

Letter, dated 2.4.63, from B.J. Israel to Secy. to the Govt. of India (Foreign), Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi:

As a member of the Indian Jewish community I wish to invite the attention of your Ministry to an impending intrusion of the Govt. of Israel in the internal religious affairs of the community. As you may be aware, the Bene Israel section of the community has been very much exercised over certain discriminatory directives issued by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel which subject members of the community who have migrated to Israel to humiliating questioning if they wish to marry. Instead of following the straight-forward course of withdrawing these obnoxious directives, which have been condemned by progressive elements of Jewry the world over, efforts have been made to bring Jewish religious institutions in India under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. As resistance was shown to the reception of a Rabbi deputed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Israel in consultation with the Chief Rabbinate and presumably paid out of Israeli State funds, it has now been arranged to have the Rabbi sponsored by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, with headquarters in New York, since this Union has been helping with guidance and money a local organisation called UOJCI (Address C/o Magen Hassidim Synagogue, 8 Morland Rd. Jacon Circle, Bombay 11-BC). Apparently the local organisation has accepted the arrangement without realising its dangerous implications.

To the reception of a foreign Rabbi and the acceptance of his guidance in deciding complicated questions of Jewish religious law there can be no possible objection, as the community has no trained Rabbis of its own. Nor can there be any objection to such a Rabbi being of Israeli nationality. But the participation of the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (which, it may be explained, is almost a limb of the State machinery in Israel in so far as its rulings in matters of marriage and divorce are enforced by the State) in the deputation of a Rabbi can only be interpreted as direct interference by a foreign State in the internal affairs of a group of Indian nationals. There can be little doubt that the Rabbi deputed to India will be, in fact, the representative of the Israeli Ministry and the Chief Rabbinate. His presence in India is bound to foster the impression that the religious affairs of the local Jewish community are within the jurisdiction of Israeli authorities.

Already the activities of the Jewish Agency in promoting migration to Israel has created considerable confusion amongst Indian Jews regarding their political allegiance. Some of them have been misled into believing that Israel has some sort of claim on their political loyalty. Many other Indians are similarly misled into believing that Indian Jews are not completely loyal to India. The Govt. has rightly not interfered with the freedom of movement of those who wish to emigrate to Israel. But the position of those of us whose political loyalty is exclusively given to India has been made somewhat difficult, as we have often to be on the defensive so far as our allegiance is concerned. The presence in India of a Rabbi who is virtually a representative of the Israeli Govt. will largely add to our difficulties.

The fact that the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel insist on participating in the deputation of a Rabbi when the needs of the situation could have been met by the deputation of an American Rabbi shows that the Govt. of Israel is using our local difficulties to take the first steps in extending its jurisdiction beyond the territories of the State of Israel. Once a precedent is established in India, it will doubtless proceed to take under its wing other small and isolated Jewish communities and ultimately make a claim to the direction of Jewish religious and cultural life from Jerusalem. Were the attempt to be made by a genuinely international religious organisation, like the Vatican in respect of the Roman Catholics, there might be some justification. But the State of Israel is by no means the international forum of World Jewry in matters of religion. It is just a territorial State in which Jews happen to be in a majority, and it would be disastrous



for World Jewry if it were ever established that Jews outside Israel are in some way under Israeli jurisdiction in matters of religion. The suspicion of extra-territorial loyalty is already having tragic consequences for Jews in the USSR, and it is up to the Govt. of India to ensure that the seemingly innocent deputation of a Rabbi from Israel to India does not further weaken the position of Indian Jews as Indian citizens.

I would earnestly request that the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India be called upon immediately to explain exactly what the relations of the Rabbi whom they are about to receive are to the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, before he is allowed to come to, or stay in, India. The negotiations appear to have been carried out in some secrecy and it is therefore only at this late stage that I have been able to send this representation. I trust, however, that it is still not too late for action by Government, even if permission has already been given to the Rabbi to come to India.

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Letter dated 3.4.63 from B.J. Israel, to the Sec. to the Govt. of India (Foreign), Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

In continuation of my letter of 2nd April 1963, regarding the deputation from Israel of a Rabbi to serve the needs of the Jewish community in India, I wish to clarify the statement in the first para of the letter that the Rabbi will be sponsored by the UOJCA. Though he will be so ~~and the~~ sponsored, I understand that the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel will in fact have the determining voice in his ~~selection~~ selection, and that he will be in reality their spokesman. The cover given by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America will therefore, merely disguise the real character of the Rabbi's mission, viz. to provide a channel of influence to the Israeli authorities in the governance of Jewish religious affairs in India.