate for Masorti weddings to be recognized by Israel, there were 30,000 clicks in support on their website in the first week).
- Do you feel that the Masorti movement has things to offer to the Israeli society? If yes, why is it that Israel's government is dominated by Orthodox halacha?

Step 5: "Text Study" Articles on Issues of Religious Pluralism in Israel and the part of the root of it all- the Status Quo Agreement (Heb: Heskem Status Quo)

Explain that recent news events have brought the issue of religious pluralism in Israel to the forefront of debate and divide between Jews of different denominations and between Israeli Jews and their Diaspora cousins. Summarize each of these recent news pieces For the sake of time, summarize the two personal stories.

Summaries:

1. "Jessica Doesn't Live Here Anymore" (for full text of article, see link on page 1 of program)

Jpost.com- 5/21/2010

The Issue: Jessica grew up as an active Conservative Jew- camp, day school, USY, Hebrew U study-abroad, etc. She makes Aliyah at 23, serves in the IDF, like almost every other citizen and falls in love with an Israeli. She plans to marry him and soon learns that under Israel law, she cannot marry as she was considered Jewish enough to make Aliyah, but not Jewish enough to marry a fellow Jew. Her mother converted through a Reform Rabbi, and even though she grew up extremely connected to Judaism, her mother's Reform conversion deems her not Jewish to marry through the Orthodox Rabbanut, the jurisdiction that makes marriage legal in Israel. This issue causes great strife between families and eventually, she breaks up with her fiancée.

2. Nashot Hakotel- Women of the Wall Arrested for wearing Tallit and carrying a Torah

A group of egalitarian women hold traditional monthly prayer services at the kotel. Woman carrying Torah scroll detained for questioning by police. Western Wall rabbi says "act was violation of law."

Women of the Wall chairwoman: 'Citizen of State cannot be arrested for donning prayer shawl, holding scroll'

Published: 11.18.09, / [Israel Jewish Scene](#)

The story: Police detained a woman from the



Women of the Wall (WOW) movement Wednesday **after she donned a prayer shawl and held a Torah scroll at the Western Wall compound in violation of a court ruling.** The woman's act caused a commotion during Rosh Chodesh prayers at the holy site.

Every Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the month) WOW members hold a festive prayer, common to both men and women, in the Western Wall square and later move to the adjacent Robinson Arch in accordance with a compromise reached by the High Court of Justice.

Wednesday morning saw 40 women participating in the event, including **one woman who carried a Torah scroll brought from home, instead of keeping it in her bag.** Inspectors of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation claimed that the act was a violation of the law and called a police officer who **proceeded to arrest the woman and escort her to the police station for questioning.**

Hoffman further stated, "**It is unthinkable that a citizen of the State of Israel is arrested for donning a prayer shawl and holding a scroll.** There were hundreds of people on the other side of the screen who did the same and nothing happened to them."

'Act of provocation'

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, leader of the Progressive Judaism movement said in response, "Millions of women in the Jewish world enjoy the privilege of donning a prayer shawl and taking an equal part in public prayer.

"It is in the Jewish State and the holiest site for the Jewish people of all places that police forces are sent to arrest a woman who seeks to pray according to her conscience and conviction. It is a great shame to the Israeli Police and the State."

The Masorti Movement also issued a statement in response, which condemned "the scandalous arrest of one of its members." Executive Director of the Masorti Movement Yizhar Hess, said: "**The Western Wall must be freed from the obstructionist orthodox establishment. It is inconceivable that a Western democratic nation such as Israel does not allow religious ritual freedom for its Jewish citizens.** The Western Wall must be liberated."

Ask someone to explain the issues with Case 1 (Jessica Doesn't Live Here Anymore) and Case 2 (Women of the Wall leader arrested for holding Torah and wearing Tallit)

Why is it, that as Conservative Jews, we struggle to be Jewish in the Jewish State? Where does this come from?



Hand out page titled “Medinat Halacha” - brief information the Status Quo Agreement. Ask for a volunteer to role play David Ben Gurion and read the brief explanation which can help shed light on the roots of issues of religious pluralism in Israel, why there exists an Orthodox monopoly over legal matters in Israel. While he/she is reading, group must look for words or phrases that may spark confusion, questions or controversy.

- What does this law mean in a nutshell?
- What ramifications do these laws have for non-Orthodox Jews?
- How does the Status Quo law translate into real life in Israel? What are the wonderful things about it that make Israel a special place? What issues or implications does it have ? (example: Everything closed on Shabbat shows that Israel really is a Jewish State but what do Jews who don't keep Shabbat do if they want to grocery shop on Saturday?)
- What questions do you have about this?

Interview David Ben Gurion- What questions/concerns/comments do you have about this law? Have each person share something that confuses them, a question they may have about it that could affect them personally (example: could my Conservative Rabbi conduct a marriage for myself and my future spouse if I made Aliyah? Would I be arrested for wearing a Kippah as a woman?) or something that bothers them. As pe'ula leader, you will step into the role of David Ben Gurion and attempt to provide answers. They should ask questions you as if you were David Ben Gurion.

If they don't come up with their own questions, have volunteers read some of the sample questions below.

Step 6: Discuss Status Quo and its implications

Key question- given this information and the recent controversies that have been discussed over religious pluralism in Israel, we return to our question- Can you live freely as a Conservative Jew in Israel?

NOTE- Depending on how much time you have, you can either have each person share their controversy/question or comment to David Ben Gurion, or in groups, have them come up with possible personal situations or questions where Status Quo would be an issue and describe their situation.

Examples:

- a) Person wants to marry an Israeli, but mother converted by Conservative Rabbi. She can make Aliyah as a Jew but cannot marry her fiancée because technically, her mother's conversion is not recognized. She would have to undergo Orthodox conversion, even though she grew up Jewish.
- b) I want to have my Bat Mitzvah at the Kotel, just like my brother did three years prior. If we were to do this, we risk arrest, small riots, verbal and possible physical attacks.



Or, have each person share their reaction/response/question/controversy

Sample Questions:

Personal Status Law- what does this mean? This is probably the section of the law that most pertains to our conversation on whether a new oleh can live as a Conservative Jew in Israel

This law is probably the most controversial and affects the most people. What does this mean for someone who has converted to Judaism by Conservative Rabbanut and grew up as an active Conservative Jew? Would they be able to instantly become a citizen like other Jews? What about someone who grew up as a Conservative Jew, but whose mother converted by a Reform Rabbi? Would that child still be considered Jewish?

Q: When a Jew wants to make Aliyah, he needs to bring a letter from the rabbi that says he is Jewish. Can a Conservative Rabbi write such a letter?!

A: Yes. A Conservative Rabbi that was ordained at JTS or Ziegler and that is a member of the Rabbinical Assembly can write such a letter.

Q: Personal Status Law- Can your Conservative Rabbi officiate at your wedding in Israel?

A: Yes and no.

Yes: Any couple can get married in any way they wish in Israel. They can celebrate in their own personal way: by a Conservative Rabbi or Reform Rabbi or Orthodox rabbi. No: in order to be registered as a married couple in Israel, you need to sign up by the Rabbanut. The Rabbanut will only approve Orthodox Rabbis. In order to go over this, couple can register civilly out of Israel, and the Ministry of Interior will accept the civil marriage from abroad.

Q: Can a woman openly wear a Tallit or Tefillin at the Kotel?

NO. She can be arrested for doing such. Google "Women of the Wall" for more information on this. Additionally, if in public, she risks verbal and even physical attacks on her for openly expressing egalitarian Judaism...in the Jewish state!!

Make sure to discuss the issues in terms of the struggle for religious pluralism in a State governed by Orthodox halachah, and let them know that making Aliyah is not an issue for any type of Jew- Israel's doors are open to all Jews. Rather, it is living the Jewish life you want that becomes an issue once you've made Aliyah!

Following discussion of issues:

As we can see, Israel isn't quite ready for religious pluaralism with the Status Quo Agreement still in effect. Many Conservative women who normally wear Kippah every day, don't necessarily feel comfortable doing this in Israel. Girls openly reading from the Torah at the Kotel, as boys do at Bar Mitzvah are not allowed. Is Israel really a State for all Jews or a Jewish state for some?



Is there anything positive in all of this?

THE POSITIVE!

1. Israel is still a Jewish state, the only place in the world where Jewish history comes alive, the Jewish language is spoken, Jewish holidays are national holidays and Shabbat is a national day of rest. However, we have a long way to go in terms of legally acknowledging all types of Jews.
2. **Our role as Conservative Jews- fight for your right!**

Q: Is anything being done today in terms of advocating for religious pluralism in Israel?

A: YES, this is one of main functions of the Masorti Movement in Israel- advocating for religious pluralism and being a digma or example for Israelis who do not fit into the definition of “dati” or “chiloni” but rather, choose to live traditional Jewish lives, we define as Conservative in the rest of the world. Go to www.masorti.org for more details on religious pluralism and advocacy.

Sikkum:

We should make it very clear the difference between personal status law and the immigration law based on the Law of Return [next session]. The gate to Israel is open to any Jew no matter what denomination they are. But once in Israel, we still have a long way to go in terms of religious pluralism and equal rights to all Jews.

Please make sure that the Peula will end on an positive note, that Israel is still a Jewish State, where we can all find a home, there is just much advocacy work to do in terms of accepting all Jews as they wish to live as Jews. It is a young State and we have to make sure that we are part of shaping it as Conservative Jews.

Bring it home: Now what? How does this affect me?

Read Pirkei Avot text

פרקי אבות: ב,יט [טז] הוא היה אומר, לא עליך כל המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל

“It is not up to you to complete the work, neither are you allowed to ignore it.”- Pirkei Avot 2: 19

Ask: How can I support religious pluralism in Israel so more Conservative Jews will feel comfortable there?

- Masorti Advocacy- join their mailing list and get updates on Masorti’s work advocating for religious pluralism in Israel.
- Rotem Conversion Bill- learn about the advocacy of USCJ leaders and leaders of other major Jewish community institutions who are fighting the Rotem conversion bill which would only recognize Orthodox conversions to Judaism as legitimate.
- Social Media: Sign petitions, join Facebook groups, respond on blogs!
- Join “Women of the Wall” on Facebook and support women who openly express their Jewish practices of Egalitarian Judaism
- When in Israel, visit a Masorti congregation or pray at Robinson’s Arch in the Old City, which has been dubbed as the “Masorti Kotel.”



- Your own advocacy for Conservative Judaism in Israel _____ (share as a group)

Attachments:

Thoughts about Aliyah

Provocative sentences

Status Quo agreement in brief (labeled as “Medinat Halacha”)

Medinat Halacha: A Unification of Religion and State, Disunity of its People

There is a bumper sticker made in Israel that says “Medinat Halacha, Halcha HaMedinah” which means, “A State governed by Halacha...will make the State disappear.” Religious disunity is tearing apart the Israel people. How did this mess begin?

- When Israel was established, its leaders had to decide what a “Jewish State” would look like.
- From the beginning, there were tensions between those who advocated a strict division between religion and state, those who believed halachic Judaism should be the guiding principle of the state and those who sought a middle ground. David Ben Gurion, first Prime Minister of Israel, established some laws that would help define a Jewish state and would result in religious authority monopolized by the Orthodox. A key example of these laws is the Status Quo Agreement.

The Status Quo Agreement

This agreement was enacted into law by David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, in 1947. It basically says that all laws will be determined according to Orthodox Halacha and no other religious authority. The Israeli *Rabbanut* or *Halachik* authority is governed only by Orthodox Law.

Because David Ben Gurion (Israel’s first PM) was not a religious man himself, he didn’t quite know how to handle the religious issues of religious Zionists and what it meant to be a “Jewish State.” Why then, would he give all religious authority to the Orthodox?

- He wanted to gain support of the religious parties in order to gain votes on other non-religious issues and also formalize the Jewish character of the Jewish state.
- **RESULT:** He therefore mandated that all Jewish legal decisions would maintain the "status quo" with regard to religious jurisdiction. In 1947, he drafted the **Status Quo Letter** which outlined all legal jurisdiction on issues of: **Shabbat, Kashrut, Personal Status Law, and Education would all be governed by the rules of Orthodox Halacha. No other kind of Halachik Authority would be legal in Israel.**

KEY QUESTIONS:

What are the implications of the Status Quo Agreement for Jews living in Israel today?
What would this mean for us, as Conservative Jews?

¹ the members of the Executive will do all they can to satisfy the needs of the Orthodox, to prevent the division of the people. All matters of personal status (conversion, birth, death, marriage, etc.) will be determined solely by Orthodox standards

My Personal Thoughts about Aliyah

Name: _____ date: _____

- The first time I thought that I might end up there...
- I will do everything for Israel but won't live there.
- I can be a good Zionist living in North America.
- When I envision my life in Israel I see myself...
- My biggest concerns about Aliyah...
- The moment in which I clearly understood I will end up there
- If I Make Aliyah I would miss...
- I have good chances to succeed because...
- The most rewarding part about making Aliyah...
- My friends who have made Aliyah...

- Retirement seems to be a good time.
- I prefer not to deal with the question...
- I am afraid about being drafted into the army because.....
- How my parents will feel if I made Aliyah.....
- Aliyah is the fulfillment of Judaism
- Making Aliyah means giving my Conservative Judaism
- Aliyah might be for Jews for Russia and Ethiopia but American Jews already have a meaningful Jewish life.
- In a global world, Aliyah is no longer an issue
- Any one not living in Israel is not a Zionist.
- Aliyah is not the ends it is a means.

**Aliyah is not
the end, it is
the means.**

**Any one living
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Zionist.**

**Aliyah is the
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**In a global
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**Making Aliyah
means giving up
Pluralistic
Judaism**

**Aliyah might be for
Jews from Russia and
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**Making Aliyah
means giving up
my Conservative
Judaism**