



Rabbis for Religious Freedom & Equality in Israel



“The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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August 2015

Dear Friends,

Nineteen centuries of rabbis would have endured gut wrenching suffering to partake of our unearned זכות: living with the fruition of a sovereign Jewish state in ארץ ישראל. The outcome of the historic conclusion of 2,000 years of גלות lands squarely upon us.

Somewhere Elie Wiesel wrote that had you told him there'd be a Jewish state in his lifetime he wouldn't have believed it, but had you told him he wouldn't live there he'd have called you a liar. Yet here we are, living on the outer rim of the national wheel, the very incarnation of Ahad Ha'am's Cultural Zionism, connected by destiny and cultural spokes to Amcha at the hub, מדינת ישראל. Many of us travel there frequently, flying casually back and forth on what was once termed a pilgrimage, hardly giving a thought to the **אז** that has radically transformed Jewish existence. Only 3 Jewish commonwealths in 3 millennia, and we live in the embrace of one of them.

We members of RRFEI come with different biographies, with

Dear friends and colleagues, now that we are off and running, and given the social political and religious scene in Israel, we need your help to recruit colleagues in your communities, denominations and other circles. Please share this with them, and urge them to join at <http://rrfei.org/about/registration/>

Israel's recent cycle of religious violence

Reactions across the spectrum

We are aware that many of you have already spoken about these events from your pulpits, but for the benefit of those who have yet to address these tragedies, and even for those who have already done so and faced subsequent questions, we would like to provide you with relevant sources published in Israel and abroad that reflect the reactants' very different religious attitudes.

These are somber times in Jerusalem and in Israel. Religion has raised a threatening fist, sending shockwaves throughout the country and the Jewish world. The recent cycle of violence began with the burning down of the Church of the Multiplication. Hebrew graffiti at the site grounded the motives for the destructive act in Jewish liturgy; a direct quote from the 'Aleinu' prayer was sprayed on the wall: "The false gods will be eliminated."

The violence continued with the burning down of a house in the Arab village of Duma, incinerating an eighteen month old baby, and, a few days later, resulting in the death of his father. The mother's life still hangs in the balance. There too, graffiti at the scene spelled out the perpetrators' religious and murderous motives: "revenge" and "long live the King Messiah." Several days later came the attack upon the Jerusalem Pride Parade by the murderer Yishai Schlissel who stabbed and wounded six marchers; one of whom, Shira Banki ז"ל, did not survive her wounds and died in the hospital. Schlissel made

different entry points into this experience called Israel. I was born nine months after the Jewish State was declared. Baby-boomers grew up with a threatened, weak state that appeared to be the last refuge for our beleaguered people. Israel was democratic politically with socialist economic tendencies (do you remember bread being government subsidized?), mostly secular, and the fulfillment of Jewish nationalism. Virtually no one spoke of settlement on the land as the fulfillment of a divine promise.

We could not have envisioned today's mighty Israel, or our ambivalence about the nature of her governance and inequality. We never contemplated Israel as the only democracy in which liberal Jews could not freely practice Judaism. I personally led a number of worship services with a combined male and female congregation in the Western Wall Courtyard in the seventies, eighties and nineties. And given the centrality of Israel to American Jewish life after the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, who could have foreseen the abandonment or disinterest regarding Israel among a significant percentage of American Jews?

Yet, the seeds were there, as Simon Herman wrote already in the sixties, of the split between American and Israeli Jewry. We read, but we did not act. Now the challenge is spread out before us: creating a Jewishly diverse Israel with no central religious authority, a welcoming homeland for Jews of all streams: hasidim and mitnagdim, Sefardim and Ashkenazim, Liberal and Haredi, determining Jewish destiny according to their

no secret of the reason for the murder, citing the Biblical capital punishment for homosexuality, and stressing that his act, like that of Rabin's assassin in 1995, drew its inspiration from the zealous priest Pinchas who assassinated the fornicating Jew and Midianite woman, Zimri and Cozbi, thereby halting the plague that threatened to consume the Israelites under God's wrath.

The question that we raise is whether the time has not come for an even bolder approach, such as the one manifested by the rabbis of old, who recognized that threatening and unacceptable Biblical practices and commandments needed to be halted. It was with that in mind, we believe, that known Talmudic statements nullified the practical potential for implementation of the law regarding the **בן סורר ומורה** (rebellious son), **עיר הנידחת** (the subversive city), **פרשת סוטה** (the woman accused of adultery), and the seven nations of **כנען**. Of course, there were the purists of the time who resented such a radical approach for doing away with concepts that no longer had a desirable religious message, and protested, like Rabbi Natan, "yes, they did exist, and I stood on their graves."

Is such a drastic approach not direly needed today? When some are fanning the flames of hatred and violence, based on out-of-context, antiquated religious edicts regarding capital punishment and the annihilation of homosexuals, Shabbat desecrators and Christians? We do not mean to sanction a "Soviet Encyclopedia" or even "Jefferson Bible" approach, thereby publishing editions of the Tanakh and rabbinic texts with such edicts omitted. Rather, this requires that we acknowledge that the times have changed, and in every instance in which these ancient texts are studied, and their bloody messages quoted, the teachers must immediately explain that such acts are not allowed under any circumstances, whether because we hold them to be in the category of **drosh v'kabel sachar** (delve only theoretically into the Torah's complexities, and you will be rewarded) and not implementable, or because we recognize that in the clash between Torah law and civil law on matters of sanctity of life and property, as well as human dignity, we need to bow to the civil law and genuinely accept its restrictions.

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Enforcing the Chief Rabbinate's new, legal kashrut regulations

It's now up to us, the rabbis

This year, following a year-long battle with Hiddush, the Chief Rabbinate updated its kashrut regulations to be in accordance with the law. Everyone that has heard of this change has viewed it as revolutionary and a sea change. It comes after decades of religious

beliefs.

In the years following the Holocaust ultra-Orthodoxy was thought to be disappearing, a pre-modern relic, a remnant community decimated by the Shoa and on its last legs. The existential threat to Jewish life was the surrounding Arab states, and in the wake of the Six-Day War we waited for those states to trade land for peace.

With *זכות* comes *אחריות*. Our contemporary reality is so different, and our historic obligation profound: to join hands to ensure the future of our Jewish State as one that cultivates the seeds of a reborn Judaism, that welcomes every member of Amcha, a state that practices the ethics of her Declaration of Independence, "...complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience..." and rises to the vision of her Founders. To shrink from this challenge is to evade our historic responsibility, no less than had the *חלוצים* refused to drain Israel's swamps because the physical challenge surpassed their abilities.

Returning to a world without a Jewish State is to refuse God's task; and there is no allowing the Jewish State to exclude the vast majority of the Jewish people from fulfillment as Jews. Our God-given *זכות* is the challenge to complete the vision of the Founders, a democratic Homeland for the world's Jews who choose Israel as their home, and a spiritual homeland for us all. To accomplish this clear mitzvah we turn to you to use your rabbinic positions, among nearly all Jewish streams, to rally

coercion, and it is important for us to make clear that the intention of Hiddush's initiative was not to prescribe the use of musical instruments, recorded music, photography, etc., on Shabbat, but rather to remove the Rabbinat's illegal prohibitions, and make it possible for individuals and groups to choose how to celebrate their Shabbat rituals and oneg Shabbat in meaningful ways. Unfortunately, the Chief Rabbinat long extorted the hotel establishments, using its monopolistic authority over kashrut to force the hotels and event halls to comply with its Shabbat standards and anti-Christian sentiments.

Relevant kashrut regulations - old and new

Chief Rabbinat's <i>old</i> kashrut regulations for hotels and event halls	Chief Rabbinat's <i>new</i> kashrut regulations for hotels and event halls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 13 clauses related to Shabbat practices in hotels• Events organized in hotels on Shabbat and on holidays forbidden from making use of filming, video and musical equipment• Prohibition against non-Jewish holiday symbols for Sylvester and Christmas, like fir trees• Prohibition against Jewish employees working at the check-in/out desk and accepting payments on Shabbat• All hotels elevators required to be usable on Shabbat according to Halacha	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9 clauses related to Shabbat practices in hotels• Events organized in hotels on Shabbat and on holidays only forbidden from making use of filming, video and musical equipment during the serving of food at the hotel• No prohibition against non-Jewish holiday symbols• No prohibition against Jewish employees working at the check-in/out desk and accepting payments on Shabbat• Only the elevator use for delivering food and ingredients required to be usable on Shabbat according to Halacha

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We ask that those colleagues who have encountered problems share the details of their encounters with us, and colleagues who are planning future trips should convey to their tour operators and hotels what their intentions and expectations are, as to the use of music, photography, video projection, etc., as part of their Shabbat programming. As you may imagine, the hotels are eager to see this change, making it clear that the current policy of the Rabbinat seriously hinders their ability to serve groups and potential groups (such as Israeli labor union groups) who decide, for instance, not to come to Jerusalem because they are curtailed in their weekend programming. Without counter-pressure from clients, the hotels may not be able to effectively push back against the ongoing pressure from the Rabbinat.

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The new, independent Orthodox conversion courts in Israel

Giyur K'halacha

our colleagues and our communities to our historic task, one past generations could only pray for and dream to accomplish. Jewish history rests on our shoulders.

This RRFEl newsletter will provide information, and a forum for us, rabbis of all streams, to remain both up-to-date and share an arena in which we can discuss our inmost concerns about Israel and the destiny of our people. We encourage you to use the newsletter to express your thoughts that you would like to share with our colleagues. Your editing talents are certainly welcome, as well. If you would like to write or edit for the newsletter, please contact me, Mark Levin, at organizers@rrfei.org.

אם תרצו, אין זו אגדה

Mark H. Levin
Chair, Editorial Committee

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Contact us

email: organizers@rrfei.org
Phone (US): [646-334-5636](tel:646-334-5636)
Phone (Isr): [054-779-1179](tel:054-779-1179)

Not yet a member?

[Please register here »](#)

In recent days, even as we were finalizing this newsletter, a dramatic new development caught the media's imagination on the front of religion and state in Israel: for the first time in Israeli history, a group of highly respected Zionist Orthodox rabbis have established independent conversion courts, outside the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate.

Uri Regev's article and some other resources in Hebrew and English can be found [here on the RRFEl website](#), and you may be assured that we will address this development at greater length in our next newsletter, and welcome your comments.

Announcements & Action Alerts

2015 Israel Religion and State Index coming soon!

For those of our colleagues preparing their High Holy Day sermons, Hiddush's annual Religion and State Index is a tremendous resource. This uniquely relevant and important yearly report provides in-depth data as to the views of Israeli Jews on all major aspects of religion and state in Israel. The 2014 Index can be found [here on the RRFEl website](#), and the 2015 Index is currently being analyzed. As in the past, it will be publicized a day or two before Rosh HaShanah. Quite likely, it will be also publicized in English via JTA.

We suggest that those of you who plan on speaking about Israel, and would like to include the most up-to-date data available regarding the public opinion of Israelis on matters of religion and state, reserve a space in your sermons. As soon as the 2015 Index is published, we will e-mail you the detailed report. The general trend of growing support among Israelis for all aspects of religious freedom and equality seen in last year's report has been sustained, and even grew further in regards to some of the cutting edge issues.

While the timing of the study and its publication prevents us from making it available earlier, we promise that the data will be received by Rosh HaShanah, hot off the press, making your High Holy Day sermons further relevant and up-to-the-minute.

Join the conversation: RRFEl members on Facebook

Please respond to the RRFEl newsletter and articles in the new RRFEl Facebook group, which can be [found here](#). We encourage you to share your ideas and resources with the network!

Updates

Diaspora

As of June 4, 2015 six Boards of rabbis have past resolutions or made official statements in support of marriage freedom in Israel...[Read More »](#)

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel

Website: WWW.RRFEI.ORG | Email: organizers@rfeei.org | Tel. [US] [646-334-5636](tel:646-334-5636); [Israel] [054-779-1179](tel:054-779-1179)

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Freedom of Religion for Israel
182 East 95th St., Suite 24G
New York, New York 10128
US

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