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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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Introduction

February 16, 2017
20 Sh'vat, 5777



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?

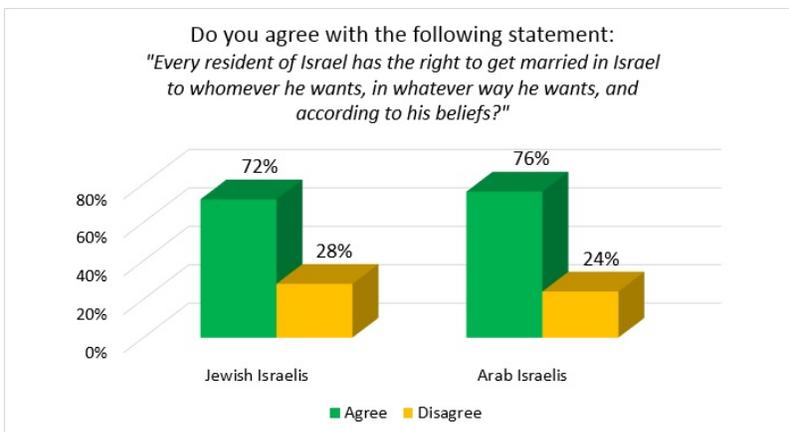
In our first article, you'll read the new Hiddush survey of Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs regarding their support for civil marriage. As you will see, the larger proportion of Israeli Jews who are secular translates into greater support for civil marriage, but both communities would like to see more 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

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

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



After years of polling Jewish public opinion, [Hiddush initiated a special study of both Israel's Jewish sector and its Arab](#)

We are providing the recent *p'sak halakhah* regarding women as rabbis issued by the OU. More intriguing than the *p'sak* itself is the second document, reflecting an increasing demand for recognition of women and their communal roles within the confines of *halakhah* and *hashkafah*. Indeed, the article clearly reflects an attempt at balancing between the history and method of Jewish law and the demands of democracy in contemporary America. It's challenging both from a traditional perspective and the demands of modernity with which we all deal on a daily basis. What struggles the Jewish world is undergoing at this time! What does Jewish democracy look like?

I trust you will find the articles demanding and worthy of a response. Please send any thoughts to: organizers@rrfei.org, or see our [Facebook group](#) for Rabbis for Freedom and Equality in Israel.

Kol tuv,

Mark

Rabbi Mark H. Levin
RRFEI Editor

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[sector](#), and its findings were released on Valentine's Day. On the same day, another study initiated by the Modern Orthodox NGO Ne'emanai Torah v'Avodah, which focused on the views of Israel's Zionist Orthodox sector, was published. Since these issues are clearly high on the priority list of Israelis when it comes to matters of religion & state, and they directly impact world Jewry, we are making these reports available in the resource section of the RRFEI website. We'll be glad to provide further insights and background to those who request more details.

- [Click HERE](#) for Hiddush's report on the 2017 Valentine's Day marriage surveys of the Jewish and Arab sectors of Israel (*Heb.*)
- [Click HERE](#) for Ne'emanai Torah v'Avodah's report on the views of Israel's Zionist Orthodox community (*Heb.*)

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.

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[Professional roles of women in Orthodox synagogues](#)

The Orthodox Union's response

[Click HERE for the full document](#)

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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?

...

Professional roles of women in Orthodox synagogues

Responses of the [Orthodox Union] Rabbinic Panel

[Click HERE for the full document](#)

To the esteemed members of the Orthodox Union's executive committee and board of directors, in response to your questions:

- ***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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Resources

- [Vision of Hiddush and Rabbis for Religious Freedom](#)
- [Hiddush resources](#)
- [Courts - religious & secular](#)
- [Conversion](#)
- [Death & burial - ancient & now](#)
- [Diaspora-Israel](#)
- [Diversity & inclusivity among Jews](#)
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- [Western Wall](#)
- [Women](#)

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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