

התנועה המסורתית יזהר הס מנכל התנועה המסורתית - 24180

• By JEREMY SHARON

The mayor of Rehovot, Rahamim Maloul, prevented a bar mitzva ceremony for autistic children at a special-needs school from taking place because it was scheduled to be run by a Masorti rabbi in a Masorti synagogue.

The Masorti, or Conservative, Movement, has run a bar and bat mitzva program for special-needs children in Israel for almost 20 years, and last year brought the program to the Lotem School in Rehovot, which accepts special-needs children from all religious backgrounds.

The culmination of the program is a bar or bat mitzva ceremony in which the children get called up to the Torah and for the blessings for reading from the Torah.

Since the children are autistic, instead of reciting the blessings they are able to press buttons on a tablet computer application which then plays a recording of the blessings.

Four boys at the school were scheduled to participate in the bar mitzva ceremony Thursday morning but following the intervention of the mayor the ceremony has now been put on hold.

Tami, the mother of one of the boys, who spoke to *The Jerusalem Post*, said that a religious parent of another child at the school, who was not participating in the bar mitzva program, had complained that the ceremony was being held in the Masorti Adath Shalom Emanuel synagogue in Rehovot.

This eventually led to the intervention of the mayor, previously a Shas party MK but now a member of the Likud, who prohibited the staff at the school, which is funded by the municipality, from participating in the event during school hours.

The children suffer from difficult behavioral challenges due to their autism and it would not be possible to conduct the ceremony without the school staff.

# Rehovot stops Masorti bar mitzva for autistic teens

*Ceremony canceled after parent's complaint • Municipality: School used 'anti-religious coercion'*

Additionally, the Torah is only read during the week in the morning on Mondays and Thursdays, so the mayor's prohibition on the school staff for attending during school hours effectively stymied the bar mitzva ceremony entirely.

Various compromise solutions were offered, including staging the ceremony at an Orthodox synagogue but on condition that the Masorti rabbi of Adath Shalom Emanuel synagogue, Rabbi Mikie Goldstein, would not lead the prayer and bar mitzva service and that some of the prayers in the service not be recited.

Additionally, mothers and fathers of the bar mitzva boys would not be allowed to sit together, as is the custom for Masorti communities, nor would the female staff for the program be allowed to don prayer shawls, also a Masorti custom.

Goldstein and the Masorti Movement's national leadership declined the offer, stating that the program has been conducted around the country for almost 20 years without hindrance and that there was no reason for the mayor's intervention.

Tami, who would not use her full name, described the bar mitzva program as a fantastic endeavor and said she was saddened and disappointed that she would not be able to take her son to the ceremony on Thursday.

She said, however, that she was unsure of the extent to which her son is aware that he was supposed to participate in the ceremony on Thursday because of the nature of his autism.

Tami stated that the mayor was “a good man” who had done a lot for Rehovot, but that stopping the ceremony could not be justified.

“It’s unthinkable that in 2015 there can be a fight between Jewish denomina-

tions and politicians, and that autistic children are stuck in the middle," she said.

“Neither side is backing down on its principles and the children are suffering,” she said, but added that the Masorti Movement was “justified” in refusing the compromise solution offered by the municipality.

"There is no reason to have stopped the ceremony, it doesn't desecrate anything, this is what we have chosen to be a part of and stopping it can't be justified," she said.

Goldstein said that despite the children's autism they had been excited for the ceremony and could react negatively if it does not go ahead as they had expected.

He criticized Maloul for “hijacking” the ceremony and using these children “to advance his religious agenda,”

The director of the Masorti Movement in Israel, Yizhar Hess, described the mayor's intervention as "shameful," and forcing his own religious views on the school.

"According to the mayor, our synagogue is not Jewish and our Judaism is not Judaism," and Maloul had degraded his city and the Jewish religion, Hess said.

“The mayor is using children as pawns in a game and holding them hostage in his own political playing field... As we know, in contrast to the Orthodox standpoint, the halachic perspective of

the Masorti Movement considers children with disabilities to be part of a minyan and eligible to read from the Torah as are all other children, once they reach the age of mitzvot. This program has been operating throughout Israel for the past 20 years and thousands of children with disabilities have joyously celebrated their bar and bat mitzvas. But, it is not the children that interest the mayor. How very sad and how utterly infuriating," he said.

The Rehovot Municipality issued a response, saying the school was designed for children of all religious backgrounds and that the school board had been asked to find an alternative ceremony.

ny “that would fit the needs of all the children, including the religious community,” but that this was not done.

It accused the school of “anti-religious coercion” in going ahead with the Masorti bar mitzva program since some of the religiously Orthodox parents at the school would not let their children take part in it since it was run by a non-Orthodox movement.

The municipality added that the preparatory classes leading up to the ceremony, also carried out by the Masorti Movement, were not coordinated with municipality and “contravened the directives of the Education Ministry,” and criticized Hess for not agreeing to the com-



RAHAMIM MALOUL  
(Wikimedia Commons)

promise proposal to have the ceremony in an Orthodox synagogue.

Goldstein rejected the municipality's claim of anti-religious coercion, pointing out that parents were at liberty not to have their children involved in the program, and that some parents had indeed not allowed their children to participate.

He noted that it was the participants in a Masorti program who were being forced to use an Orthodox synagogue.

Hess said in response to the points put forth by the Rehovot Municipality that the program had operating throughout Israel for 20 years and that many mayors in

other towns and cities where the bar mitzva project is conducted “participate in the ceremonies to give a blessing and feel proud that in their city such an important project exists.”