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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

March 21, 2016

Dear Friends

A Conservative colleague once told me that the auspicious Rabbi Max Kiddushin told her that if a person says that s/he wants to convert a rabbi should convert that person immediately and teach the person later.

Little did I know at the time that [Rabbi Chuck Davidson's research](#), found in our newsletter of [January 18th](#), would prove definitively that Rabbi Kiddushin's viewpoint was well-founded in tradition, assuming that the person was as well-meaning as Rebecca Thornhill, the author of [our principle article this week \(available at IDEALS: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.\)](#)

I believe the Jewish world is once again, after 200

### RECOMMENDED LINKS

- [\[Click for:\] 'Kotel Egalitarian Prayer Advocates Have Faith Bibi Will Enforce Deal,'](#) by Ben Sales, The Forward
- [\[Click for:\] 'Kotel Chaos Explained: Who Threw Who Under the Bus, and Why,'](#) by Dr. Shulamit Magnus, The Sisterhood Blog



### Updates on the Kotel agreement and the Supreme Court's ruling on access to Israel's public mikva'ot

For those who hope to deepen their understandings of current events



Since [last week's bulletin](#), there have been a number of developments in the ultra-Orthodox political and rabbinical leadership's battle against the implementation of the Kotel

years, struggling with the concept of Jewish authenticity in light of Modernity. Ms. Thornhill's overwhelming sincerity should impress any Jewish stream, and modern Orthodoxy is fortunate that such a sincere, Jewishly motivated and educated woman has chosen Modern Orthodoxy to live out her Jewish life. I hope you will take the time to peruse the article and her arguments.

But why did we choose to reprint her article here in the RRFEI Newsletter? For this reason: Ms. Thornhill demonstrates what is possible when national politics is removed from religion! She has placed herself squarely in the center of a vital and necessary discussion for the Jewish world: what constitutes authentic Jewish practice in light of modernity, and who is acceptable for conversion? Clearly, to skew a makhloket l'sheym shamayim, as is her article, because of power politics is not only a blight on the Jewish world, but harms Judaism's capacity to adjust to modern realities and move forward, as demanded by a State that has not existed for 2

agreement, as well as their battle against the Supreme Court's ruling to make Israel's public mikva'ot available for non-Orthodox conversion ceremonies.

These developments reflect, in essence, an escalation in anti-Reform rhetoric and the pressure faced by Haredi politicians to withdraw their unspoken consent to the framework of the Kotel agreement. Thus, due to these increasing tensions, Israel's political system is being pulled in opposite directions - torn between the demands of the ultra-Orthodox politicians and the consequences of reneging on the Government's agreement with the non-Orthodox streams and Women of the Wall, not to mention reversing the Supreme Court's ruling by legislative action.

RRFEI aims to deepen our members' understandings of current events, and answer all of your questions and requests for additional background materials. In the meantime, we note the following developments since last week's bulletin:

### THE MIKVAH BILL

1. Following the Cabinet's decision to support MK Gafni's (and co.'s) mikvah bill, it passed its preliminary Knesset reading last Tuesday (as is required for all privately proposed bills), with [42 MKs voting for it and 38 voting against](#).

The list of MKs who voted for and against the bill can be found [here](#). Oddly, Yair Lapid, Chairman of 'Yesh Atid,' voted for the bill. He explained that his vote was a mistake.

2. Last week, we noted some of the harsh and base statements made by Haredi MKs and ministers against Reform Judaism. Such statements continued during the Knesset debate, and included Minister of Religious Services David Azoulay's (Shas) admonition that "Whoever does not accept the Torah's (Divine) authority, and tramples the mitzvot, cannot claim to represent religion in Israel... It is their right to have ceremonies and all the folklore they want, but Judaism is not theater one drives to for mere enjoyment. **Just as a witch doctor would not be allowed near a hospital in the capacity of a doctor, so too these entities should not be allowed near the Torah of Israel.**"

In the past, Minister Azoulay also proclaimed that he has difficulty accepting Reform Jews as Jews (for which PM Netanyahu scolded him). It is important to note that his are not

millennia.

In this edition, also, you will see updated discussions of issues surrounding the Kotel and the public mikvaot in Israel. How would these be different if the sole determining factor were the welfare of the Jewish people within a modern Jewish State? Suppose there were no central rabbinic authority defending its political power and its state supported budget? How might the Jewish people flourish as never before in the last 2,000 years?

I hope Ms. Thornhill's discussion will prompt your comments. For myself, I am further energized to see in her article that unleashed forces await just outside the Jewish world, waiting to join our people and add their creativity fully within the scope of authentic Jewish life. Therefore, the task of removing state politics from religion grows even more urgent.

Please send your comments to:

[organizers@rrfei.org](mailto:organizers@rrfei.org) or comment in [our Facebook group \[link\]](#).

Kol tuv,

Mark

simply the statements of a private individual, but rather those of a Minister charged with providing religious services to all Jews in Israel. Doubtless, Azoulay's repeated declarations are aimed at all of non-Orthodox Jewish society around the world. This truly underscores the need for world Jewry to not remain passive in the face of Israeli ministers who curse it publicly on the Knesset floor, while the Prime Minister sits by and does nothing to make good on his promise to ensure that all Jews of all streams will feel at home in Israel.

3. This Sunday, it was made public that the new Attorney General has made it clear to the government that [this bill is unconstitutional](#), and violates the principles of religious freedom in a way that cannot withstand judicial review. There is doubt that the last word has not been said in this saga, and we expect new developments in the coming days, as the Haredi parties attempt to deal with this new front in the battle.

## THE KOTEL AGREEMENT

1. The pressure on the ultra-Orthodox politicians to withdraw their unspoken support for the Kotel agreement, which they voted against knowing that it would easily be approved by the government, is increasing. As a result, Minister Deri (Shas) and [Rabbi Shalom Cohen \(Head of the Shas Council of Torah Sages\)](#) have demanded that the agreement be nullified (even though they had approved of it in the past), lest Shas leave the coalition and overthrow the government. "It is not acceptable that the government makes these kinds of decisions," said Deri. ["We won't sit in a government that recognizes the Reform, not over the Western Wall, not for marriage, and not for divorce."](#)
2. Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch, Rabbi of the Western Wall, also changed his position, [petitioning the Haredi political parties to void the agreement](#). Rabbi Rabinovitch had led the negotiations and approved the agreement, but his views are also becoming radicalized under the pressure.
3. On the legal front, supporters of the agreement face another problem, for [the High Court has ordered the government](#) to respond to the "Original Women of the Wall's" petition submitted by the Center for Women's Justice (Attorney Susan Weiss). The government now has [12 days to explain why women are denied their right](#) to read from Torah scrolls at the

Western Wall, as of March 14, 2016.

4. The Women of the Wall intend to expand their operations, and, for the first time, conduct [a women's "Priestly blessing" ceremony at the Western Wall during Passover](#). Their declared intent has been met with [harsh reprimands from the Western Wall rabbi and his associates](#), further heightening tensions.

## Resources

- [2016 Supreme Court ruling on mikva'ot](#)
- [Western Wall compromise agreement](#)
- [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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## Not yet a member?

[Please register here »](#)

## On Orthodox Conversion in the Twenty-First Century

by Rebekah Thornhill, [available at IDEALS](#)

I began my Orthodox conversion process when I was 21 years old. I was a junior at New York University studying Jewish Studies and History and had just returned to Manhattan after a transformative semester abroad in Tel Aviv. But my journey with Judaism doesn't begin there; it begins with my parents.



My parents, Mike and Tisha Thornhill, grew up, met, and were married in southern Oklahoma. Having grown up in the Bible belt, it's no surprise that they were very active in their church, leading the youth group while my father was studying to be a minister and getting his master's degree. Their church sent them to Israel on a 10-day trip in the late 1980s, during the First Intifada, to learn about Jesus and Christianity's roots in the Holy Land. They discovered an authentic tradition, something they felt they'd been missing, in the places where the so-called "Old Testament" tales took place. They felt resentment toward the people and the movement that raised them to believe in Jesus, himself a Jew, without attributing any of his practice or their own to its Jewish roots. They were taken by the beauty of the land, fascinated by the people they encountered, and couldn't wait to learn more.

Upon returning to Oklahoma, they left their church and my dad left his seminary. A year later, I was born. A year after that, my sister, Hannah, joined us, and we moved to Austin, Texas. My parents searched for conversion resources and only found a small Chabad that was not interested in helping them. But that didn't stop my parents. They did their own learning and connected with like-minded folks in the area, people who felt like they connected more with

Judaism than any other religious or spiritual tradition. They raised my siblings and me celebrating Jewish traditions and holidays, and we visited the Reform temple some years on Yom Kippur. I even missed school for haggim.

[CLICK HERE for the full article, available at IDEALS>>](#)

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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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