Dear Friends,

At a recent labor rally I witnessed, the pluralistic crowds chanted, "This is what democracy looks like!" I'm fascinated by the assertion. What does, after all, democracy look like today?

In our first article, you'll read the new Hiddush survey of Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs regarding their support for civil marriage. As you will see, the larger proportion of Israeli Jews who are secular translates into greater support for civil marriage, but both communities would like to see more democracy regarding marriage ceremonies. Yet, Israel's government to date remains unresponsive. Indeed, what does democracy look like?

NEW public opinion studies on marriage freedom in Israel

Exploring Israel's Jewish and Arab sectors, as well as the Zionist Orthodox community

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This week, three new perspectives regarding Israelis’ views on marriage freedom and related issues were presented to the public.

Do you agree with the following statement: "Every resident of Israel has the right to marry in Israel to whomever he wants, in whatever way he wants, and according to his beliefs?"

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<thead>
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<th>Jewish Israelis</th>
<th>Arab Israelis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agree</strong></td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disagree</strong></td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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After years of polling Jewish public opinion, Hiddush initiated a special study of both Israel's Jewish sector and its Arab
Hiddush's dual study offers an eye opening perspective as to the differences between Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis on these issues. The findings can be better understood given the great disparity between the percentage of Israeli Jews who define themselves as secular (~50%) and the percentage of Israeli Arabs who identify as secular (12%).

Also, of great interest is the fact that whereas in the Jewish sector, the principled embrace of the right to "marriage freedom" is carried into support for enacting civil marriage and divorce, while in the Arab sector, 76% embrace the principle, but only 43% support instituting a civil option for marriage and divorce. This may be attributed to the far lower awareness among Arab Israelis of the inadequacy of religious control over marriage. It may also indicate that if they were made fully aware of the extent to which the right to marry in Israel is infringed upon, they would lend their support to the necessary remedy. It's encouraging that among younger Arab Israelis, one finds a great level of support for a civil choice (60%), even though the majority of them would prefer religious marriage for themselves. Further, the high levels of opposition within the Jewish and Arab sectors to polygamy; and the high percentage of support for a bride's right to choose her partner are of great interest.

...
Within mainstream Orthodoxy, more women than at any prior time in Jewish history are learning and teaching Torah, with passionate commitment and at unprecedented levels of scholarship and professional achievement. Motivated by yirat shamayim and ahavat Hashem, they seek not only to learn, but to teach and inspire others. Similarly, highly qualified and dedicated women are increasingly assuming leading roles in Orthodox communal life, both as professionals and within the laity. These positive developments have transformed the face of synagogues and the Orthodox community.

As women have assumed an expanding array of roles, including leadership positions of all sorts, often closed to them in the past, it becomes our challenge – and responsibility – to help define the contours of professional synagogue roles that may be played by women that are permissible within the bounds of halacha and our mesorah – and that conform to the norms of traditional halachic process.

Accompanying this memorandum are the Responses of the Rabbinic Panel to two questions posed to it by the Orthodox Union, in reference to professional synagogue roles:

- Is it halachically acceptable for a synagogue to employ a woman in a clergy function?
- What is the broadest spectrum of professional roles within a synagogue that women can perform within the bounds of halacha?

...
• Is it halakhically acceptable for a synagogue to employ a woman in a clergy function?

• What is the broadest spectrum of professional roles within a synagogue that may be performed by a woman?

These inquiries must be answered in a way that goes beyond a simple yes or no, permitted or prohibited. The issue of female clergy is complex, and touches upon not only the dictates of halakhah, but also upon fundamental issues in our hashkafat olam. Indeed, the questions relate to the philosophy of the halakhic process itself. Furthermore, we recognize that this issue is emotionally charged; some perceive limitations on women’s roles and titles as barriers to full involvement in the Orthodox community, while others view the lifting of traditional gender distinctions in ritual as representing a rejection of the mesorah. This tension pits egalitarianism, a central value of modernity, against a time-honored tradition that clearly speaks of equally valued, yet different, roles for men and women.

In contemporary discourse, rabbinic discussion of these issues often appear to focus primarily on what functions performed by men are inappropriate for women. By contrast, our intention is to define halakhic parameters with the goal of clarifying practical roles that women can and, depending on the particular kehillah, indeed should, play in our community institutions.

The following represents our collective opinion. For the reasons noted above, we will begin with an outline of halakhic methodology.

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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.

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