

Pluralism in Israel and the Law of Return - 1981

Issues

While some gains have been made in Israel regarding non-Orthodox congregations such as providing, in two cases, municipal land on which to build synagogues, non-Orthodox rabbis are not recognized for the performance of important rabbinic duties, including officiating at marriages, funerals or conversions. Further, although the government of Israel provides financial support for Orthodox institutions including their rabbis and congregations, such support is not available to Progressive or Conservative rabbis and congregations.

Again, there are attempts by Israel's Orthodox political parties to amend the Law of Return in order to declare conversions by Reform, Progressive or Conservative rabbis invalid under Israeli law.

Background

The Law of Return provides that any Jew who wishes to return to Israel is automatically granted citizenship. Born out of the realization of the longing to return to Zion, the Law of Return is the Jewish passport, for the Jew who chooses to make Aliyah or seeks refuge from persecution. Any amendment to the Law of Return which disqualifies conversions performed under non-Orthodox auspices jeopardizes the oneness of the Jewish people throughout the world and within Israel discriminates against non-Orthodox Jews.

The continued lack of recognition, even harassment, in Israel of non-Orthodox religious groups threatens the strength of Judaism which throughout its history has contained diverse streams of Jewish expressions and has maintained its vitality through pluralism.

Resolution

The State of Israel is the treasure of all Jews, to serve as the Jewish homeland, whether in actuality or spirit, for all Jews. Israel cannot and must not discriminate against any religious movement in Judaism nor deny the essential pluralism of Jewish life.

We call upon the government of Israel to recognize and accept the varied forms and practices of Judaism. We urge recognition that any amendment to the Law of Return which constitutes religious discrimination in Israel is unacceptable intervention into the affairs of diaspora Jewry. We further call upon the government of Israel and leaders of Jewish communities throughout the world to understand that such changes in the Law of Return and the continued discrimination against non-Orthodox congregations and rabbis inhibits those who may be considering aliyah and threatens to alienate many who by their support and advocacy strengthen the home of our people and the security of the state.

NFTS urges Sisterhoods and their members to actively participate in programs and advocacy actions that will work to achieve full recognition in Israel of all Jews and to secure their religious rights. We further encourage all Sisterhoods to continue and even increase their support of the World Union for Progressive Judaism as it works to establish and expand the Progressive movement in Israel; to encourage Sisterhood and congregation members to support the various Reform groups of our world-wide constituency.

We commend the Union of American Hebrew Congregations for its youth programs in Israel, the Hebrew Union College Jerusalem program, the Israeli Progressive Movement, the young people of Kibbutz Yahel and those who are now preparing for aliyah.

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