

LEARNING GERMAN IN GERMANY: A STUDENT'S DIARY *page 6*

A CONVERSATION WITH ITZHAK PERLMAN *page 10*

REFLECTIONS FROM A JERUSALEM FUNERAL *page 14*

PRIME MINISTERS: THE NEXT GENERATION *page 37*

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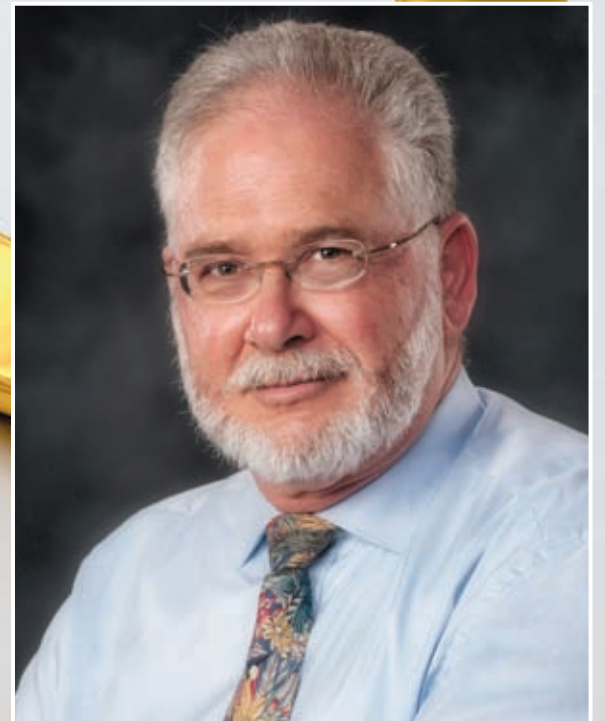
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Will freedom ring?

Israel's Rabbi Uri Regev fights for the right to marry



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Cover Story

Freeing the Jews

Rabbi brings mission of reforming Israeli chief rabbinate to Teaneck shul

LARRY YUDELSON

In the map of the world that Uri Regev has prepared, Israel lies in the middle of a sea of black that extends from Algeria in the west to Pakistan in the east. Beyond the countries labeled in black are the countries in gray, from Namibia through Vietnam. America, Europe, Russia, Australia, and most of South America are white.

By the logic of rhetorical cartography we have become accustomed to, we would expect Israel, the lone democracy and American ally in the Middle East, to

What: Rabbi Uri Regev delivers the Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg Memorial Lecture: "Magic, Superstition, and the Challenge of Religious Freedom in Israel."

Where: Temple Emeth, 1600 Windsor Road, Teaneck

When: Friday night, October 9, 8 p.m.

Admission: Free

be in white.

It is not.

This map ranks countries based on freedom to marry, and Israel, like most Muslim countries, gets a zero.

Israel, like many of its neighbors, has inherited its system of marriage from the Turkish empire that ruled it for centuries before the First World War. In that system, marriage is delegated to the official religious bodies. For Jews, that means the rabbinate, headed by the chief rabbis. (Muslims have their parallel religious officialdom.) Marriages between people of different religions cannot be performed in Israel. There are 300,000 Israelis registered without a religion, and they cannot marry at all in their country.

That's one of the things that Rabbi Regev wants to change about Israel. He is founder and director of Hiddush, a Hebrew acronym for "Hofesh dat v'shivyon," religious freedom and equality, and also the Hebrew word meaning innovation and renewal.

He shares the desire to change Israel's balance of religion and state with most



Rabbi Uri Regev

of his compatriots. Hiddush recently released its annual survey of Israeli attitudes toward religion and state and found that "an overwhelming majority supports freedom of choice in marriage, including

recognizing civil marriage and Reform and Conservative rabbis conducting marriages," Rabbi Regev said.

In 1986, Rabbi Regev was one of the first Israelis to be ordained by the Reform movement in Israel. But in recent years, Rabbi Regev has found himself with Orthodox allies. These include Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the former leader of Manhattan's Lincoln Square Synagogue and now chief rabbi of Efrat in Israel, who has helped found Tzohar, an Israeli liberal Orthodox rabbinic association, and with Rabbi Seth Farber, who founded the organization Itim to help Israelis navigate the rabbinate's bureaucracy. The organization, funded in part by the Russell Berrie Foundation, recently reported that the Israeli rabbinate had rejected an Orthodox conversion conducted by a Chabad rabbi (whose earlier brush with fame was putting tefillin on Sandy Koufax after his historic Yom Kippur non-game 50 years ago) and certified by Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, the head of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America's rabbinical

The Israeli Supreme Court building, where Rabbi Uri Regev has been fighting battles for religious freedom for decades.

court. This apparent violation of an agreement between the RCA and the Israeli rabbinate was resolved following publicity – but it was a reminder of how little the chief rabbinate feels compelled to answer to any other authorities.

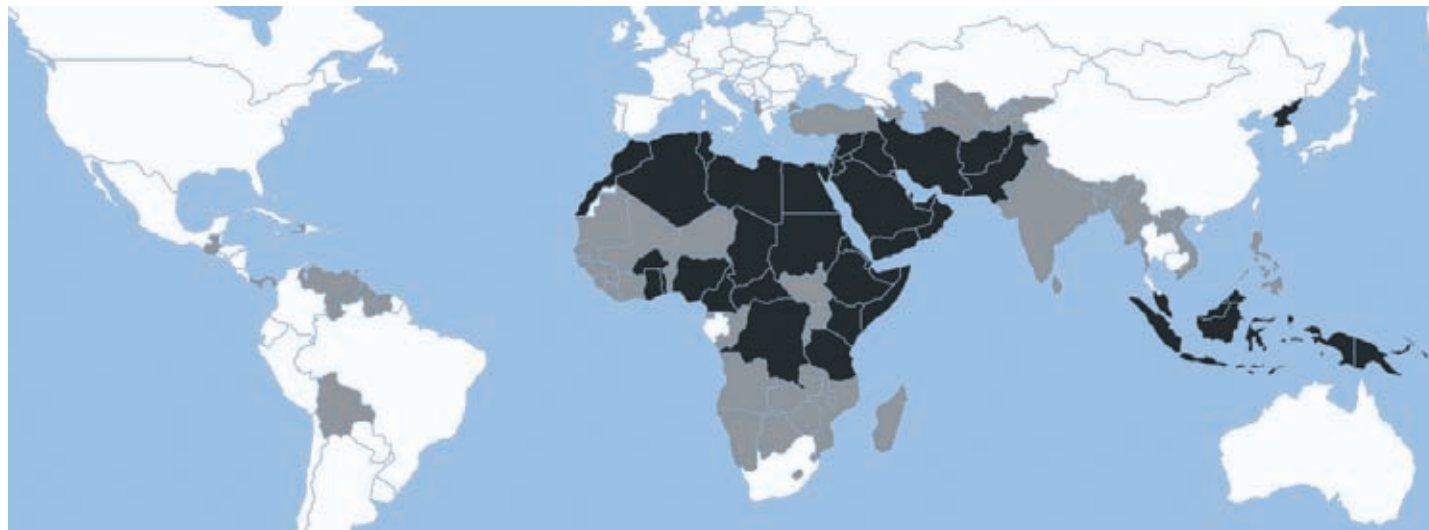
In America, the American Jewish Committee has formed the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition, which includes Reform, Conservative, and modern Orthodox rabbis and organizations, as well as Hiddush.

“The chief rabbinate has clearly become an object of derision, even scorn, in many quarters, both in Israel and the diaspora,” said the coalition’s Orthodox leaders, Dov Zakheim and Steven Bayme, in a statement.

For the AJC, the issue of the chief rabbinate’s monopoly on marriage and conversion is an issue for diaspora concern. Rabbi Regev agrees with that assessment. “Israel will not be the home for all Jews if it does not relate to all Jews with dignity, equality, and acceptance,” he said.

Of course, who is a Jew is a matter of dispute. Is a convert a Jew? From an ultra-Orthodox perspective, someone who converts and is not Orthodox is not a Jew. And someone who is not ultra-Orthodox is not Orthodox. And while Jewish law has been rather clear over the centuries that once converted, always a Jew, in recent years the chief rabbinate, or at least some of its officials, has not hesitated to undo conversions.

All of which makes me wonder about two young women I know who now live in Israel, daughters of friends of mine



The Hiddush freedom of marriage map ranks countries according to three levels of marriage freedom. Black represents severe restrictions, gray represents partial restrictions, and white represents full heterosexual freedom of marriage.

who attended my seders when they were younger. Both were born non-Jewish, adopted as infants, converted as infants, and raised as Jews. There was no question that they are Jewish. Except that now that they’re in Israel, under the present regime, their conversion always is up for question. One grew up in a Conservative home. Is she Jewish enough? The other might no longer be observing Shabbat. Is she Jewish enough?

“Some might say, it’s a price worthwhile to pay to keep Israel Jewish,” said Rabbi Regev of the chief rabbinate’s scrutiny of converts and control over marriage. But “the question is can we afford, under the guise of keeping Israel Jewish, to turn Israel into the only Western democracy in

the world that restricts the right of citizens to marry?”

“The majority of children growing up in the Jewish community in American today will find that they will be dealt with by Israel as either not Jewish or not Jewish enough – if we’re not able to work together to change it. They will be told they will not be able to legally marry in Israel if they ever choose to leave their life in America. That’s not a prescription for solidarity between Israel and world Jewry.”

If Israel-diaspora relations are part of Rabbi Regev’s pitch for why American Jews should be concerned about this issue, they’re also what got him started on this path. Back in 1967, when he was 16, his high school principal selected him

for an exchange program that had him living among American Jews for six months. He had grown up in a secular family in Tel Aviv. He was the prototypical sabra, born in the earliest years of the state. In America, he lived with a Reform Jewish family in southern California, and then spent the summer at two Reform camps, Camp Kutz in New York and Camp Swig in California.

“This was my first exposure to religious pluralism,” he said.

Can we afford to turn Israel into the only Western democracy in the world that restricts the right of citizens to marry?

It was a time when the Reform movement’s commitment to social action was focused on the civil rights movement. It had only been a handful of years, after all, since major civil rights laws had been drafted around the table at the movement’s Religious Action Center in Washington.

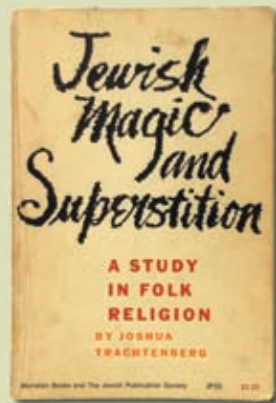
“The combination of exposure to religious diversity on the one hand the struggle for civil liberties on the other have had a profound impact on my personality,” Rabbi Regev said. “I attribute a lot of what transpired in subsequent decades to that period.”

From folklore to politics: Revisiting Jewish magic and superstition

Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg published his groundbreaking work, “Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion,” in 1939. The shadow darkening Europe, which soon would destroy the remains of the centuries of Ashkenazic Jewish life that are at the center of the book, is evidenced in the work’s very first paragraph.

Rabbi Trachtenberg went on to become rabbi at Temple Emeth in Teaneck, and his book went on to become a classic. Rabbi Uri Regev read it in rabbinical school. And yet, whether in the 1930s, when it was written, in the 1950s, when Rabbi Trachtenberg led Jews in Teaneck, or in the 1960s, when it was brought out in paperback by the Jewish Publication Society, the book seemed to be notes from a buried world. It was a world filled with angels and demons, charms and amulets, that Rabbi Trachtenberg no doubt would have assumed to be doomed by progress, even had the 20th century not taken its murderous turn.

By the time Rabbi Regev read the book, it was clear that in the modern State of Israel, folk religion, with its magic and superstition, had not vanished — but he still viewed the



work as “scholarly research of the past,” he said.

Now, however, when he delivers his Rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg Memorial Lecture, Rabbi Regev’s topic will be “Magic, Superstition, and Religious Freedom in Israel,” and he will investigate magic and superstition as “a contemporary phenomenon and a contemporary source of concern.”

In large measure, this folk religion has taken a Sephardi form. But the folk involved are not simply peasants; they include Israel’s financial tycoons, who attend rituals of “tzadikim,” where thousands of candles are thrown into fire pits, and they include a senior police official who committed suicide because of his involvement with an allegedly miracle-working rabbi.

Yet this folk religion reflects an even more dangerous religious turn, Rabbi Regev believes.

“When these beliefs have to do with the need to exclude women from the public sphere, when they have to do with excluding non-Jews, when it takes the form of torching churches, we realize we have a much more serious challenge than throwing candles into pits,” he said.



Israeli Attorney General Yehuda Weinstein

On his return to Israel, he took a path that placed him in law school before his army service. His law school papers focused on issues of religion and state.

After he earned his law degree and completed his army service, “while my late mother would have rather seen me settle in a comfortable law practice and being able to provide comfortably for my family, I chose to pursue rabbinic studies.” He studied at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem.

In 1988, he combined his Jewish and legal interests by founding the Israel Religious Action Center of the Reform movement, which fought in the Israeli court systems for religious pluralism, equitable funding of non-Orthodox Jewish institutions, and the recognition of non-Orthodox converts. In 2001 he headed the movement’s global division, the World Union for Progressive Judaism. And six years ago he started Hiddush, which fights many of the battles he fought with the Religious Action Center but is a transdenominational body.

“Hiddush is unique by having Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and secular individuals and groups working with us, and by focusing solely on religious freedom and equality,” he said. This sharp focus enables it to find allies on the political right as well as the political left.

“The battle is supported by the overwhelming majority of Israelis,” he said. “It isn’t about non-Orthodox Jews in America trying to tell Israelis how to run our lives. This is about a genuine desire of the majority of Israelis to see Israel live up to the not-yet-fully-fulfilled promise of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, the promise of religious freedom and equality.”

He points to his survey’s finding that “Israeli politicians are not representing their constituencies when they pursue policies that do not reflect Israel’s founding commitment to religious freedom and equality. On some key issues, such as financial concessions to the charedi parties, military service for yeshiva students, public transportation on Shabbat, and other key elements of the Chief Rabbinate



Rabbi Uri Regev with a client who was excommunicated by her charedi community for using the Israeli legal system.



Israeli charedim protest “the wicked Zionist regime” for efforts to draft them in the Israeli army.

and the rabbinical establishment monopoly, even a majority of the voters of some of the coalition parties like Likud oppose the current situation.”

As Hiddush conducts its surveys from year to year, support for its positions increases. It seems that the chief rabbinate’s monopoly on marriage is no more lovable than those of the phone company in Lily Tomlin’s time or cable companies now.

Given their druthers, “Seventy percent of Israeli secular Jews say that had it been up to them, they would not marry through the rabbinate,” he said.

When he comes to New Jersey this weekend and asks for American Jewish support, he will be coming to a receptive audience. Rabbi Regev cited a finding from the recent AJC annual study of American Jewish views, which showed two thirds saying that there should be less connection between state and religion in Israel.

“This is what Israelis desire, and what American Jewry stands for,” he said.

In America, Hiddush is reaching out to

boards of rabbis and asking them to take a stand. Recently, the North Jersey Board of Rabbis endorsed such a resolution to “support a pluralistic approach to marriage in Israel.”

But as a lawyer, litigation – and negotiation under the threat of litigation – is a key strategy for Rabbi Regev.

One case Hiddush is involved in has potentially wide ramifications. In it, the organization is representing an ultra-Orthodox family in the ultra-Orthodox town of Elad who had a problem with its upstairs neighbor. The upstairs neighbors, it seems, built an illegal addition on their porch, extending over the family’s patio and making it impossible for the family to put up a sukkah.

So why does a Reform rabbi running a religious freedom organization get involved in a zoning dispute with a sukkah at its heart? Because the woman whose patio was impinged on went to a civil court to get an injunction against the neighbor. And for the crime of going to a civil court, she received a ktav seruv, a statement from

the religious court saying she was ignoring its authority. Such a statement is tantamount to excommunication.

“This case in a nutshell represents the conflict of religion and state in Israel,” Rabbi Regev said. “Here is a charedi woman being assaulted by a charedi hoodlum who couldn’t care less about legal rights or the due process of zoning and getting a permit. She is getting the penalty of excommunication for daring to turn to the courts of the state to enjoy the protection of the law of the state,” he said.

“As far as the charedi courts are concerned, neither the civil courts nor the Israeli laws are considered legitimate,” he said. “They call them gentile courts and gentile laws.”

The charedi court meets at the municipal building and the town’s chief rabbi presides, he said. “That added an official aura to this.”

This is not only a moral outrage; it is also a violation of Israeli law, Rabbi Regev said. “It’s criminal, because in essence it represents interference to her access to the law. There are specific criminal prohibitions to what the charedi court did, having to do with extortion and interference with due process.

“In response to our taking the case, the attorney general has issued guidelines that spelled out his strong view that such conduct constitutes potentially criminal acts.

“We asked the court to declare this ktav seruv as null and void. We also submitted complaints to the police demanding criminal steps be taken against the rabbis who signed it.

“Almost 70 years after the founding of the State of Israel, we are still confronting the ABCs of our identity as a Jewish and democratic state, with some elements refusing to accept the notion of democracy and the procedures associated with democracy,” he said.

Earlier this year, Hiddush reported a victory in reining in the chief rabbinate’s control of venues it certifies as kosher. For decades, the rabbinate had threatened to remove certification from hotels where video and photography was allowed on Shabbat, and where such non-Jewish symbols as Christmas trees were displayed, even if Christian pilgrims were staying there. Hotels had told visiting Reform and Conservative groups they could not use musical instruments at their Shabbat services, for fear they would lose their certification.

Following a yearlong correspondence between Hiddush, the attorney general, and the rabbinate, “They have changed criteria and removed those clauses,” he said. “Now we have to make sure they live up to the changed criteria.

“It’s an exciting period where quite a number of things that in previous decades were seen as part of the elements, that there was nothing you could do about it, are now eroding and hopefully will collapse,” he said.