

Conservative Jews upset with Israeli president over scrapped bar mitzvah service

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JERUSALEM (RNS) Conservative Jews in the U.S. and Israel have accused Israeli President Reuven Rivlin of canceling a bar mitzvah ceremony at the official president's residence because one of the rabbis scheduled to conduct the ceremony is non-Orthodox.

The ceremony, for four boys with autism, was scheduled about two weeks ago, after the ultra-Orthodox mayor of the city of Rehovot refused to allow the bar mitzvah, long planned by the Conservative movement, to be held at a Conservative synagogue. The Conservative movement has been running a bar/bat mitzvah program for Israeli children with disabilities for two decades.

The cancellation of both ceremonies hit a raw nerve with non-Orthodox Jews because non-Orthodox rabbis and institutions have no legal standing in Israel and, unlike the Orthodox establishment, receive virtually no government funding.

Conservative Jews, called Masorti Jews in Israel, said Rivlin's decision amounts to a de-legitimization of non-Orthodox Jewry.

On Sunday, after learning that only an Orthodox rabbi would be permitted to officiate at the ceremony—contradicting a compromise the movement said was brokered by the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs—23 leaders of the U.S.-based Conservative movement sent a letter to Rivlin.

They called both cancellations an “act of cruelty in which disabled children and their parents are being denied a service that would help them, and the sole reason for this denial is the contempt of Israel's leaders for the sponsors of this program, the worldwide Conservative/Masorti movement.”

The Conservative rabbis continued, addressing Rivlin: “Our love for the State of Israel is unconditional . . . . But Israel must live up to her claims about herself. A modern, scientific, humanitarian, democratic state cannot deny a program to disabled children simply because of your loathing for our Jewish philosophy and practice.”

In response, Rivlin’s office said the Conservative leadership in Israel had rejected alternatives, including one to hold the ceremony at the Western Wall followed by a reception at the President’s Residence.

“In recent days,” the office said, “frantic efforts were made by the Director General of the President’s Office, the Director of the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, and others, to find an agreed upon solution to hold the event in a way that would not perpetuate the dispute. ... But these too failed due to the obstinacy of the Masorti Movement to stick with the original plan to run the event themselves.”

On Monday, the Conservative movement issued a statement saying the bar mitzvah could not take place at the Western Wall because the children, who have severe autism, would be too distracted.

Furthermore, the statement said, the Conservative movement had accepted the compromise of co-officiating alongside an Orthodox rabbi “for the sake of the children, despite the implicit, if not explicit implication by the President that the Masorti/Conservative movement is unfit to officiate over a religious ceremony on its own.”