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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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August 22, 2016
18 Av, 5776

Dear Friends,

The new Diaspora Affairs Ministry plan to organize and work with North American Jews and university students around the world appears to be geared 2/3 toward an Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox interpretation of Judaism, granting funding only to Hillel to represent all other Jewish movements on campus. It's not surprising, perhaps, that Minister Naftali Bennett would use Israeli tax dollars to further the recognition of only one branch of Judaism, but that he would undermine Israel's efforts at organizing for Israel on campuses is irresponsible when it's so sorely needed. Clearly the vast majority of Jewish university students around the world will not respond to an exclusively Orthodox religious interpretation. Not only will the money likely be wasted, but a superb

Below, please find Hiddush's original public survey data on the question of egalitarian Jewish wedding ceremonies



Orthodox Groups to Lead Israeli Government's Outreach to Diaspora Youth

Or Kashti and Barak Ravid, *Haaretz*, Aug. 16, 2016

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

Lack of proportion in representation gives the impression that the Diaspora Affairs Ministry is trying to export the communal distortions that exist in Israel to communities abroad, says one concerned American Jewish source.



The Diaspora Affairs Ministry has announced a comprehensive project to “strengthen Jewish identity and the connection with Israel” among university students around the world.

The budget for the project is 250 million shekels (\$65.6 million) over two years, with a third of that sum coming from the government and the rest from Jewish groups and philanthropists. The budget will be divided equally between

opportunity to defend Israel will be frittered away for sectarian purposes.

Our colleague Eric Yoffie's editorial from Ha'aretz (*see the right-hand column*) ought to be disseminated to all North American ohavei Yisrael. The myth spread by the ultra-Orthodox that they exclusively represent Torah Judaism is not only fallacious but malicious. As rabbis our jobs must include denouncing such politicized and historically inaccurate versions of the nature and content of Judaism, and replace the ultra-Orthodox narrative with the truth: that there is no religious reason to deny any Jew access to public mikvaot, or to deny recognition to all streams of Judaism. Indeed, Israel's government should be out of the business of religious recognition altogether. That the ultra-Orthodox continue to undermine Israel's economy and rob their male adherents of an education to make a living is not only astounding but irresponsible for Israel's economic viability.

The most recent survey conducted by Hiddush, that 74% of Israeli Jews would prefer to have egalitarian Jewish wedding ceremonies, demonstrates not only the fact that the Israeli public does not entirely buy into the ultra-Orthodox narrative they have been fed, but, more importantly, that they prefer

three organizations that work with Jewish students: Chabad, Olami and Hillel, the first two being Orthodox groups.

Sources working in the American Jewish community were critical of the relative weight given to the Orthodox organizations.

The ministry, headed by Naftali Bennett, said the activities would not be focused on issues of religion and Jewish law. "The activities on campuses throughout the world are the real answer to the growing anti-Semitism and the delegitimization of Israel on campuses," Bennett said. "For the first time since the founding of the state, the State of Israel understands that it's not just the state of Israeli citizens, but the state of all Jews throughout the world."

The program, to be launched this fall at hundreds of universities, is being managed by an outside firm called the Initiative for the Future of the Jewish People, which picked the three organizations.

...

In Israel, the War of the Jews Over Pluralism and Religious Extremism Is Escalating

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, *Haaretz*, Aug. 04, 2016

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

There is something sad, pathetic and even tragic about the constant attempts by so-called religious parties in Israel to defame the Judaism practiced by the great majority of American Jews.



Israel is at risk today less from the Palestinians than from the ominous and intensifying war of the Jews over pluralism, freedom of religion and religious extremism.

In the last six months, Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties have gone on an extremist rampage. They have infuriated Diaspora Jews in two ways: First, by blocking a compromise on non-Orthodox worship at the Western Wall; and second, by passing legislation that bars Reform and Conservative

an alternative route. They are fed up with unresponsive rabbis and a system that does not come near to approximating the spiritual realities of their lives. They want change.

We'd love to hear your response in [our FB group](#), Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel, or at organizers@rfeei.org.

B'yedidut,

Mark

Rabbi Mark H. Levin
RRFEI Editor in Chief

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converts from using state-run ritual baths for their conversions.

There was no religious justification for either of these acts. In both cases, the purpose was simply to express scorn for Reform and Conservative Jews and to deny the two non-Orthodox movements even the slightest measure of recognition by the Jewish state.

Haredi politicians, by the way, did not hesitate to acknowledge their motivations. Moshe Gafni, a member of the United Torah Judaism Party and a font of contempt for his fellow Jews, was the sponsor of the bill restricting access to ritual baths. In the Knesset committee considering the bill, Gafni was challenged by members of the opposition who noted that immersion in ritual baths by Reform and Conservative Jews did not detract in any way from the suitability of the baths for religious use by Haredim. No one can argue that halakhah – Jewish religious law – requires barring non-Orthodox Jews from the baths.

Gafni did not deny this, and he also made no attempt to suggest that the bill in question was intended to promote the cause of Torah or advance the sacred character of Israel. The bill's purpose, he acknowledged, was to prevent Reform Jews from making use of the ritual baths to gain "legitimacy" in Israel.

There is something sad, pathetic, and even tragic about all this...

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Hiddush poll: 74% of Israeli Jews would prefer egalitarian Jewish wedding ceremonies

Full data survey set available here: [Hebrew / English](#)

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

74% of Israeli Jews would prefer to have egalitarian wedding ceremonies for themselves or their children, including an egalitarian exchange of wedding rings and an egalitarian Jewish marriage contract, which would include equal obligations for both spouses. 92% of secular Jews and 81%

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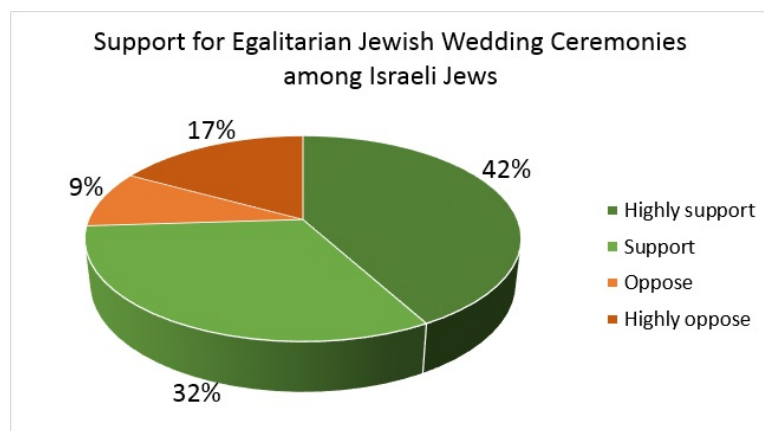
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of traditional Jews would be interested in having egalitarian wedding ceremonies. Among Zionist Orthodox Jews, 69% are opposed, but 31% support the idea. The relatively high level of support for egalitarianism among Orthodox respondents once again indicates that the battle for religious freedom and diversity is not between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, but rather between those who embrace democracy and progress, and those who would see Israel become a theocratic, pre-modern state.

Of note: Among voters for the Zionist Orthodox Jewish Home party, 51% would be interested in having egalitarian wedding ceremonies. This is likely due to the high percentage of non-Orthodox Jewish Home party voters.



The survey underscores the degree to which the Jewish community, including a growing percentage of the religious community, is growing away from the archaic institution of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. The public has clearly expressed that it does not prefer the antiquated and anti-egalitarian wedding ceremony imposed upon it by the intransigent Rabbinate. Many want a Jewish ceremony, but one that matches their values and ways of life, namely a modern, egalitarian ceremony. Nevertheless, the Chief Rabbinate and the Orthodox political parties insist upon non-egalitarian Jewish wedding ceremonies; they are Judaism's number one enemies and breed hatred in the hearts of the public toward Judaism.

Unfortunately, due to the intransigent ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate's monopoly over Jewish marriage and divorce, egalitarian Jewish weddings are not recognized by the State of Israel, unless citizens get married outside of Israel. Even then, married couples who wish to divorce may only do so via the official Israeli Rabbinate in non-egalitarian, Orthodox

ceremonies. Israel is the only Western democracy that denies its citizens the right to marry as best befits their beliefs, values and lifestyles, as evidenced by Hiddush's international marriage map, which provides a comparative analysis of marriage restrictions in some 200 countries around the world. [see: <http://marriage.hiddush.org/>]

...

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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