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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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Editorial

December 14, 2015

Dear Friends

We are changing the format of our RRFEI newsletter communication. We'll be sending a message weekly to keep our rabbis up-to-date on emerging events in Israel, in accordance with our stated goal:

[Imagine an Israel](#) where Judaism blossoms in all its nuanced shades and colors; where religious and secular movements flourish side-by-side and those who explore beyond Judaism in search of meaning are able to forge new spiritual paths within Judaism.

Our campaign for a democratic and Jewish Israel is growing steadily, united around the issue of ending the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly over marriage. The larger issue, an Israel for the entire Jewish people, will follow.

J-REC and RRFEI

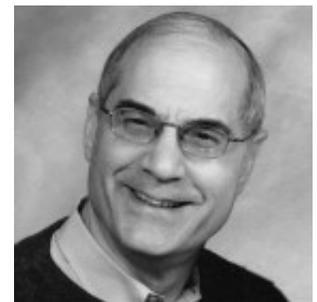
By Rabbi Prof. Michael Chernick, founding member of RRFEI

Recently a coalition called [J-REC](#), which RRFEI members may not be familiar with, made its first mission trip to Israel.

[The J-REC or Jewish Religious Equality Coalition](#) is the brain child of Dov Zakheim, less known as an Orthodox rabbi than as an adviser to the American Defense Department and a neo-con. As a strategist and a lover of Israel Dov has concluded that the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's monopoly over marriage and presently over conversion represents a danger to the security of Israel. The connection between one issue and the other is not necessarily immediately obvious, but here is how they are connected:

Non-Orthodox rabbis are thought leaders in their communities. Further, committed and dedicated members of the American Conservative and Reform Jewish communities are frequently the most dedicated supporters of Israel. The more non-Orthodox rabbis are insulted and delegitimized by the Chief Rabbinate, the more ambivalent if not negative they become about the State that supports and extends the purview of that Rabbinate. This ambivalence often spills over into messages delivered to congregations, which leaves those congregations less inclined to take up Israel's cause with American politicians whose support is crucial for Israel's security.

Further, comments like that made by the Minister of Religious Affairs several months ago, "Reform Jews are not Jews," and the positioning of Orthodoxy as the only recognized Judaism of the



We hope you enjoy the article and information provided by our founding member, Michael Chernick. Michael serves on J-REC as well as RRFEI, working toward the common goal of an Israel that will be a homeland for all of our people regardless of religious belief.

Please let us know how these materials are a help in your work, and how you use them in your congregation or workplace. We look forward to hearing from you.

We will soon be putting together an editorial committee. If you'd like to volunteer, please contact Mark Levin at:

organizers@rrfei.org

B'yedidut,

Mark

J-REC Mission to Israel, Winter 2015

At the last meeting of the Jewish Religious Equality Coalition (J-REC) on December 2, it was recommended that the coalition aim to demystify J-REC and enhance understanding of what it is trying to accomplish.

Towards this end, please see the following materials:

- [J-REC Mission](#)

State of Israel creates severe difficulties for Reform and Conservative supporters of Israel. These supporters often find the work of convincing fellow Jews to support Israel more difficult when the response often is, "If I care about Israel, will Israel care about me?"

It is these factors that led Zakheim to invite a wide spectrum of the Jewish community to join with the American Jewish Committee in order to wrest control over marriage from the Chief Rabbinate, at least as a first step. J-REC/AJC includes supporters of Israel who are Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox and secular. They have come to see how the progressively more Haredi and non-Zionist Chief Rabbinate is wreaking havoc on Israel-Diaspora relations with potentially disastrous outcomes.

The mission unlike other organizational missions to Israel was not about meeting as many Knesset members as possible to convince them to bring down the Chief Rabbinate. Rather it was a fact finding mission that would help J-REC figure out how to reach its goal, and whether the goal it has set for itself is the right one. Here's what we found out:

1. Surveys have shown that the majority of Israelis would like to have alternatives to the Chief Rabbinate in life cycle events and agree that religious pluralism would be a boon to Israel. However, this issue, so prominent for American supporters of Israel, is practically at the bottom of the list of Israeli concerns. The reason is obvious: Israelis are far more concerned about their security, just as we would be if we were in their place.
2. Social change in Israel does not come about "top down." Coalition politics are not the best catalyst for change. This has been proved over and over again by non-Orthodox missions to Knesset members who promised to put religious pluralism on the agenda and never did. Even during the last Knesset, which had no Haredi party to contend with in the coalition, religious pluralism never saw the light of day as an issue.
3. Social change in Israel presently comes from the "bottom up." There are all sorts of grassroots organizations pushing for changes in the status quo. The biggest demonstration of this kind of activity was the tent cities that grew up throughout the country trying to get a better deal for the middle class.

Some of these grassroots activities in the area of religious activities are best exemplified by organizations like "Hashgahah Peratit," an organization that (illegally, for the time being) grants kashrut certification. Various food producers and restaurants opted for this supervision rather than the Rabbinate's because its operation is

Statement

- [Talking points developed for our mission in Israel](#)
- [New York Times article featuring J-REC](#)
- [List of J-REC members \(individuals and organizations\)](#)
- [Op-ed piece by Rabbi Dov Zakheim](#)
- [Op-ed piece by Prof. Steven Bayme](#)

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Resources & News

- [Giyur K'halacha](#)
- [Acts of violence](#)
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transparent and not corrupt. The hashgahah obviously employs Orthodox rabbis, but they are responsible to the community who constitute the members of Hashgahah Peratit. That community is made up of Orthodox, Masorti, Reform, and hiloni Jews.

The creation of alternative, private conversion courts by Orthodox rabbis like Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi Benny Ish-Shalom with support from the Russian and Orthodox Zionist community is also indicative of this tendency. These courts have come into existence due to the Chief Rabbinate's unwillingness to take seriously the full integration of the Russian community in Israel by granting its members clear Jewish status. The support of the Orthodox Zionist community comes from its awareness that the private courts support the interests of Israel and Zionism rather than the interests of men who seem to enjoy wielding power rather than helping people.

By dialoguing with a wide swath of Israeli society including Haredi and religious nationalist elements supportive of the Chief Rabbinate as well as young couples whose experience with that institution was tragic, J-REC came away with some important take-aways for the future.

The most important for the RRFEI are the following:

1. RRFEI should have representation in J-REC. I believe that the Coalition would not only be open but welcoming of Rabbis who share the Coalition's interests and goals. This can be arranged by contacting Steve Bayme of the AJC and expressing willingness to be involved.
2. RRFEI members should make it their business to set up meetings with Israeli embassy officials in their locales. RRFEI should share concerns about how Orthodoxy's position as the only legitimate form of Judaism in Israel makes it more difficult for supporters of Israel connected with American Jewish religious streams to garner support for Israel within their movements. American Jews two most significant critiques of Israel relate to lack of religious pluralism and settlement policy.
3. Through its connections with Hiddush, RRFEI should try to find out more about organizations and individuals who today may not see a connection between religious pluralism and healthy Israel-American Jewish relations. We need to take our case to known personalities like Ruth Calderon and interesting people like Micah Goodman, founder of an intra-communal (Orthodox-Secular) dialogue called Ayn Perat. Hiddush may be the resource and catalyst for creating these relationships.

RRFEI is a potentially important agent for change in regard to religious pluralism in Israel. It should use every means available to further that agenda. As an organization we also need to think about practical strategies that will achieve our goals, which may be the hardest part of our mission.

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

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