

Israel agrees to recognize non-Orthodox rabbis

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c. 2012 Religion News Service JERUSALEM (RNS) When activist Anat Hoffman learned that the Israeli government had agreed to pay a state-funded salary to several non-Orthodox rabbis -- something their Orthodox counterparts have been receiving for decades -- she recited the Shehechyanu, an ancient blessing of thanks that Jews intone on special occasions.

"This was the first time the government called a non-Orthodox person -- or a woman--'a rabbi'" said Hoffman, who heads the Jerusalem-based Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), the activist arm of Israel's Reform Jewish movement.

The government's landmark decision on Tuesday (May 29) comes seven years after Hoffman's agency petitioned Israel's highest court to recognize Miri Gold, a Detroit-born Israeli Reform rabbi, as a bona fide spiritual leader.

Until now, Israel's Reform and Masorti (Conservative) movements, which together have about 250 rabbis and around 100 congregations, have received no official recognition of their leaders or institutions. In 2011, the government allotted the Orthodox movement \$450 million; the Conservative and Reform movements received \$60,000.

This financial inequality, coupled with the government's refusal to recognize non-Orthodox conversions and weddings performed in Israel, has sparked fireworks between successive Israeli leaders and American Jews.

That's why Reform, Masorti and many modern-Orthodox Jews consider the precedent a victory. And it's why Israel's strictly Orthodox religious establishment, which has government-empowered authority over all matters related to Judaism, is livid.

Under the agreement, the government acceded to Orthodox demands not to pay Gold and 15 other rabbis in outlying communities from the Ministry of Religious Services budget. In addition, the decision stipulates that the rabbis' religious rulings would pertain only to their Reform and Masorti communities.

Even so, traditional Jews clearly feel threatened by what they consider non-Orthodox watered-down Judaism. Ya'acov Margi, the Orthodox Minister of Religious Services, threatened to resign over the issue.

Nissim Ze'ev, an ultra-Orthodox parliamentarian, called the decision "harmful to the soul of the Jewish people" and said he may introduce legislation to define what a rabbi is using strictly Orthodox criteria.

Not all religious people are upset by the precedent.

Rabbi Dov Lipman, an activist who can best be defined as ultra-Orthodox in a modern, open-minded sort of way, believes the "increasingly extreme" religious establishment brought this development upon itself. "The extremist (political) parties are largely to blame because their policies have led people to the search for official alternatives," Lipman said.

These policies include the continuation of a decades-long military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews; refusal to automatically accept even Orthodox conversions performed abroad; and escalating efforts to marginalize women from public events on the grounds that their presence could lead to improper mingling of the sexes.

While no one expects Israel's volatile religious landscape to change overnight, "this is a breakthrough not only for Israelis but for American Jewry," said Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, the executive vice president of the New York-based Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly. Sounding hopeful, Hoffman said the decision "opens up a whole world of diversity in how Judaism is expressed. It's leveling the playing field a bit, and says there's more than one way to be Jewish. Hopefully make Israelis more aware that they have options."

Hoffman hopes media coverage of Rabbi Gold's story will help IRAC during its next High Court battle: for official recognition of community rabbis who serve towns and cities.

Until then, she said, it will continue to be an uphill battle for Israel's non-Orthodox Jews.

"First there are the Jews who say, 'The synagogue I don't go to should be Orthodox,'" she said. "Second, why would someone cross the street to go to a Reform or Conservative synagogue, where they have to pay for a rabbi, when they can attend an Orthodox synagogue that receives government funding?"

Speaking from her home on Kibbutz Gezer, a collective community, Gold said she was "a bit shocked" when informed that the government now recognizes her as a "rabbi for the Reform community" -- with a salary to boot.

"Now we have to see how it will be implemented," she said with guarded optimism. "This isn't the end of the struggle."