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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 07, 2016

Dear Friends

Just a few weeks ago many of us were somewhat shocked but also delighted at the Kotel agreement that not only gave liberal Jews official access to an egalitarian prayer area at the Robinson's Arch section of the Kotel, but also, for the first time, granted recognition to the Liberal Jewish movements in Israel and in North America. What a change in just a few weeks!

As you will read in this week's RRFEI bulletin, the Haredim who had been counted on to accept the agreement (rather than have the Supreme Court decide in favor of Women of the



In [last week's RRFEI bulletin](#), we regretfully neglected to credit the Israel Religious Action Center for the photograph and translation of the anti-Reform *pashkvil*, and we neglected to credit the Rafi Smith Institute for the public opinion data on civil court rulings vs. religious edicts.

The burning flames of resistance to the Western Wall agreement are rising

(fanned by the ultra-Orthodox media & rabbinic leadership)



Since [last week's RRFEI bulletin \[link\]](#), the flames of religious detraction against the Kotel agreement have been rising. This has been covered widely in the Anglo Jewish and international media; below, RRFEI provides you with the original Hebrew

Wall) have instead used coalition politics to demand that the Government change the agreement to withhold recognition of Liberal Judaism in Israel.

As you will read in Uri Regev's analysis on the right and [Anshel Pfeffer's insightful piece \[link\]](#), the forces of extremism are gearing up and may well win again, blocking the agreement. The question may become: how will we, who choose a democratic Jewish state that fulfills the vision of Israel's founders, react if the Government reverses its promises and maintains the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on official Jewish life in Israel?

Please consider, after reading the prognoses, replying with your analysis and suggestions to organizers@rrfei.org or comment in [our Facebook group, Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel \[link\]](#).

Kol tuv,

Mark

pronouncements of: the Chief Rabbinate, [the Ashkenazi Council of \[Great\] Torah Sages \[link\]](#), [the Sephardic Council of \[Wise\] Torah Sages \[link\]](#), [Rabbi Shlomo Amar \[link\]](#) (current Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem), [Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach \[link\]](#) (a leading Ashkenazi Lithuanian posek), and [Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron \[link\]](#) (former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel).

There is no doubt that both Shas' and UTJ's key political leaders were involved in the Kotel agreement process and gave it their (quiet) nods, even as it was stipulated that they would vote against it (knowing that their nays would be in the minority). They did not anticipate the extent to which the ultra-Orthodox media would drum up resistance and anger, nor that some key rabbinic leaders (particularly those with an axe to grind against the ultra-Orthodox political powers that be) would be stoking these flames.

For instance, In the case of the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox, while the Council of [Wise] Torah Sages continues to back Minister Rabbi Aryeh Deri, their anti-Reform rhetoric is quite vitriolic. In the case of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox, Rabbi Auerbach has been consistently opposed to the leading forces of Ashkenazi Haredi Judaism on IDF draft issues. In both cases, discontented rabbinic elements are riding the issues of the Western Wall and the Supreme Court's ruling on mikva'ot under the guise of religious purism.

As we read these sources, let's note the following:

- The ugliness of the rhetoric;
- Both the Kotel agreement and the Supreme Court ruling on the mikva'ot have been assailed – so the operative byproduct is both anti-Reform, as well as anti-civil judiciary and the rule of law;
- The Zionist Orthodox Jewish Home party has once again emerged as a religious smorgasbord, with its party chairperson continuing to back the Kotel agreement, which is essentially an expansion of his own initiative three years ago when he was Minister of Diaspora Affairs. On the other hand, the party's stauncher religious and political right, represented by [Minister Uri Ariel and MK Smotrich \[link\]](#) are expressing a more aggressive and rigid stance, challenging the agreement and, implicitly, Bennett's leadership;
- All in all, one cannot begin to understand this chaos without understanding the subtext, which goes beyond the Kotel, into personal, political and ideological rivalries. The makers of this deal had hoped it would fly under the radar, but these internal interests and the intense media attention caused by the confluence of events, including the CCAR conference in

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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](#)
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Israel, which presented the Kotel agreement as a major victory, elicited to these responses.

- While these voices are attacking the “Reform,” they have a very limited idea of what “Reform” is, and use it as a generic label to describe anybody who with whom they have religious disagreements.

Before consenting to this agreement, Rabbi Rabinovitch, the Rabbi of the Western Wall, sought guidance from leading Ashkenazi Lithuanian Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky who instructed him to turn to Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzhal. Nebenzhal instructed Rabinovitch to support the agreement so that non-Orthodox and liberal Orthodox prayer practices would have no place at the traditional Kotel plaza. However, [Nebenzhal \[link\] did not expect the extent of the backlash, and is now buckling under the pressure.](#) Short of retracting his opinion, he is saving face and making a half-turn, saying that the agreement should be sabotaged by finding a “better way.”

Following this, a meeting was supposed to take place yesterday, on Sunday, between PM Netanyahu, the Chief Rabbis, Minister Deri, Minister Shaked and some additional Haredi leaders. [The meeting was postponed \[link\] after the harsh pronouncements against the agreement were issued](#) over the last several days, with the understanding that the Chief Rabbis would attempt to propose an alternative approach to the agreement.

Additionally, a number of elements including a rabbinic group associated with the Chief Rabbinate have hired [a senior attorney \[link\] who has presented a legal challenge to the validity of the agreement to the Attorney General.](#) His claim is that the law requires that the Chief Rabbinate be consulted before the Minister of Religious Services institutes such regulations, according to the Law of Preserving the Holy Places of Israel.

Beyond this, in yet another classic clash of religion and state in Israel, Shas’s [Minister of Religious Services David Azoulay \[link\] has declared that he will not sign the regulations,](#) indicating that he’s not answering to the majority Government decision, but rather to the rabbis who control him. Sadly the fragile set-up of Israel’s rule of law breaks when it comes to fundamentalist religious functionaries.

Everyone expected that the Ashkenazi political leadership would voice strong objections to the Kotel agreement, but not that they would seriously consider leaving the coalition over these issues. However, recent statements indicate that the ante has been raised, and they have come under greater pressure from their rabbinic masters. Therefore, they have explicitly threatened to leave the coalition if the Government does not take tangible measures that

assert that non-Orthodox Judaism will not gain any traction and recognition in Israel.

All of this leaves Netanyahu between a rock and a hard place. He meant well, but he now realizes that these dynamics may cause a greater challenge to the well-being of his coalition than he had considered. He is clearly still acting on the logic and strategic direction that led him to accommodate the non-Orthodox American movements in the first place, namely appeasing these key forces in the American Jewish community critical for Israel's strategic interests, but the political pressure he now faces is only intensifying.

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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