The Jewish Federations® OF NORTH AMERICA
הפדרציות היהודיות
iRep - The Israel Religious Expression Platform

Quarterly iRep Update On Key Issues Relating To Religion And State In Israel

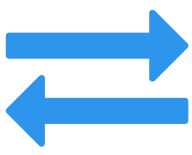
Volume 3, January 2017

This religion and state update covers the period from August through December 2016. Please click here to review volume 2 which covers May-August 2016, and here to review volume 1 (January – April 2016).

Ritual Baths (Mikvaot)

In July 2016 the Knesset passed a law that enables religious authorities to turn away individuals seeking to use state-run ritual baths. In essence, this law bars Reform and Conservative converts from using state funded and operated Mikvaot. The law may ultimately be found to be illegal by the courts, as the Justice Ministry views it to be discriminatory against non-Orthodox streams if no alternative state-funded Mikvaot are provided to them. In addition, in June 2016 the government declared that women would be able to immerse in public Mikvaot without the presence of an attendant, and without restrictions. This decision was the result of a case brought by Orthodox women to the High Court of Justice.

Read more:
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.726574
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4864802,00.html
http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=469583



Conversion

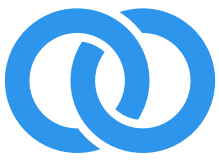
In September 2016, the Rabbinate rejected conversions carried out by two leading American Orthodox Rabbis of the Beth Din of America: Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz of Chicago and Rabbi Mordechai Willig. These instances followed a very public case in which the Rabbinate rejected the conversion of an American woman converted by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, a leading Orthodox American Rabbi.

In December 2016, Israel's two Chief Rabbis announced that they are convening a committee to create standards for recognizing which Diaspora Rabbis the Chief Rabbinate trusts to handle conversions.

Read more:
http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/israel-news/top-us-rabbis-not-kosher-enough-israels-chief-rabbinate#ryx3zopVrwWyhqym.01
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.744063
http://www.jta.org/2016/12/07/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/israels-chief-rabbinate-promises-to-establish-conversion-standards-and-count-ivanka-trump-as-jewish
http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Jerusalem-Post-Editorial-Rabbis-and-reform-474872

The Giyur Kahalacha independent Orthodox Rabbinical court for conversion that was established in December 2015 has become the largest non-state conversion court in the country. After one year of operation, 280 individuals have undergone conversion through Giyur Kahalacha - the vast majority of them children.

Read more:
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Giyur-Kahalacha-is-largest-non-state-conversion-court-474857



Marriage and Divorce

The Chief Rabbinate filed an official complaint with the Israel Broadcasting Authority demanding that the ”Chatuna Shava” radio campaign sponsored by iRep grantees (the Reform Movement, the Conservative Movement and Yisrael Hofsheet), be taken off the air. The Rabbinate claimed that the ads are misleading and might give the impression that the wedding ceremonies being discussed are recognized by the government. The complaint had no effect on the campaign as it had already been completed.

Read more:
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4836460,00.html

An August 2016 poll conducted by iRep grantee Neemanei Torah Ve`avoda showed that 80% of the public is convinced that the Rabbinate’s monopoly over marriage and divorce increases the number of Israelis who choose to wed in civil ceremonies abroad. It is interesting to note that 56% of religious respondents also hold this opinion. When asked if they support civil marriage in Israel, 25% of religious-Zionists said they are in favor, with 52% opposed, and another 23% said they have no opinion on the matter.

Read more:
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Poll-shows-high-religious-sentiment-among-religiously-traditional-and-secular-Israelis-463722

Several recent polls show that there are changes in the way Israelis perceive the marriage issue. For instance, the number of couples choosing domestic partnerships is increasing. Between 2012 and 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, the number of unmarried cohabiting couples increased by 28%. A Hiddush poll conducted in September 2016 showed that the percentage of Israelis who prefer alternative marriage ceremonies for themselves or their family members rose from 37% in 2015 to 47% in 2016. Another developing trend finds an increase in the number of Orthodox couples seeking egalitarian Halachic ceremonies. This has resulted in the creation of new organizations that provide services for alternative Orthodox marriages. The religious feminist movement is also becoming a significant force resulting in more Orthodox couples seeking ceremonies that are more inclusive and egalitarian for women.

Read more:
http://hiddush.org/article-16968-0-The_2016_Israel_Religion__State_Index.aspx
http://forward.com/news/israel/348803/why-far-more-unmarried-israeli-couples-are-living-together/
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.739459
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4858374,00.html
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Large-majority-of-American-Jews-Israelis-call-for-end-to-Orthodox-monopoly-in-Israel-467664
http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Majority-of-Jewish-Israelis-want-egalitarian-prayer-site-at-Kotel-467815

The Kotel (Western Wall)

In January 2016, the Israeli cabinet voted to create an egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall. Since the agreement was approved, objections have been raised primarily by Haredi leadership which has resulted in the implementation of the decision being stalled.
Recent polls conducted by the Jerusalem Post with the American Jewish Committee show that most Israelis support implementation of the Kotel agreement: 70% of American Jews and 61% of Israeli Jews support the establishment of a pluralistic section in the Western Wall plaza.
Organizations and individuals on both sides of the Atlantic have called on the government to implement the Kotel agreement, including Modern Orthodox religious leadership in Israel. In addition, the Reform and Conservative movements organized a massive letter writing campaign to pressure the government to implement the agreement.

Read more:
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4874299,00.html
http://www.jta.org/2016/11/04/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/orthodox-rabbinical-group-joins-call-by-non-orthodox-demanding-western-wall-compromise
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Large-majority-of-American-Jews-Israelis-call-for-end-to-Orthodox-monopoly-in-Israel-467664
http://www.haaretz.com/.premium-1.743040

In a hearing on a case related to the Kotel, Israel's High Court of Justice (part of the Supreme Court) questioned why the State of Israel has not implemented the Kotel resolution. The Reform and Conservative movements then filed an updated petition to the High Court of Justice demanding that the State explain why it has not implemented its own decision to build a second egalitarian prayer area.

On November 24 2016 death threats were made to senior Reform and `Women of the Wall` leaders at a Reform synagogue in Ra'anana. Three envelopes bearing the names of the Reform and WOW leaders were found at the Kehilat Ra'anan Reform synagogue, alongside a large kitchen knife, and the synagogue itself was vandalized. The text linked the death threats to the demand to provide a pluralistic prayer space at the Western Wall. The attack led to widespread condemnation from senior political leaders in Israel, including the prime minister, and Jewish leaders all over the world.

December 2016 saw another stark development in the Kotel issue when 16 members of the coalition government (the Ultra-Orthodox Shas party, some members of the Likud party and some members of Habayit Hayehudi party) submitted a private members bill in the Knesset that would ban all non-Orthodox religious practice throughout the entire Western Wall plaza. Under this bill, women at the Western Wall who are wearing prayer shawls, tefillin; reading from a Torah or blowing a shofar would face criminal charges punishable by up to 6 months in prison or 10,000 NIS fine. The same penalty would apply to prayer by men and women together. At the moment this remains a private members bill that the government has not indicated it will support. Nonetheless, should the bill proceed through the legislative process, it would represent a significant threat to freedom of worship at the Kotel.

Read more:
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.741603
http://www.timesofisrael.com/liberal-jews-petition-high-court-over-western-wall-deal/
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.758389
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Knife-found-at-Israeli-Reform-synagogue-defaced-with-threats-473524

IDF

In November and December 2016 there were numerous instances of public conflict between IDF leadership and leading Rabbis. The Sephardi Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef stated that women should not join the Israel Defense Forces or sign up for national service. Several Rabbis and former generals criticized the IDF for enabling women to take on more combat roles in the army.

The newly appointed Chief Rabbi for the IDF was criticized for voicing extreme views that support rape of enemy women, oppose the LGBT community and women serving in the army which were made many years before his appointment and in the context of a query relating to what the texts actually indicated (not his personal views). He eventually issued a public statement effectively retracting those comments.

Read more:
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.758312
http://www.timesofisrael.com/rabbis-vow-to-keep-women-out-of-idf-tank-corps/
http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/11/israel-girls-enlisting-national-religious-movement-rabbis.html
http://www.timesofisrael.com/karim-sworn-in-as-idf-chief-rabbi-after-rocky-nomination/

Shabbat

In September 2016 another controversy surrounding Shabbat took place when PM Netanyahu decided to halt railways infrastructure work scheduled to take place on Shabbat following pressure from Ultra-Orthodox parties. The maintenance work was due to take place over the weekend in order to minimize interference with public transportation during the work week. The cancellation of the scheduled work minutes before Shabbat began resulted in the railway being inoperable for two days during the following work week. It's important to note that maintenance work of this type has taken place over Shabbat for many years so the recent flare-up did not reflect a change in the status quo.

The Ultra-Orthodox parties have also formed a committee to formulate new, more restrictive rules for opening businesses on Shabbat. The proposed ultra-Orthodox guidelines are still under development, and the government has not indicated that it will support any of the proposals.

Read more:
http://www.timesofisrael.com/hundreds-protest-netanyahu-decision-to-halt-shabbat-train-work/
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.740199

Kashrut

A new study by the Finance Ministry found that kashrut certifications costs the economy about 3 billion NIS ($770 million) a year which results in food products costing the consumer 5% more than they would without certification. The study also points to inefficiencies and redundancies in the system.

As a result of numerous complaints during the last few years about the inefficiency and corruptness of the Rabbinate Kashrut services, Chief Rabbi Lau is currently considering reforming the process of certifications.

Read more:
http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/.premium-1.695480
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4891347,00.html
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Chief-Rabbinate-looking-at-serious-reform-to-kashrut-supervision-476495

The Supreme Court ruled in June 2016 that only the Chief Rabbinate is authorized to grant businesses kashrut certification and rejected a petition by several restaurants that were denied use of private alternative Kashrut certificates. In October 2016, Chief Justice Miriam Naor ruled that, in a rare procedure, the Supreme Court will revisit its earlier ruling.

Read more:
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Supreme-Court-to-hold-second-hearing-on-legality-of-non-rabbinate-kashrut-authorities-470188

●●● Something Extra

Over the past few months, we have witnessed women taking an increased public role in orthodox religious life. A woman was appointed as a `spiritual leader` (a position similar to assistant Rabbi) in one of Jerusalem's national-religious synagogues, and the State confirmed that women may serve as legal advisers to Rabbinical courts.

Read more:
http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Ramban-synagogue-in-south-Jerusalem-appoints-a-woman-to-serve-as-spiritual-leader-464775
http://www.jpost.com/printarticle.aspx?id=464843