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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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December, 2016
8 Kislev, 5777

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Dear Friends,

As we have seen in the U.S.: education silos separate people and enable tribalism rather than an integrated nation with a common identity and destiny.

Recently I visited the Yad B'Yad school in Jerusalem, where Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish children study together in both Hebrew and Arabic. It was part of a broader program sponsored by Interfaith Partners for Peace in which we witnessed Israelis and Palestinians, Arab Christians and Muslims and Israeli Jews, working together daily in an effort to create relationships that would enhance the road to peace. Rather than political lobbying, these folks are day by day forging

How to Finally Get Egalitarian Prayer at the Western Wall

Liel Leibovitz, *Tablet Magazine*, Nov. 22, 2016

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

It hasn't been an easy month for American Jews, more than two-thirds of whom voted for Hillary Clinton and many of whom are terrified by the election of Donald Trump. To the already growing list of political bad news, then, it gives me no pleasure to add one more setback: the delicate negotiations over egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall, the subject of guarded optimism earlier this year, have come to a very public impasse after a coalition of rabbis, led by the heads of the American Conservative and Reform movements, marched into the Kotel plaza on November 2 and were immediately confronted by security officials and enraged haredi worshipers alike.

The rabbis were there to protest the Israeli government's failure to implement its plan to dedicate an ecumenical prayer space in Judaism's holiest site. Though Israel's Supreme Court had given the government until November 17 to explain why it had yet to put

neighborhood ties and friendships, learning to rely upon one another and trust one another to live in peace.

Recently Minister Deri said this about Reform Jews: *“Last week someone said that the Reform are our brothers, but we completely disagree with them. We reject their ways, etc. The truth is that they are NOT our brothers and we do not want such brothers. Those that stick a knife in the back of the Jewish people cannot be our brothers. Those who are the cause for the assimilation of millions of Jews cannot be our brothers. No how — no way! Such a person is an adversary and an enemy. One who mocks and prostitutes our tradition, that is to say, all of the holy Torah of the Jewish people for which we have sacrificed our lives from generation to generation for thousands of years, is not a brother. One who is a traitor and betrays his parents, grandparents, and all of the generations that came before, is not a brother. Not even a lost brother. He has thrown off the yoke and one must fight against him with all means available, and never give any sort of recognition nor any foothold.”*

its plan into motion, the rabbis felt that they had waited long enough. The protest, as the Reform movement’s Rabbi Rick Jacobs later told the press, was “an act of spiritual disobedience.”

Having long supported egalitarian prayers at the Kotel, I certainly sympathize with the rabbis’ frustration. But as someone with much experience in the glacial pace of change in bureaucratic Israel, I worry about this choice of hard-sell tactics and how they might scuttle the much-needed progress made in recent years.

...

Rabbi Uri Regev responds:



As Liel Leibowitz (LL) suggests, the non-Orthodox movements should broaden their appeal and avoid unnecessary conflicts. Nevertheless, I have strong reservations as to the specifics of LL’s perspective on what is “unnecessary conflict” and *who* the appeal should be broadened to include. I fear that LL, in as much as his credentials are impressive, may not be as authoritative on the relevant questions involving the Kotel controversy and the politics of religion & state in Israel, as he assumes in prescribing to the non-Orthodox movements how they should conduct their affairs.

LL suggests that the impasse over the Western Wall Agreement (WWA) was generated by the [Nov. 2 demonstration](#) by liberal North American rabbis, but this had very little to do with it. The impasse was ironically precipitated in part by [the victorious Torah service at the Wall](#) celebrated on February 25 during the CCAR (American Reform Judaism’s rabbinic umbrella) convention in Israel, which, by chance or Divine providence, took place shortly after the WWA was announced. Israel’s ultra-Orthodox leadership dug its feet into the ground at that point, and demanded that PM Netanyahu not implement the agreement. This was not a regular case of slow-paced Israeli decision making. Rather, the WWA was an exceptional case of an agreement slow in the making (more than 3 years of intensive deliberations), which received tacit endorsement from the political

Obviously, Minister Deri has no idea what he is talking about. No mention of our support for Israel historically or today. No appreciation of historical process. Just denial and enmity.

How many Liberal Jews has he actually spoken with about their Judaism? He frequently casts aspersions that are entirely false. I am not saying that with education he'd be Reform's best friend. Modernity is once again being fought, and its becoming as ugly as it was two centuries ago. But such egregiously ignorant *sinat hinam* destroys the fabric uniting the Jewish people. Perhaps the vicious nature of his ignorance could be mitigated with knowledge, and respect for *amcha* restored.

The Pluralism Index from JPPI indicates the same. Israeli society is not American, but neither is it Haredi. We are participating in the emergence of a modern, indigenous Jewish expression in Israeli life, perhaps well-symbolized in the teaching of Dr. Ruth Calderon, who recognizes the need for indigenous and authentically Jewish spirituality among Israel's Jews. RRFEI can be one

leadership of the Haredi parties, as well as the Rabbi of the Western Wall. It was achieved because it was viewed by the Haredi operatives as the lesser of all evils. What neither they nor the PM took into consideration was the extent to which this agreement would play into the hands of disgruntled Haredi rabbinic leaders in both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities who were looking for an opportunity to challenge the movements' leadership, as well as the sensationalist urges of some key Haredi media outlets that refused to hold their peace in the face of an agreement.

While LL probably does have experience with "buearucratic Israel," as he claims, this conflict has nothing to do with that, but rather with a theological conflict, which can only be won by "hard-sell tactics," which LL objects to.

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Hiddush Is Concerned Over The Chief Rabbinate's Ban Over Xmas Trees In Hotels Certified As Kosher

The Yeshiva World News, Dec. 2, 2016

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

Up until two years ago, the Chief Rabbinate threatened to withdraw the kashrut certification of any hotel in Israel that displayed any Christian holiday symbols during the Christmas and New Year's season. Upon Hiddush's legal appeal, these demands were removed by the Chief Rabbinate. Nevertheless local rabinates continue to ignore the newly issued kashrut regulations, and continue to illegally enforce their ban of Christian holiday decorations.

Head of Hiddush Rabbi Uri Regev, Esq.: "We are offering our assistance in enforcing the law against the recalcitrant Rabbinate, which is funded by the State of Israel but continues to reject its laws."

of the handmaidens of that birth, but so are Yad B'Yad, Kids4Peace, and other initiatives to integrate Israeli society into a single fabric that will live in peace.

Please send us your feedback, particularly regarding how you use the articles we are sending. We look forward to hearing from you at:

organizers@rrfei.org.

Kol tuv,

Mark

Rabbi Mark H. Levin
RRFEI Editor in Chief

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With 2017 approaching, and with it – Christmas and New Year's celebrations, Hiddush – Freedom of Religion for Israel wrote a letter to the Director of Israel's Hotel Association, Mr. Bar Nir, as well as to the Director of Jerusalem's Hotel Association, reminding them that the Rabbinat's ban on Christmas trees has been officially abolished. Up until two years ago, the Rabbinat threatened hotels with withdrawal of their kashrut certifications, should they not comply with this illegal demand, but following a series of legal appeals by Hiddush the Rabbinat's regulations were amended. Religious Shabbat restrictions and prohibitions hostile to Christianity, none of which had anything to do with the kashrut status of the hotels' food and kitchens, were removed from the Rabbinat's newly issued regulations.

...

Looking at Jewish Pluralism in Israel

2016 Annual Assessment of the Situation and Dynamics of the Jewish People, *The Jewish People Policy Institute*

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

One of the ongoing sticking points in Israel-Diaspora relations is the disconnect between Israel's Jewish-Israeli public space and the expectations of some Jewish communities throughout the world. Non-Israeli Jews (and quite a few Israelis) complain of the lack of Jewish 'pluralism' in Israel. They mainly refer to the fact that Orthodox Judaism in Israel is accorded superior status to that of other Jewish denominations. This year, the never-ending saga of the conflict over non-Orthodox space at the Western Wall prompted some to protest Israel's lack of resolve in adapting certain aspects of Jewish life to meet the expectations of Diaspora Jews, even when compromise decisions are reached for doing exactly that.

A JPPI study conducted earlier this year reveals a built-in difficulty in bringing about an accepted mode of Jewish pluralism in Israel because, despite widespread agreement over the need for tolerance and diversity, the question of what Jewish pluralism is supposed to look like and exactly what it implies is in dispute. It is also difficult to persuade the Jewish public that a change is needed

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since 90 percent of Israeli Jews feel comfortable living in Israel "just the way they are." As far as they are concerned, no acute problem exists that absolutely necessitates change. Moreover, among those with a higher comfort level the study found a right-leaning political and religious orientation. Thus, the coalition presently managing Israel's affairs seems representative of contented Jews who feel comfortable with the existing situation.

The Pluralism in Israel survey was conducted as part of a broader JPPI project examining pluralism in Israel. Integral to this project was the establishment of a Pluralism Index with the capacity to track changes and trends concerning the ability of different Israeli communities to live alongside each other in mutual respect. The first iteration of the Pluralism Index, released in May 2016, focused exclusively on Israeli Jews, under the working definition of Jewish pluralism as: "The condition in which Jew of different social classes, ideologies, religious streams, levels of beliefs and practices, genders, and ethnic backgrounds have equal opportunity to legitimately exercise their differences in the public sphere."

...

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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