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THE JERUSALEM POST



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So what did we read in the news recently?

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06/25/2015

We take solace in the knowledge that Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel share a commitment to religious freedom and diversity with the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews.

1. Religious Services Minister David Azoulay of Shas reportedly called Reform Jews “a disaster for the people of Israel,” and said about Women of the Wall that “to come with tallitot, tefillin and a Torah scroll is not praying but rather provocation.”
2. MK Rabbi Yisrael Eichler of United Torah Judaism announced that the Reform Jews who “shook up the Jewish world by desecrating a Torah scroll” at the start of the month of Tamuz (referring to Women of the Wall) are “no less dangerous than the rioters who have set fire to the ‘Christian site’ on the Sea of the Galilee.”

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3. President Reuven Rivlin canceled a bar mitzva prayer service for boys with special needs due to take place at the Presidential Residence because a Conservative rabbi was to co-lead the prayers.

We, organizers of Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel, representing a broad spectrum of Jewish religious life in the Diaspora, strongly reject these objectionable stances. The fallacious conflation of Women of the Wall with any one Jewish denomination demonstrates the underlying agenda of depriving women of an equal place in Jewish religious life and beyond. Labeling it as “Reform” is an attempt to delegitimize women’s public prayer, and reflects the demonizing attitude toward both, coupled with a total lack of interest in the actual facts. Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal and Liberal congregations in Israel and throughout the Diaspora – along with Reform – include women as full participants in leading worship, reading Torah and wearing tallit and tefillin. Modern-Orthodox partnership minyans are also blossoming in Israel and the Diaspora, and include women in wearing tallitot and reading Torah as well as in other liturgical leadership.

We take solace in the knowledge that Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel share a commitment to religious freedom and diversity with the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews, as polling demonstrates in compelling percentages. The attempts of religious and political extremists to deny women’s rights and equality are rejected by the mainstream Israeli public. Moreover, this anti-egalitarian mindset is often part of a wider agenda that similarly rejects the legitimacy of Zionism, democratic values and civil law altogether.

The newspaper of the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas Party and an online ultra-Orthodox news portal, each portraying the official 2015 photograph of the new cabinet, blurred or blotted out the female ministers as if they are tainted. This does not stop the ultra-Orthodox MKs and ministers from interacting regularly with these female ministers, when not being photographed with them. UTJ’s MK Rabbi Yisrael Eichler took delegitimization of the State of Israel even further when he labeled Israel “an enemy state” and an “abusive and evil regime.” He labeled secular Israelis as “two-legged animals” and stated that “Reform Jews are worse than Arabs,” indicating his ugly prejudice against both.

We lament that these very individuals were selected by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as partners in his present government coalition. We welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu’s

denunciation of Minister Azoulay's disparaging words regarding Reform Judaism and Netanyahu's expressed commitment to Israel as a "place that is comfortable for all Jews," but we feel that more than words are needed to make that statement fully come to life. Only when "Religious Freedom and Equality," promised in Israel's Declaration of Independence, are fully realized and protected can all Jews feel at home in Israel.

The imperative of pluralism and openness must extend throughout the government – from the executive branch to the Knesset to the president. President Reuven Rivlin has demonstrated openness and compassion in many arenas involving Jewish/Arab relations.

We regret and deplore the president's decision to cancel the bar mitzva celebration for children with special needs that was to be held at his residence because a Conservative rabbi, who worked with these families for months, was to co-lead the service with an Orthodox rabbi. Worse yet, he placed the blame on the Conservative Movement for refusing to bow out of officiating altogether.

The playing of autistic children and their loved ones in the "game of chance" by denying them the right to become bar mitzva in a Torah service with the movement whose dedicated leaders prepared them for this special moment breaks our hearts. For generations, individual bar mitzva boys have stood at the Torah scroll in synagogues throughout the world. Why, now, does the request of some families for an Orthodox officiant lead to the denial of the right of all the families to choose which rabbi will officiate at the service when their sons with special needs become bar mitzva? We stand with Women of the Wall in the wearing of tallitot and tefillin, in reading from a Torah scroll during worship and in celebrating the bat mitzva of girls coming of age and of women who never had the privilege; we stand with the autistic children in Rehovot whose families seek a Conservative service and we stand with the autistic children whose families choose an Orthodox service. We strongly resent the insulting and misguided statements of cabinet and Knesset members, directed against Reform, which is a major movement in contemporary Jewish life. Religious pluralism must include the entire Jewish family both in Israel and throughout the world. Only then will Israel live up to its founding vision and its identity

as a Jewish and democratic state.

The authors are organizers of Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel.



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