

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

*Volume 13, May 2020*

This Religion and State update covers the period from August 2019-May 2020. Please click [here](#) to review previous issues.

Over the past year Israelis lined up at the polls three times, while the Knesset and interim government functioned under limited legal authority. As a result this report is shorter than previous ones.



## New Israeli Government

In May, a new Israeli government was sworn in following 15 months of political turmoil, three elections and prolonged coalition negotiations. The unity government led by Blue and White and Likud includes the two Ultra-Orthodox parties, the Labor party and several Knesset members (MKs) who left the parties they were elected with to join the government as independent members.

Unfortunately the new government's recently released Fundamental Principles, which are binding on all parties in the coalition, do not address any religion and state issues, skirting the topic with wording such as,

*"The government will work to preserve the Jewish and democratic character of the state. The government will ensure that, based on Jewish heritage, the Jewish character of the state will be preserved, and will respect the religions and traditions of the various religions, in accordance with the values of the Declaration of Independence."*

The agreement also touches upon Israel's relationship with the Jewish world:

*"The government will emphasize Aliyah and absorption and will act decisively to increase Aliyah from all corners of the globe and ensure the successful absorption of the Olim."*

In addition to the Fundamental Principles, some parties signed separate coalition agreements with other parties. Coalition agreements create mutual commitments between the signatories but do not bind other parties in the coalition.

In the coalition agreement between the Likud and United Torah Judaism – the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox party - there is a clause that guarantees that the status quo on religion and state will be maintained and that if any change is made the Likud and UTJ will work together to revoke it and reinstate the status quo.

In addition, there are several clauses that guarantee that the public funding of ultra-Orthodox institutions will be safeguarded. The agreement also contains a commitment to passing a new Haredi IDF draft law which will not limit the number of yeshiva students permitted release from the draft. If struck down by the courts, these parties commit to passing legislation that will bypass the courts' ruling.

Likud's agreement with Shas, the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party, contains a commitment that the appointment of Judges to Rabbinical courts will maintain balance between the "different groups", wording that most likely refers to parity between Ashkenazi and Sephardi, and between the National Religious and ultra-Orthodox sectors.

It is significant that commitment to maintain religious status quo appears only in the coalition agreements of the Likud with the ultra-Orthodox parties. As such, it does not apply to Blue and White and the Labor parties.

As for other coalition agreements, Blue and White has promised the Labor party to work to provide financial assistance to same-sex couples for surrogacy procedures abroad (surrogacy is currently illegal for homosexuals in Israel). It also guarantees that 30 million NIS be allocated for the development of Israeli Judaism. This term refers to Jewish renewal and pluralist Jewish organizations.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/clause-to-change-religion-state-status-quo-in-haredi-coalition-agreements-627757>

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/mk-stern-blue-and-white-totally-betrayed-promises-on-religion-and-state-628328>



In April, the High Court of Justice ruled that hospitals can no longer prohibit visitors from bringing patients food that is not kosher for Passover. The ruling states that there is no legal authority for hospitals to infringe on people's freedom of religion and personal autonomy, and therefore it is prohibited to confiscate non-Kosher food from visitors. The ultra-Orthodox parties and other religious MKs announced that they will pass legislation to give directors the authority to enforce Kashrut laws over visitors in their hospitals.

Read more:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/high-court-rules-hospitals-cant-stop-visitors-bringing-in-bread-during-passover/>

In May, the head of the Chief Rabbinate's Kashrut Division was indicted on charges of receiving bribes from food importers who demanded kosher certification and preferential treatment in return for large sums of money. This follows the indictment last July of the previous head of the Rabbinate's import department for allegedly accepting hundreds of thousands of shekels in bribes from food importers to approve their Kashrut certificates.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/head-of-chief-rabbinate-kashrut-to-be-indicted-for-bribery-627651>



## Shabbat

In November 2019, the municipalities of the Gush Dan area which include Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan Givatayim, Kiryat Ono and Ramat Hasharon launched bus services on Shabbat. The new service is a groundbreaking departure from the usual ban on public services on Shabbat due to state-enforced religious restrictions. The bus service enjoyed popularity among citizens of Gush Dan until it was halted due to the coronavirus outbreak. Although religious leaders condemned the initiative, it met with relatively low resistance from the ultra-Orthodox parties, probably due to timing which was between election rounds. In November 2019, the municipalities of the Gush Dan area which include Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan Givatayim, Kiryat Ono and Ramat Hasharon launched bus services on Shabbat. The new service is a groundbreaking departure from the usual ban on public services on Shabbat due to state-enforced religious restrictions. The bus service enjoyed popularity among citizens of Gush Dan until it was halted due to the coronavirus outbreak. Although religious leaders condemned the initiative, it met with relatively low resistance from the ultra-Orthodox parties, probably due to timing which was between election rounds.

Read more:

<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Tel-Aviv-central-district-cities-launch-Shabbat-public-transit-608885>