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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

January 11, 2015

Dear Friends,

Haaretz Columnist Chemi Shalev this week challenged liberal American Jews to forcefully defend Israeli democracy in the face of increasing threats from the right [\[click here\]](#). As logical as his argument is, it is partially misdirected and incomplete: All Jews, particularly American Jews, left or right politically, will be hugely impacted by the disintegration of democracy in Israel.

I do not believe this is the place to get into all of the arguments. RRFEI members hail from different political backgrounds and allegiances. But we are

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Strategy:

How to most effectively advocate for religious freedom and equality in Israel

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

Much praise should be extended to Rabbis Rick Jacobs and Steven Wernick for publicly airing the cause of full religious equality in Israel for all. Their exchange with President Rivlin at [the 2015 Chanukah event sponsored by the UJA Federation of NY](#) should encourage us to consider the issues they raised and the best strategy to be pursued in order to advance our shared interest of greater religious diversity and freedom and Israel.

While Rabbi Jacobs' and Rabbi Wernick's words certainly generated media attention... the question [remains] whether the particular list of demands they set forth is most strategically appropriate.

The disadvantage of listing our demands

One disadvantage of such a list, which includes representation on rabbinical courts, state authorization to perform weddings, divorces and funerals, and equal funding for non-Orthodox communities, is that the Prime Minister could elect to deal with these demands gradually – one at time... while claiming to be carrying out his

united by our belief in the ultimate benefit to the Jewish people of an Israel untethered from a single expression of Judaism. RRFEI is dedicated to the future of Israel and the Jewish people by supporting a disconnect between the government of Israel and the future of Judaism. The State of Israel should nurture Judaism without siding, indeed specifically by failing to prefer, a single stream or movement.

We welcome two Supreme Court decisions that you can read about in the links provided: to allow women to become directors of rabbinical courts [\[click here\]](#), and to insist that the rabbinate provide the names of rabbis whom the Chief Rabbinate uses to vouch for the Jewish background of diaspora Jews [\[click here\]](#). Both of these will strengthen Israel's democracy and enable a more robust Judaism.

Israel's President, Reuven Rivlin, has seemingly changed his

commitment to pluralism and expecting our gratitude and patience on all other matters. **He could present his initiatives as tangible progress, thereby deflating the push on the major issues...**

... An indication of this pitfall could be seen back in 2013 during the JFNA General Assembly, as well as during the subsequent Reform movement's Biennial at the end of that same year, when Netanyahu focused his message... on his initiatives regarding the Robinson's Arch section of the Kotel. **His words were met with great appreciation and applause, precluding (in both instances) any opportunity to address the audiences' priorities...**

[\[Click for full version\]](#)

Considering potential priorities

Some demands are less realistic than others, which is important to consider. For example, **it is not very realistic to expect that non-Orthodox rabbis will be represented on rabbinic courts in Israel**. In fact, the position of the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel is to settle, for the time being, for a parallel civil path. This would consist of civil marriage and divorce, of allowing couples whatever religious ceremonies they prefer without interference from the State...

Other issues, like performing funerals, are actually less a matter of pluralism in Israel than a matter of non-implementation of existing laws. The 1996 law regarding the right to an alternative civil burial was passed by the Knesset, but only a handful of such cemeteries were established. In these cemeteries, rabbis of all denominations may perform burial services. The State Comptroller has criticized the abysmal implementation of this law in very harsh language. Renewed deliberation on this matter is being debated...

Ironically, when it comes to conversions, it is the Modern Orthodox who are currently denied official recognition, such as the independent conversion courts running under the name of 'Giyur k'Halakha.' These rabbis find themselves treated no differently than their Reform and Conservative counterparts. Reform and Conservative conversions performed in Israel, for some years now, entitle the converts to be registered as Jews...

Unfortunately, these same converts who are registered as 'Jewish' by the State cannot get married as Jews in Israel, but neither can non-Orthodox converts or modern Orthodox converts who converted in the USA. If advocates of religious freedom and equality were to focus strategically upon the right to... marry –this would empower us

tune regarding liberal Jewish streams. But has he redirected his actions and intentions? As you will see in this week's article, apparently not yet. Prime Minister Netanyahu, too, continues to strengthen his political alliance with certain segments of the Jewish community, while ostracizing others. He threatens, or perhaps even rejects, the Founders' vision of a Jewish state for the entire Jewish people.

I daresay that every member of RRFEI sees Israel as central to the future of the Jewish people. But how to achieve the goal? Ours is a sacred mission, perhaps even a messianic vision, for a sovereign state in which Jews and Judaism will flourish free of political intervention. Please let us hear your voice in the cause.

We look forward to hearing from you at: organizers@rrfei.org, and in our FB group: [\[click here\]](#)

B'yedidut,

Mark

to frame the debate as a matter of wider appeal... **Freedom of marriage is not just a matter of religious pluralism, but truly a core civil rights issue...**

[\[Click for full version\]](#)

Focusing on marriage freedom

Strategically, we believe the issue of marriage freedom ought to be the primary focus for our efforts in Israel, in the USA, and across the Jewish world. Rather than presenting lengthy lists of demands, which often turn out to be as weak as their weakest items, we should be focusing on one key, symbolic and highly critical issue. Doing so would not only advance the rights of the streams, but also endear the non-Orthodox movements and their Modern Orthodox partners to Israeli society. **We would demonstrate that what motivates us is not simply self-interest, but rather a shared vision of a religiously diverse and free society...**

We would love to hear back from you about this strategy, and speak further with you about how to get involved: organizers@rrfei.org

Analysis:

President Rivlin's response to Rabbi Jacobs' & Rabbi Wernick's demands for religious equality in Israel

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

Ever since Chanukah, there has been a lot of media traffic regarding President Rivlin's "change of heart" as to non-Orthodox Judaism. Much of it focused on [the Chanukah event sponsored by the UJA Federation of NY](#), which brought together rabbis of different denominations to listen to President Rivlin, following "introductions" by Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Reform Movement, and Rabbi Steven Wernick, head of the Conservative Movement... Both Rabbis Jacobs and Wernick are to be applauded for their commitment to having religious freedom become a reality in the State of Israel...

Below, we will try to unpack the encounter and related events and consider its actual substance, regarding whether we are indeed witnessing a change of heart on President Rivlin's part, and what this exchange may suggest for future strategy in this arena. As you will see below, the specific issues raised with Rivlin were: that Reform and Conservative rabbis should be officially allowed to sit on rabbinical courts, perform weddings, funerals and conversions, and

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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)

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receive state funding for their congregations in Israel. President Rivlin responded that he “believe[s] it is very important for the State of Israel to show full respect and sensitivity to all American Jews,” and that nobody should deny another’s Jewishness. The President’s words drew praise from many in the non-Orthodox world.

As we know, “the devil is in the details,” and breaking down each speaker’s terminology and comparing their use of language is very instructive, for this casts a clearer light upon President Rivlin’s response to the two American rabbis.

American rabbis welcoming President Rivlin	President Rivlin's response to American Jewry
<p>Rabbi Rick Jacobs: The time is long overdue for equality to reign throughout the State of Israel, and because of our deep love for and commitment to the ideals of Israel, we insist on equality, not just at the Kotel (at the Western Wall), but also in rabbinical courts, under the bridal canopy, at funerals and conversions, and the founding and funding of our congregations... It cannot be that the great ingathering of the exiles will result in the only democratic state in the world that formally does not grant equal rights to the majority of the Jewish people.</p>	<p>President Rivlin: The Jewish communities of the United States also have their own special flame and their own special character. I believe it is very important for the State of Israel to show full respect and sensitivity to all American Jews. It is important that we remember... that we are all one family. All feeling ahavat Yisrael – the love of Israel. That simple love for all the Jewish people of all groups and all streams. I know that all of the communities represented here share ahavat Yisrael and a deep commitment to the future of the Jewish people and to the positive image of the State of Israel. We must never forget that even the major differences between us are an honest expression of concern shared by all of us, whether Orthodox, Reform or Conservative... Jews of the United States and Jews of Israel – left and right – right and left – conservative and liberal – we all share concern for the Jewish people all around the world. We can, and we should, argue aggressively, but from the</p>
<p>Rabbi Steven Wernick: ... the challenges that we believe are important both for our Jewish brethren in Israel, as well as for us in the Diaspora. And that is having the sense when we come to Israel, when we talk about Israel, when we advocate and support Israel, that Israel is indeed the homeland for all the Jewish people; that all of us – no matter which methodology, ... it is one that is acknowledged, accepted and supported with full</p>	

equality and in equal pluralism for all Jews around the world... Rabbi Heschel who was brought to this country, saved from the Nazis by the Reform movement, and found his home within the Conservative movement, in Israel would not be afforded the same rights as our Orthodox brethren in the State of Israel. Can't do marriages, can't do divorces, can't do conversions, and other things.

position of respect – of fairness – without denying anyone's Jewishness, without denying the place of one approach or another within Jewish dialogue today... Jewish culture is a culture of dispute through listening – and that is the most important thing: to listen to one another, even though sometimes we cannot agree or we are not ready to agree, we have to listen to one another – all together.

This side-by-side comparison of the three speakers' words clearly illuminates the difference between the thrust of Rabbis Jacobs' and Wernick's demands, and the intent of President Rivlin's response...

[\[Click for full analysis\]](#)

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@rrfei.org | Tel. [US] [646-334-5636](tel:646-334-5636); [Israel] [054-779-1179](tel:054-779-1179)

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