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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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April 18, 2016

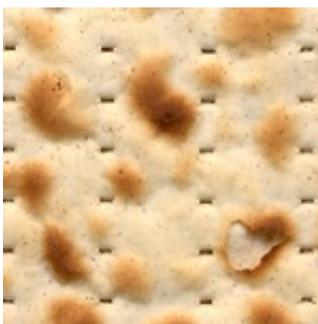
Dear Friends

Eric Goldstein, CEO of UJA-Federation of New York, wrote in last week's Jerusalem Post [\[link\]](#) about the nature of Israeli society. Is Israel the

homeland of all the Jewish people, in which all of us can live according to our understandings of Judaism, or is there one recognized Jewish stream and the others have little or no authority?

Goldstein writes:

From its birth, Israel has stood as a source of inspiration and strength for Jews everywhere. And Israel reflects the aspirations of the entire Jewish people, about half of whom live outside of the Land of Israel. Our concern – shared by



PESACH SUPPLEMENT

- [\[Click for:\]](#) Rabbi John Rosove's and Gordon Silverman's reflections upon true religious freedom in Israel

Hiddush survey: 71% of Israelis attach importance to Marriage and Divorce Freedom

A poignant reflection by Rabbi Uri Regev

Having been immersed for some decades now in Israel-Diaspora relations, I often reflect upon a short story that Martin Buber included in his iconic “Tales of the Chassidic Masters;” one Jew asks his friend, Yankel, do you love me? And Yankel responds, Moishe, how can you ask such a question? Of course I love you. Moishe replies: But Yankel, how can you say that you love me if you don't know what pains me?



I thought of this brief, piercing exchange when we at Hiddush received the findings of our most recently commissioned poll (see below, and for a full account [CLICK HERE](#)). Hiddush conducts many polls, but this one, in my view, has some of the most important implications for the Israel-Diaspora partnership in addressing Israel's challenges of religious

the 86 percent of Israelis who according to the [Hiddush 2015 Religion and State Index](#) support freedom of religion and conscience in Israel – is that these recent events will further distance many Diaspora Jews from the Jewish state and Israelis from Judaism.

Are the vast majority of North American Jews being detached from Israel as a practical matter?

We're including here two readings for your seders [\[link\]](#), that evoke the hope of true freedom for Israel's Jews: one by Rabbi John Rosove and the other from Gordon Silverman. Please feel free to distribute them to your congregation, or use them however you see fit.

Also included is this [\[link\]](#) to **an English version of a Haaretz article reporting on the first analysis of the amount of money going to religious institutions in Israel.** The amount is 13 times higher than the budget of Israel's Religious Services Ministry, and 2.3% of Israel's total budget. It shows how the Haredi parties and United Torah Judaism are attempting to educate Israel's children according

freedom and equality. We share it with you in this RRFEI bulletin so you may not only consider it and reference it in discussions, sermons and public statements about Israel, but also share with us (RRFEI) your thoughts on these findings in the context of our mutual desire to see Israel advancing the goals of religious freedom and equality. **I encourage you to use our RRFEI Facebook group [\[link\]](#) (or offline exchange), as an intimate, discreet forum to discuss this very delicate and often explosive topic.**

You don't need to be a big maven to see that Israeli Jews prioritize Israel's religion-state conflicts very differently than the Reform and Conservative Movements have in their now three year almost exclusive advocacy focus on egalitarian Services (and Women of the Wall) at the Kotel. How do you feel about this radical gap? How do you view the irony that it's been mainstream Jewish organizations with strong Israel credentials such as the JFNA and AJC, which have acknowledged the strategic priority of personal status matters and the need to actively advocate for the advancement of freedom of choice in these areas, while the major religious streams have been mostly playing the role of back benchers, as they invested considerable time, energy and advocacy capital on the Wall?

The other questions covered in the poll are of clear corollary importance. We so often hear reservations from American colleagues and community leaders, who ask: what right do we, living in America, have to interfere with these internal Israeli issues? Do Israelis listen to us? Is this the right time to raise questions of religious freedom and equality? **The nuanced, yet compelling survey data underscores the eagerness of the clear majority of Israeli Jews for American Jewry to enter the battlefield, and join Israeli groups and activists in the fight for marriage freedom.** The level of support and its intensity differs between challenges of utmost importance and concern, such as the right to family on the one hand, and, on the other hand, issues of lesser importance or greater ambivalence on the part of Israelis. Our polling serves as resounding endorsement for those in the American Jewish community who have taken up the cause of marriage freedom in Israel,

to their own version of history and dogma.

At stake is the vision of a Jewish State held by the vast majority of American Jews, and nothing less. Perhaps we don't care about whether we can pray in our manner from our siddurim at the Kotel. Perhaps that's not significant in people's lives. But the larger point, our place in the mainstream of Jewish life, is critical to the future of our community and Jews worldwide.

While recent developments regarding the Kotel, conversions, and public mikvahs indicate a trend towards slowly undermining the authority of the Chief Rabbinate, the report on the budget demonstrates that the coalition agreement with the ultra-Orthodox is being used to educate Israel's children toward a nationalist view of history, through both formal and informal education.

The campaign for civil and non-Orthodox marriages in Israel, to allow all streams equal status, represents our most united effort to make Israel conform to a state for the entire Jewish people.

Will you be speaking on these subjects around Pesah? If you are, please send us a copy of your remarks, to:

and should stimulate further reflection, as to the almost exclusive advocacy focus of recent years on the Kotel.

Let me make clear that I am not questioning the justice of the cause of freedom of worship at the Kotel for egalitarian groups and for WOW. I wholeheartedly support this. My question is that of individual and communal priorities in a reality in which nobody seems to be able to advocate effectively for multiple social causes (For obvious reasons I am not referring here to the controversies over security, settlements and the peace process). I am also concerned with the related question of the degree to which we should place great value on seeking a common front with Israelis who share our values of a democratic and religiously diversified Israeli society, as well as the degree to which identifying a cause, to which both our communities attach high levels of importance, should be a primary consideration in making our choices.

Hiddush Public Opinion Survey on Religion-State priorities

- [Click HERE for survey data results in Hebrew](#)
- [Click HERE for Hiddush's survey data analysis in English](#)

60% of the Jewish Israeli public supports the involvement of American Jewish organizations in advancing marriage freedom in Israel. There is no doubt that for Israelis – breaking the yoke of the fundamentalist Orthodox Rabbinate in marriage and divorce is a top priority among the religion/state battles. Israelis welcome American Jewish partnership in advancing this cause, both for the sake of Israel and for the sake of world Jewry!

organizers@rfeif.org.

We look forward to hearing from you regarding your thoughts on Religious Freedom and Equality.

Kol tuv, and chag sameach,

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Resources

- [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](#)

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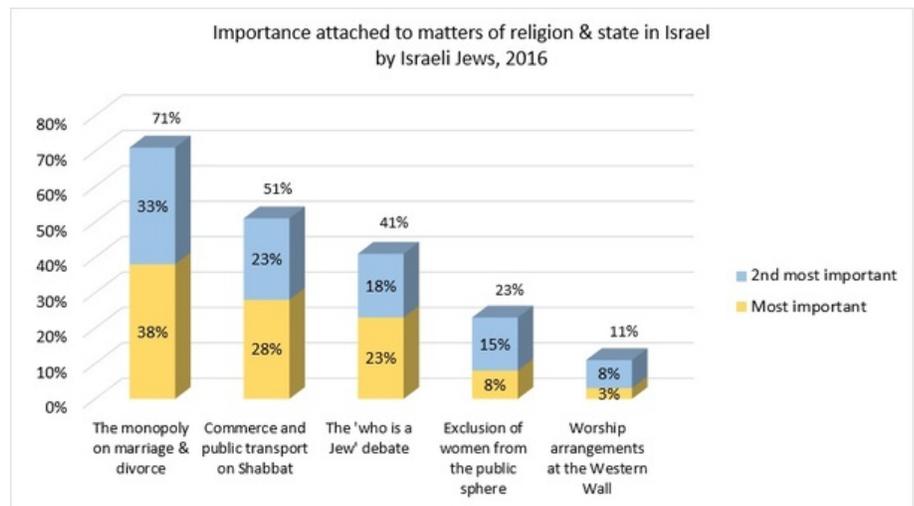
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The survey results demonstrate the support of Israelis for American Jewish involvement in the struggle for religious freedom in Israel in general and for marriage freedom in particular. It is critical as a counterbalance to the political extortion of the Haredi parties, which is antithetical to the clear will of the people and to the core principles of democracy and civil society. As long as the Orthodox Rabbinic establishment controls marriage of all Jews in Israel, hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens are denied the right of marriage in Israel, and the majority of children growing up in today's American Jewish community would be ineligible to get married in Israel, should they wish to make their home there.

An Israel for all of the Jewish people

by Eric S. Goldstein, CEO of UJA-Federation of New York

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

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From its birth, Israel has stood as a source of inspiration and strength for Jews everywhere. And Israel reflects the aspirations of the entire Jewish people, about half of whom live outside of the Land of Israel. Our concern – shared by the 86 percent of Israelis who according to the Hiddush 2015 Religion and State Index support freedom of religion and conscience in Israel – is that these recent events will further distance many Diaspora Jews from the Jewish state and

Israelis from Judaism.

...

For us – and for me, as an Orthodox Jew – an inclusive and diverse religious tapestry in Israel is key to ensuring the engagement and participation of the largest number of Jews in Jewish life and strengthening Jewish engagement worldwide.



...

We urge the Israeli government to recognize that diverse forms of Jewish expression are critical to ensuring that Israel remains a Jewish, democratic state. We must work together to realize that vision of a flourishing, organic and pluralistic Israeli Judaism so that future generations will be able to participate as proud Jews in the Jewish state, able to express their Jewish identity in whatever ways they choose.

In today's complex and challenging world, achieving a safe and secure Israel requires the support and participation of the broadest range of Jews. That's why it is so important that we do all we can to build an Israel for all of the Jewish people.

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

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

 [join facebook group](#)

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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