

Dear Friends,

This past summer, Nicole Zeitler, an American who had converted to Judaism under Orthodox auspice in America, was denied permission to marry in Israel because a local rabbinical court rejected her status as a Jew. Their problem was with Haskel Lookstein, the rabbi who had overseen her conversion. Rabbi Lookstein is a graduate of Yeshiva University's Rabbinical School, the long-time rabbi of Congregation Kelilath Jeshuran, and founder of Ramaz (the Horace Mann of Jewish day schools). He is venerated by both Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbi, by religious leaders of other faiths, and by New York City and State government officials. This is not the first time that the conversion by a previously sanctioned Diaspora rabbi has been questioned by local authorities in Israel. (Conversions by progressive or liberal rabbis – Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist – have never been recognized by the Israeli rabbinate.) It is the first time, however, that the rabbi in question had something to do with the president-elect of the United States. Rabbi Lookstein was instrumental in the preparation of Ivanka Trump for conversion.

So if Lookstein's authority can be called into question with regard to Ms. Zeitler, could not the Jewish status of the president-elect's daughter be declared invalid? Given Mrs. Kushner's (nee: Trump) *yihus*, Israel's two chief rabbis are finally pressing for the "serious reform" of a badly flawed system. They are now calling for clear and standard criteria for Orthodox conversions performed in the Diaspora.

How ironic that Donald Trump would be indirectly responsible for bridging the growing rift between observant Jews in Israel and observant Jews in the Diaspora. (Conversions by non-orthodox Jews will still be null and void in the 'secular' State of Israel.) Local rabbinical courts with its mercurial members may finally have to comply with standard rules and regulations submitting their authority to the Chief Rabbinate, which would eliminate the tyranny of a radical few.

With President-elect Trump's appointment of David Friedman to be US Ambassador to Israel, however, the rift between politically liberal American Jews and Israel will be exacerbated. Mr. Friedman, a divorce attorney with no diplomatic experience, whose foundation funds Israel's settlements, has compared left-of-center Jews to Kapos – Jews who aided the Germans in the Nazi era. Together with President-elect Trump's promise to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem, we might again see Israel front-and-center in the headlines again, but not in the way that we would like. Of course, the appointment is no surprise as the new administration continues to remake the world. Though I have been urged not to pre-judge the president-to-be, I can certainly judge the appointments he has made to date. My hope for a reasoned future is waning as my patience wears thin.

Sincerely,
Lee