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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 28, 2015

Dear Friends

Progress is being made on a wide range of issues opposing the authority of the Chief Rabbinate. [In this highly informative article from the Times of Israel](#), published just yesterday, you will see a survey of the fronts opened in the battle to broaden Jewish practice and oppose the unjust authority that suppresses the development of authentic Judaism in the Jewish State:

We feel compelled to share this with you because the article is rare in both the scope and the depth with which the journalist - The Times of Israel's Jewish World Editor - treated

Discuss this and other issues with fellow RRFEI members in the network's new Facebook group by clicking [HERE!](#)

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Will Orthodox Israelis' revolt against the chief rabbinate spur a domino effect?

Snippets from the article by Amanda Borschel-Dan, Times of Israel

[\[Click for the full TOI article\]](#)

... Today, the new poster child of religious civil disobedience wears a knitted kippa. And faced with a recalcitrant Knesset ever fearful of disturbing the tenuous status quo, the movement is employing a strategic shift away from legislation and toward the use of other big guns, including class action lawsuits.



A new battle begins, and its arena is the court of law.

...

This year, seeing no prospect of progress through legislation, it has ramped up its efforts to create precedents through the court system, a tactic Liberal Judaism in Israel has employed for decades. And the rabbinate is on the defensive.

...

this critical subject. What it conveys is one of the most important shifts in recent years in the battle over religion and state in Israel. Namely: the growing number of Modern Orthodox rabbis and intellectuals who feel that the time has come to move away from the Israeli monopolistic Chief Rabbinate model. This dramatic change may, we believe, significantly increase our opportunities to effect change.

Among the new voices coming from Modern Orthodoxy that challenge the existing configuration of religion and state in Israel, we find different schools of thought. Some have come to realize that it's time for religious freedom for all, as religious coercion is wrong in principle, antithetical to Jewish growth, and ultimately denies the Modern Orthodox their rightful recognition too. We are glad to see some in this camp joining the ranks of RRFEI. Others still subscribe to the view that if only a more inclusive and lenient

[One particular] petition, which was brought by Itim alongside other organizations, is interesting in that there are two landmark issues at stake: The first asks whether those without the legal status of residents of Israel may convert in Israel and subsequently petition for citizenship. Currently, under the Law of Return, they cannot gain citizenship.

The second matter under discussion is whether Orthodox conversions in Israel that are completed through independent conversion courts outside of the state's Conversion Authority should be recognized by the Interior Ministry. (After a Supreme Court decision in 2002, Reform and Conservative conversions in Israel are recognized by the state, although the converts are not viewed as Jewish by the chief rabbinate so they cannot legally marry, etc.)

It is this second issue, of domestic halachic conversion courts outside the rabbinate, that quickly became relevant in late summer with the establishment of the independent Orthodox-run Giyur Kahalacha.

...

According to the 2015 Israel Religion and State Index conducted by Israeli NGO Hiddush: For Religious Freedom and Equality, some 64% of Israelis support the recognition of all forms of religious conversion, including Reform and Conservative. Among secular Jews, the majority of Israel's Jewish population, 90% support recognizing all forms of religious conversion (53% would also recognize secular conversion). Interestingly, among immigrants, the support was less, at 82%.

However, the Giyur Kahalacha initiative is, as Farber puts it, "the first frontal challenge to the rabbinate on conversion from the Orthodox community."

...

"We Israelis understand that the American model of separation of church and state is not relevant to a Jewish state. But we see no reason why religious bodies should be part of the legislative or judicial branches... It's fine if the government chooses to support religious bodies, but it should support all streams and communities."

Kariv and others believe that if the critical grassroots mass of those seeking independent avenues for marriage, conversion and kashrut continues, increased official recognition and government support for all streams of Judaism is inevitable.

Taking it one step further, in August, Dr. Shuki Friedman from the

Orthodox position were to be allowed in Israel, without recognizing any non-Orthodox alternatives, all would be well and good. While we don't agree with them, we are nevertheless committed to support their call for recognition.

[\[Click: TOI article\]](#)

In addition, we have the privilege of hearing directly from the founder of *Hashgacha Pratit*, an independent supervisor of *kashrut*, Rabbi Aaron Leibowitz, regarding his approach to providing kosher food without the religious coercion of the highly politicized Chief Rabbinate.

[\[Click: Hashgacha Pratit\]](#)

If you would like to join me in producing and editing this newsletter to keep our members informed, please contact me at:

organizers@RRFEI.org.

B'yedidut,

Mark

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Israel Democracy Institute wrote in an op-ed published in Haaretz that “the trend towards privatization of religious services heralds not only the death of the rabbinate – it creates a de-facto separation between religion and the state. The less relevant the rabbinate and the official and established religious services it provides, the more significant the separation between religion and the state. And if that is the actual situation, in the end the legislators will have no choice but to recognize it by means of legislation as well.”

Hashgacha Pratit: An alternative Kosher Supervision model

By founder Rabbi Aaron Leibowitz

[\[Learn more at www.kashrut.org.il\]](http://www.kashrut.org.il)

“Hashgacha Pratit” is an alternative Kosher Supervision model for restaurants and businesses. Based on Jewish law, mutual trust and cooperation, the project seeks to put the responsibility for kashrut in the hands of the restaurants and the local community. I established “Hashgacha Pratit” as Head of the “Sulam Yaakov” Talmudic academy in Nachlaot, and a member of the Jerusalem city-council for the Yerushalmim party. We are initiating a new dialogue about the role of religion in city life which is breaking the existing molds and creating unified communal spaces for the diverse spectrum of the Jerusalem population.



What is the problem?

The law in Israel gives an exclusive mandate on kosher food supervision to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. This monopoly has created poor service, poor standards and many cases of corruption. It also prevents more liberal groups from providing alternative types of supervision for their communities.

The solution.

Since March 2013 Hashgacha Pratit has been using a loophole in the law to pioneer a community based supervision. The law prohibits the use of the word ‘Kosher’ without governmental authority, while this project uses the alternative terms ‘the Jewish law as it pertains to food and its preparation’. The State Attorney is on the record stating this is completely legal. To date the project has more than thirty locations in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Hertzeliyah, and Zichron Yaakov.

Resources

- [Chief Rabbi Lau attacks Bennett over pluralism](#)
- [J-REC / AJC Mission to Israel](#)
- [Giyur K'halacha](#)
- [Acts of violence](#)
- [Kashrut regulations for hotels and event halls](#)

Contact us

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What is the community model?

The community model is built on the covenant of trust which is signed between the business and the community, in which the business declares that it sees the faith that the community gives it as a 'socially sacred value' which will not be broken or abused. The business commits itself to viewing the organization as the representatives of the community of customers, and pledge to cooperate with them in maintaining the restaurant's kosher status.

How can we rely on the business owner?

There are three potential halachic issues with regard to relying on the business owners: Are they sufficiently familiar with the laws? Is the reliability of the kosher status as important to the business owner as it is to the Kosher customer? Does the owner's financial involvement create a conflict of interest that calls into question his/her trustworthiness and objectivity? Therefore a 'Trustee' who is a trained and paid employee of the project, is present in every business for at least an hour and a half a week, at varying hours. This adds an objective, professional element and provides a solution to these halachic issues, similar to a standard mashgiach (Kosher Supervisor).

How is the "kashrut representative" different from an ordinary mashgiach?

Even though the kashrut representatives do fulfill the role of "mashgiach," the relationship between them and the business owners is built on trust and not authority. We enlist the will of the business owners to uphold the "covenant of trust" which they have signed, and as such provide a better response to the times when the "kashrut representative" is not present.

Is a Kashrut certificate provided to the restaurant?

The signed "covenant of trust" is displayed in the business. In addition, there is on site documentation which is available to the public detailing the standards of kashrut and the processes in place to ensure compliance.

What is next?

The project goal is to grow to two more regions and to over one hundred locations in 2016. There is also significant work in the public education and opinion arena. There is also significant political lobbying to prevent the ultra-orthodox attempts to make the prohibitions broader and place the project outside the law.

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