

Pluralism in Israel - 1993

This [29th] Zionist Congress calls on the State of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish People to implement fully the principle of guaranteed religious rights, including equal recognition of religious authorities and equal governmental support for all religious movements within Judaism.
(Adopted, Jerusalem, 1978)

Issue

The Orthodox establishment's hold on all matters of personal status continues to deny Israelis freedom of belief and religion and causes undue hardship on thousands of olim.

Background

The resolution on Pluralism in Israel and the Law of Return, passed by the 33rd Biennial Assembly in 1981, stated that "Israel cannot and must not discriminate against any religious movement in Judaism nor deny the essential pluralism of Jewish life." The State of Israel since its establishment has given sole jurisdiction over matters of personal status to Orthodox authorities. Government regulations on the rights of individuals to marry, divorce and convert have had a serious impact on recent immigrants.

Many from the former Soviet Union are not considered Jewish according to the Orthodox authorities and therefore are denied the right to marry. Conversion is not an alternative for most since only conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis are recognized and they demand that those converting become observant Orthodox Jews.

Orthodox authorities have ruled that Ethiopian Jews are "questionable Jews" and therefore must undergo a quasi-conversion process as a prerequisite for marriage. They have also denied to the Kessim, the traditional leaders of the Ethiopian Jewish community, permission to officiate at weddings in Israel.

Individuals who have converted to Judaism under the auspices of a non-Orthodox rabbi in the Diaspora are still denied the right to marry in Israel. Orthodox rabbis will not officiate, non-Orthodox rabbis are not recognized and civil marriage is not permitted. A couple can divorce only if the husband agrees of his own free will to divorce his wife. If husbands are physically or mentally unable to so agree or refuse to do so, women are trapped.

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) is a leader in the struggle for religious pluralism and the Basic Human Rights law in Israel. Recently the Center led a coalition which included the Conservative Movement in a successful battle for non-Orthodox burial societies. This is the first of the life cycle events to be freed from Orthodox control.

In August 1993 a special committee appointed by the Israeli government to review the functioning of local religious councils released its report. Chaired by former Justice Minister Chaim Zadok, it recommended that Reform and Conservative Jews not be denied the right to serve on religious councils. It also addressed the inequitable distribution of funds and services to Reform and Conservative institutions in Israel and recommended a more equitable allocation.

Resolution

The Women of Reform Judaism reaffirm their commitment to religious pluralism in Israel and call on sisterhoods

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and their members to:

1. Work in their congregations and communities and through ARZA and Kadima to rally support for the Israel Religious Action Center and other groups in Israel and elsewhere that are working for religious rights for all Israelis; and
2. Use every opportunity, whether in the Diaspora or in Israel, to express to Israeli officials their support for religious pluralism in Israel, including implementation of the Zadok Committee's report, particularly with respect to its recommendations that Reform and Conservative synagogues and institutions receive a more equitable distribution of services and funding and that Reform and Conservative Jews be appointed to serve on religious councils.