

Women to get greater representation on local religious councils says AG



By JEREMY SHARON

08/09/2016 According to statistics provided by the Hiddush religious pluralism lobbying group there are 49 women serving on 40 of the total 132 religious councils in the country. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit has instructed the Religious Services Ministry to significantly increase the number of reserved seats on local religious councils for female representatives.

Religious councils run Jewish religious services including the municipal kashrut licensing system on behalf of the Chief Rabbinate; the local marriage registration bureau; mikvaot, or ritual baths; and administrative requirements for burial.

According to statistics provided by the Hiddush religious pluralism lobbying group, there are 49 women serving on 40 of the total 132 religious councils in the country, representing just under 17 percent of all council members.

However, 66% of the 132 councils do not have a functioning panel due to political deadlock on appointments, and are instead run by a council chairman appointed by the religious services minister, none of whom are women.

Critics of the way religious services are provided have argued that the manner in which representatives are elected to the religious councils is often not sufficiently representative of a city's population.

In order to rectify this situation, the Ne'emanai Torah VaAvodah national- religious lobbying group, together with the Edvat and Shatil organizations, have lobbied for increased female representation on local religious councils.

The organizations argue that local religious councils have direct influence over religious services required by women but that too few women are represented on the councils making these decisions.

In addition to the goal of obtaining fair representation for women, it is hoped that female representatives will come from less religiously conservative sectors of the population, and will provide greater representation to

non-religious or religiously traditional residents.

Ne'emanai Torah VaAvodah has drafted a petition to the High Court of Justice on the matter of female representation, and it is believed that the Attorney General's decision on this matter came about, at least in part, through this legal pressure.

The 132 local religious councils fall under the jurisdiction of the Religious Services Ministry, and are funded jointly by the local municipal authority which provides 60% of a religious council's budget and by the Religious Services Ministry which gives 40% of the budget.

Representatives to the body are also selected jointly by the local municipal council, which nominates 45% of council members, the minister of religious services who also nominates 45%, and the local municipal rabbi who nominates 10% of council members.

In response to a report on the attorney general's decision on Tuesday, the Justice Ministry said, "there is a need to match the number of female representatives [on the councils] with the [total] number of council members."

The ministry said that if there are 11 members on the council, then there should be at least three female representatives, and at least one woman on a five-member council.

The number of council members is established by the Religious Services Minister and can vary, but cannot exceed the number of representatives on the local municipal council.

Representatives for local religious councils must be completed within a year of the last municipal elections, although the law as it stands gives a veto to all three institutions selecting council members over all candidates, which frequently creates deadlock.

If a council has not been convened a year after the local elections, the Religious Services Minister is authorized to appoint a salaried chairman and a deputy chairman to carry out the functions of the council. These appointees can in effect serve for an indefinite number of terms until a new council is selected.

In practice, there is seldom the requisite cooperation between the ministry and the municipal authority leading to deadlock and a failure to select a full religious council.

As a result, more than two thirds of the 132 local religious councils are run by a politically appointed chairman and not by the full complement of council members.

Tani Frank of NTA said that although the attorney general's decision was welcome, it is likely that it will create even less incentive for the Religious Services Ministry to compromise on selection of representatives in order to keep political appointees in place.

The decision will also not affect local religious councils which have already been formed since the last municipal

elections in 2013, but will come into effect for any councils which are yet to be formed and after the next municipal elections scheduled for 2018.

Ne'emanai Torah VaAvodah, Edvat and Shatil welcomed the decision, calling it "a direct result" of their legal work on the issue.

"There is no doubt that if the ruling is implemented it will very good news for consumers, particularly female consumers, of religious services in Israel," the organizations told the press.

Hiddush director Rabbi Uri Regev called the decision "revolutionary" and added that work by his organization had also contributed to the new directive.

"The situation in recent years in which there was at least one woman in each [functioning] religious council was progress, if merely symbolic," said Regev.

"From now on, women will not be alone in facing the male establishment...

and women will also be able to be elected as chair of a council along with other senior positions."

