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A bar mitzvah celebration at the Western Wall. (Photo by AP Photo/Alon Elkayam)

American Reform leaders see Kotel deal as foundation for further gains

By SAM SOKOL
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Fox's Israeli counterparts were looking at marriage equality and "rights for recognition for conversion" among other issues, he said.

The government's recent decision to expand an egalitarian prayer area at the Western Wall provides a foundation for further gains on issues of pluralism and the recognition of non-orthodox streams of Judaism, a senior representative of the Reform movement told The Jerusalem Post.

Standing outside of Mount Zion's Dormition Abbey on Tuesday evening, Rabbi Steven Fox, chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, said that while it is "sort of funny to say that the wall is a foundation, because it's a wall," gains made for non-orthodox services at the site serve as "the foundation [for] further issues that our friends here are leading the way on."

Fox's Israeli counterparts were looking at marriage equality and "rights for recognition for conversion" among other issues, he said.

Fox is in Israel, along with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, and three hundred other members of the Reform movement's primary rabbinical organization, for the their annual gathering, which is held here once every seven years.

The group decided to hold the opening of its conference at the Dormition Abbey as a sign of solidarity following last month's religiously motivated vandalism in which three young men scrawled several anti-Christian messages on the church.

"May his name be obliterated," "Death to the heathen Christians the enemies of Israel," "Go to hell" and other messages were crudely scrawled in red ink, drawing international condemnation.

Sitting in the church under a large mosaic of the Madonna and Child, the rabbis sang a hassidic song accompanied by church bells, followed by a prayer by the abbey's priests.

Gilad Kariv, the executive director of the Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism, said, “We chose this location because this abbey came to be a symbol of the ‘price tag’ disturbing phenomenon.

And we are here in order to show that because there is a Jewish majority in this country, one of the responsibilities of our Jewish majority is to make sure that we promote religious tolerance and that we stand against any racist incitement, as Israeli Jews, as North American Jews.

“We are glad that this important delegation is arriving in Israel a few weeks after the government resolution over the Kotel and a few days after the supreme court gave another important constitutional ruling in regard to freedom of religion,” he told the Post, referring to a recent ruling allowing non-orthodox Jews to use public ritual baths for conversions.

He continued, “We are in the midst of a quiet revolution here in Israel. More and more Israelis are coming to our congregations and more and more Israeli establishments are recognizing the need to be inclusive. By the fact that they are here, they are sending a very important message to the Israeli political leadership.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with representatives of the movement in Jerusalem earlier in the day, who told him that while their movement is committed to supporting Israel, it also expects the Israeli government to advance pluralism, religious freedom and equality.

Earlier this month, Netanyahu slammed statements by government ministers and lawmakers disparaging liberal streams of Judaism in the wake of the Cabinet’s approval to expand the egalitarian section at the Western Wall.

Representatives of the group are expected to speak before the Knesset’s Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Committee Wednesday morning, and it is likely that the issue of further changes to the religious status quo will come up.

According to Fox, this push for equality can be directly tied to the decision to visit the abbey on Tuesday.

“Tonight is an example of the way in which we work with our rabbis here, our reform community here, and others to help amplify the voice of not just the rabbis but the North American Jewish community.

We’re here tonight to show our solidarity and support for this church which has been through a lot in the last few years... So it’s broader than our support for pluralism and advocacy for equal rights for all Jews, but our support and advocacy for the rights of all people who live in Israel,” he said.

JTA contributed to this report.



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