

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](#).

This report covers the period January – March 2022. Click [here](#) for previous issues of this update.



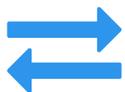
Kosher (Kashrut) Supervision Services

In January, new legislation went into effect authorizing municipal rabbis to offer Kosher supervision services to businesses anywhere in the country. In practice, the first rabbi to offer these services is Rabbi David Stav of Shoham, a small town in the center of Israel. Rabbi Stav reported in February that the Shoham Kashrut supervision is now overseeing several business outside of Shoham.

Rabbi Stav is also the head of Tzohar, a rabbinic organization that offers private Kashrut services. In the next phase of the newly legislated reform, starting from 2023, Tzohar will be able to offer supervision services as an official Kashrut service, which is expected to open up the competition on Kashrut supervision even further.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-696694>



Conversion

In February, the government of Israel approved a bill initiated by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Matan Kahana, aimed at liberalizing the state conversion system. The bill is expected to be presented in the Knesset in the coming months.

The bill will formalize the existing state conversion system, which until now was based on government decisions and regulations only and was not anchored in legislation. Another major change in the conversion bill is a provision that will allow municipal Rabbis to create official conversion courts. Conversions under the State Conversion Authority will be done according to “Din Torah” – meaning the Orthodox interpretation of Halacha.

Rabbinat will be able to serve on any of the conversion panels. The bill includes a clause that grandfathers in the existing recognition of private conversions – Orthodox, Reform and Conservative.

The bill was met with strong objections from the ultra-Orthodox political parties as well as the more conservative side of the National Religious stream. These groups object to any change to the current status quo in which the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has exclusive control over all conversion processes except private conversions which have been recognized through a Supreme Court decision rather than a legislative process. Those who oppose any reform to the current system argue that any attempt to give liberal Orthodox Rabbis the ability to conduct conversions would create doubt over the converts' Jewish status, and potentially harm the Jewish character of the State.

Within the current government, there is wide support for this legislation. Although it does not grant Reform and Conservative conversions official status, the bill safeguards their current status as private conversions recognized by the State. Among Reform and Conservative leaders the bill is seen as the least harmful to their current status, and if passed would potentially prevent more harmful legislation being enacted by a future government.

Read more:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/cabinet-advances-conversion-reform-that-seeks-to-curb-rabbinates-control/>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/chief-rabbis-lead-rally-urging-religious-affairs-minister-to-scrap-his-reforms/>



The Kotel (Western Wall)

In February, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet met with the heads of the Reform and Conservative streams. It was the first such meeting since Netanyahu backtracked from his commitment to implement the Western Wall compromise. Although Bennett made no concrete promises regarding operationalizing the deal, those in attendance at the meeting noted it was very positive in tone and attitude. Earlier that month, Bennet also met with a group of Orthodox Rabbis organized by Agudath Israel of America who lobbied to roll back any changes to the Western Wall prayer arrangements and endorsed the continued freeze on the Kotel compromise.

The Cabinet Secretary, Mr. Shalom Shlomo, met with the Reform and Conservative leadership, Women of the Wall, and JFNA to discuss implementation of specific sections of the Kotel deal, mainly improvements in the construction of the prayer area itself. As it appears that the government is unable to reaffirm the full Kotel deal at this point in time, they are trying to find practical solutions that can be advanced in the meantime.

In the beginning of March, during the month of Adar Bet, Women of the Wall's Rosh Chodesh prayer service was met by thousands of young ultra-Orthodox protestors including both men and women. The police kept the groups apart in order to prevent any violent incidents. A month earlier, members of Women of the Wall were assaulted during the prayers for the Hebrew month of Adar Alef (February 2022).

Read more:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/ultra-orthodox-reformist-jews-clash-over-prayer-space-western-wall>

<https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-699333>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-diaspora-delegation-to-lobby-bennett-against-western-wall-compromise/>

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-702448>

In an interview with Zohar Palti, who this week concluded his term as head of the Defense Ministry's political-military bureau, Palti stated that the crisis with American Jewry over the Western Wall prayer arrangements is a strategic issue for Israel's national security and has to be resolved.

Read more:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT.MAGAZINE-the-dramatic-moment-when-israel-almost-struck-iran-1.10696400>



Marriage and Divorce

In February, following nearly two years of travel restrictions that prevented many young couples from traveling overseas to marry, Minister of Religious Affairs Matan Kahana was reported to be considering a plan to allow Israelis to conduct civil marriage ceremonies in foreign diplomatic missions in Israel, as part of a deal that would also place limitations on eligibility under the Law of Return. The Law of Return is Israel's fundamental immigration law which allows Jews and their descendants the right to immigrate to Israel and to receive immediate citizenship and financial assistance. Kahana's proposed "deal" was to enable flexibility with a civil marriage solution and in return the proposal included the elimination of the right to immigrate for those who have one Jewish grandparent, but are not identified as Jewish. This is a change that conservative politicians have been advocating for in recent years.

However, immediately after the proposal was published it received strong criticism from Minister of Finance Avigdor Lieberman, who heads Yisrael Beiteinu, a political party whose voter base is largely Russian speaking Israelis. He announced that no such plan would be discussed while he is in the government, ending the discussion on the two proposals.

At the same time, a member of Lieberman's party, MK Yulia Malinovsky, held a hearing in the Knesset Committee on Jewish Religious Services concerning the need for civil marriage in Israel. Although there is no bill pending, Malinovsky was able to get many MKs and some ministers to participate in the hearing and to voice their support for a civil solution for those who are unable to marry or prefer not to do so under the current framework in Israel. As part of the hearing, several couples who were married outside the Rabbinate spoke about their decision and requested that the Knesset take action.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-696488>

<https://www.israelhayom.com/2022/02/06/every-citizen-has-the-right-to-fall-in-love-and-marry-in-israel/>



Women in Religious Services

In March, Religious Affairs Minister Matan Kahana posted a picture on Facebook showing dozens of women who have been appointed to leadership positions in various Religious Councils in different municipalities. Of those shown, six were appointed to head Religious Councils and the others were appointed to other leadership positions. Religious Councils exist in most Jewish municipalities and are charged with providing Jewish religious services in that location including Kashrut supervision, mikveh (ritual bath facilities), marriage and the upkeep of eruv lines (a perimeter set up around a city or town to enable Orthodox people to carry items outside their homes and walk greater distances on Shabbat). Until these appointments, no women had ever held the highest position on a Religious Council, and there weren't many women in leadership positions.

When he came into office, Kahana began making significant changes to the Religious Council system, which in part, includes the replacement of many officeholders holding paid positions. In the past two decades, these appointees were mostly affiliated with the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas party, and Kahana wanted to lessen their influence. In November 2021 he announced that the terms of 90 existing appointees would not be extended, and he is now appointing new officeholders to these positions, many of them women.

Read more:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/israels-minister-religious-affairs-appoints-women-latest-reform>

<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/headlines-breaking-stories/2023521/kahana-to-replace-90-religious-council-heads-with-women-academic-degree-holders.html>



The Ultra-Orthodox Society and the State

In March, it was reported in the Israel media that the Ministry of Education is in the final stages of negotiating an agreement with the Belz Chassidic sect, under which the state would finance core studies in their private ultra-Orthodox educational institutions. It seems that the leader of Belz, an important Hassidic group, is not backing off from this agreement, despite harsh criticism from other ultra-Orthodox groups. Once this deal takes effect, it is likely that other sects may follow, especially among the Hassidic public.

Ultra-Orthodox educational institutions are divided into three main sectors: state-ultra-Orthodox education, the political parties' networks of schools, and private institutions not affiliated with political parties. The state-run ultra-Orthodox schools, and the networks affiliated with political parties receive the same funding as other public schools. But the private institutions of independent ultra-Orthodox groups, who do not agree to state supervision of their schools, receive only partial funding.

This latest development is part of an initiative by MK Moshe (Kinley) Tor-Paz of the Yesh Atid political party, to include core curriculum studies in these private institutions in return for additional public funding. Under the proposal, the ultra-Orthodox institutions will be able to receive full funding, as is the case with the ultra-Orthodox party education networks, in exchange for fully complying with the ministry's requirements, including supervision and participation in external tests.

Read more:

Hebrew article: https://www.calcalist.co.il/local_news/article/rjlc40zc

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/majority-of-ultra-orthodox-men-in-israel-lack-basic-english-skills-study/>



In Related News

In January, Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz announced a ban on medical professionals practicing so-called 'conversion therapy', which claims to reorient LGBTQ patients toward heterosexuality. This so-called treatment is known to be linked to self-harm or even suicide and there is no accepted research that shows it be effective. Previous attempts to legislate such a ban in the Knesset have failed.

Read more:

<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/society/1644840980-israel-s-health-ministry-formalizes-conversion-therapy-ban>