

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

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This Religion and State update is published by the Israel Religious Expression Platform (iRep). iRep is a coalition of 25 Jewish Federations and the Gorlin Family Foundation that work together to promote respect for diverse expressions of Judaism in Israel. Read more on iRep [here](#).

Click [here](#) for previous issues of the Pluralism Update.



In November, the Knesset passed into law a bill to reform Kashrut supervision which was promoted by Minister of Religious Affairs Matan Kahana (Yemina).

Under the new legislation, private Kashrut organizations will be empowered to grant Kashrut certification to business including restaurants, hotels, and factories. These private organizations will go through an accreditation process managed by the Rabbinate, and once approved, will receive a license of 3-5 years to perform Kashrut supervision.

The Rabbinate process will ensure that approved organizations meet requisite technical criteria as well as financial management standards and will award each organization a Kashrut certification that relates to the level of Halachic “strictness” needed for various populations within Israel. Alternately, private Kashrut organizations will be able to receive a Kashrut certificate from a panel of three municipal rabbis, creating increased diversity in the type and Halachic levels of Kashrut organizations that will be recognized and able to provide Kashrut supervision. For example, the Tzohar Kashrut initiative will probably be certified through this alternative legal route.

The entire system will begin operation in January 2023. In January 2022 an interim step will come into effect: municipal rabbis will be permitted to give Kashrut certificates to businesses outside their geographic jurisdiction. This will enable competition within the Rabbinate system since different municipal rabbis apply different Kashrut standards, and businesses will be able to choose which rabbi to apply to for supervision.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/kashrut-revolution-legislation-passes-into-law-684012>

Conversion

The coalition agreement, on which Israel's current government rests, includes proposed legislation designed to open up additional pathways to conversion in Israel.

Last month, Minister of Religious Affairs, Matan Kahana, announced his intent to advance legislation which would enable municipal rabbis to perform conversions in addition to the existing conversion courts under the Rabbinate. The assumption is that some municipal rabbis will facilitate more lenient/welcoming Orthodox conversions and thus increase the number of conversions under State supervision.

Currently, following a series of Supreme Court decisions, Israel honors conversions done within recognized Reform and Conservative congregations both abroad and in Israel. This allows converts to change their status to "Jewish" in the population registry and makes them eligible for Aliyah as Jews, though it does not extend to personal status issues such as marriage. In addition, the State of Israel operates an official conversion system controlled by the Rabbinate, which converts approximately 2000 Israelis each year.

While it is unlikely that the initiative will prompt all of the hundreds of thousands of non-Halachic Israeli Jews to convert, its passage would be an important symbolic gesture communicating that conversion in Israel should be more open, and some will likely opt to take this route.

It is important to note that several parties in the government have promised that the proposed legislation will not limit or "roll back" any progress made in the past on the status of non-Orthodox conversions.

The Rabbinate, the ultra-Orthodox parties and the Religious Zionist party, object strongly to any legislation that will make conversions in Israel easier.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/tensions-mount-in-coalition-over-conversion-legislation-687560>

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/317894>

The Kotel (Western Wall)

The Kotel agreement, which was adopted by the Israeli government in 2016 before it was suspended in 2017, included the establishment of a permanent egalitarian prayer plaza adjacent to the Western Wall, known as Ezrat Yisrael. In this plaza, mixed prayer of men and women will be permitted, and it will also provide space for Women of the Wall prayer services.

The agreement calls for regulations that formally recognize Ezrat Yisrael as an egalitarian prayer space, as well as building a permanent site with the same services and accessibility measures that are available at the traditional Kotel plaza.

Last week, following [reports](#) that Israel's government was freezing plans to implement the 2016 Kotel compromise that Jewish Federations were instrumental in negotiating, JFNA President and CEO Eric Fingerhut released the following [statement](#): "We remain committed to the Kotel Compromise that was reached in 2016. That deal, agreed to following detailed and lengthy negotiations between all parties, was approved by the Government of Israel, and represents a fair and equitable arrangement for all. We strongly applaud statements from Israel's governing coalition in support of seeing the historic deal realized. We urge the coalition to ensure that implementation occurs as soon as possible."

Read more:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-lapid-to-push-ahead-with-western-wall-deal-says-will-not-give-up-on-it-1.10477514>

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/plurality-of-israelis-support-kotel-agreement-poll-685367>

Marriage and Divorce

Currently, only religious marriages are recognized by the State. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens cannot get married by the Rabbinate, or do not want to get married through it.

There is greater willingness within Israel's new governing coalition to find solutions for those who cannot get married under current law. For example, the coalition agreement includes a commitment by several parties to find a civil solution that allows for the official marriage of LGBTQ couples and other couples unable to marry through the Rabbinate.

No legislation has yet been proposed on this issue, but there are several steps the government can take that do not require legislation. These include establishing a civil registry for "common law married couples", approval of civil marriages done in foreign consulates; recognition of marriages done by a foreign country online. Organizations working in the field have encouraged the government to consider taking these steps.

Funding of Diverse Jewish Practices

In November, the Knesset approved the State budget, including 40 million NIS (approximately \$13M) allocated for a new authority under the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs to promote pluralistic Jewish services. The vision is for this to become a permanent structure, tasked with supporting organizations that provide diverse Jewish services to all Israelis. This includes the religious streams, secular Jewish congregations, Masorti (traditional) initiatives, and more.

The authority is still in development and the intention is to find matching funds for the Ministry's budget, tripling the potential investment in the field.

This is the first time an official government department dealing with diverse forms of Judaism has ever been created and it significantly increases the investment of the Israeli government in this arena.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/new-progressive-judaism-dept-established-in-diaspora-affairs-ministry-675804>



Public Transportation on Shabbat

In November, Minister of Transportation Merav Michaeli (Labor) declared her commitment to making public transport available on Shabbat.

Over the past few years, several municipalities including Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, Givataim, and Ramat HaSharon collaborated to provide public transportation on Shabbat using municipal funding to operate free bus service. These local initiatives, mostly in the center of the country, have been able to subsidize this service and proved there is high demand from the public.

In December, Minister Michaeli submitted a bill that will enable private transportation companies or nonprofits to operate transportation on Shabbat for a fee. If this bill passes, it will enable more municipalities to provide Shabbat bus service since they will have an income source to fund it. It will also enable private initiatives to operate even where the municipality is not interested in providing the service.

Read more:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-transport-minister-vows-to-advance-public-transport-on-shabbat-1.10367738>



The Ultra-Orthodox Society and the State

The Minister of Finance Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) decided in July to end day care subsidies for families without two working parents. A special exception allowed Yeshiva students who are fathers to receive the subsidy for their children's day care, while in most families both parents must be employed to receive the subsidy. Lieberman postponed the policy following a public outcry and it is still being debated in the Knesset. If the legislation passes, ultra-Orthodox families will lose thousands of shekels a month in government subsidies.

Read more:

<https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-liberman-ends-day-care-subsidies-for-non-working-parents-1001377352>

In August 2021, a Knesset committee approved a bill designed to resolve the on-going debate around ultra-Orthodox enlistment in the IDF. Prior legislation was struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional and there is a June 2022 deadline for passing new legislation.

The new bill does not include significant changes in the number of ultra-Orthodox men expected to enlist, however it does lower the age of exemption to 21. This change will enable ultra-Orthodox men to leave the Yeshiva at a younger age, improving their opportunity to study in an academic institution before they are married and creating more opportunity for them to earn competitive salaries (pay taxes). This would also enable them to join the work force earlier. The Finance Ministry pushed for this change due to its significant economic implications, despite criticism from both the ultra-Orthodox leadership and others charging the legislation infringes on equality particularly of other young Israelis who cannot choose to skip army service.

Read more:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/ministers-okay-compromise-to-lower-ultra-orthodox-idf-exemption-age/>

<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/idf-orthodox-jews/>