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24180 - התנועה המסורתית					

Unorthodox revolution sneaks in

While Orthodox Judaism stays firmly in control at the national level, the Reform and Conservative movements have been making headway locally

Judy Maltz

These are not good days for Jewish pluralism in Israel. Or so it would seem.

Since the new government was sworn in four months ago, it has effectively rolled back all progress in conversion reform and ended any and all discussion of changes to Israel's marriage and divorce laws. Given the political clout of its religious coalition partners, the government knows better these days than to challenge the control of the Orthodox-run Chief Rabbinate over these fundamental aspects of civil life in the country.

Yet paradoxically, as the Orthodox establishment increasingly calls the shots in the national arena, a quiet rebellion is underway at the local government level. The unprecedented number of non-Orthodox Yom Kippur services scheduled to be held next week in congregations and prayer groups around the country — all with the support and blessing of municipalities and city councils — testifies to this phenomenon.

"What we are seeing is a quiet revolution that is taking place in the local arena," says Gilad Kariv, executive director of the Reform movement in Israel. "It's a bottom-up phenomenon."

Local governments are increasingly willing to underwrite institutions that promote Jewish pluralism.



A boy celebrating his bar mitzvah at Ashdod's Nitzanim Beach.

Ilan Assayag

They make worship space available during the High Holy Days for non-Orthodox groups, allow them to hold outdoor services in public spaces and provide the movements, free of charge, with land to build their own synagogues. Municipalities collaborate on cultural projects and local schools run non-Orthodox religious events and programs, such as bar- and bat-mitzvah preparatory classes.

"These are the sort of things that a decade or two ago, it would take us years to achieve, and then only after battling it out in court," notes Kariv.

Rakefet Ginsburg, the

plain to them basic things like the fact that we are also Jewish."

This change in attitude, says Ginsburg, explains the growing number of Conservative/Masorti groups that have sprouted up around the country in recent years. "We're talking about five to seven new groups a year, and that could mean anything from a prayer group that meets on a weekly basis to an ad hoc group that holds a one-time event or activity."

The beneficiaries have been not only the established non-Orthodox move-

director of community outreach at the Conservative/Masorti movement, agrees. "Discussions with municipalities are much less confrontational these days," she says. "There's an openness and willingness to cooperate that simply didn't exist before. When we come with requests to the municipalities, they know us already, and therefore we no longer have to ex-

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התנועה המסורתית - 24180					

TOWNS

Continued from page 1

movements — the Reform and Conservative/Masorti streams of Judaism — but also unaffiliated groups associated with the Jewish renewal movement, observers say.

An indication of how widely Jewish pluralism is being embraced by local governments was the landmark decision taken two months ago by the Jerusalem city council — which has a large number of ultra-Orthodox representatives — to allocate funding to institutions that promote religious diversity. In a first-of-its-kind decision, the city approved funding for a host of institutions, including the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, Elul — a flagship center of the Jewish Renewal movement — and the Jerusalem Secular Yeshiva.

One explanation for why Jewish pluralism has succeeded locally where it has struggled nationally involves the nature of local government. "It is much harder for the city council or a mayor to turn away a group of citizens when they come with a request," notes Sharon Orshalimy, a councilor from Givatayim who is also active in the local Conservative congregation. "The city government has to be more responsive to grassroots initiatives," she adds.

But it also helps to have more people in local government these days, like Orshalimy herself, who has a deep personal commitment to promoting different expressions of Judaism. In Jerusalem, for example, two new councilors representing the Yerushalmim party — Deputy Mayor Tamir Nir, a Reform rabbinical stu-

dent, and U.S.-born Aaron Leibowitz, a progressive-minded Orthodox rabbi — have teamed up to promote Jewish diversity. "People always ask me how, as an Orthodox rabbi, I could partner up with a Reform Jew, but as I see it, the liberal movements are our allies in the city," says Leibowitz, who sat on the committee that approved funding to the pluralistic institutions. "Many secular Jews have a strong Jewish identity, but if they're not allowed to give it expres-

and most recently it initiated a new Jewish-themed cultural event, "Oneg Shabbat," that is held at various venues around the city each Saturday. The new project, spearheaded by Gitzin, is financed through a matching grant from the New York Jewish Federations. All these events are financially supported and advertised by the city.

"For me, all this is about making a political statement," says Gitzin. "Israel is defined as a Jewish state, and we cannot give up on

Kfar Yonah councilwoman Shoshi Kahlon-Kidor. "This year we've decided to form a proper congregation, and we've just received a space from the municipality where we can hold our events."

In other recent achievements for Jewish pluralism, the Holon municipality teamed up with the local Reform congregation to promote special cultural events at the local art-house cinema; Carmiel designated a plot of land for the construction of a Reform synagogue; Kfar Sava allotted two public spaces for Reform Yom Kippur services; the Mazeret Batya local council allocated a classroom to the Conservative movement for this year's Yom Kippur services and the city of Ra'anana granted a plot of land to build a Conservative synagogue.

Orshalimy, the Givatayim councilwoman, believes part of the reason she and her allies in municipalities around the country have succeeded in spreading the message of Jewish pluralism is that it is not perceived by those in charge as a religious issue. "Many of the municipalities budget us under social and political activities rather than religious activities," she says. "That's why you won't find any mention of our Yom Kippur prayer service in any of the publications put out by the local religious council. Rather, it appears under the list of social activities in the city."

Beyond that, she notes, the type of activities Jewish pluralism activists have been promoting at the local government level aren't considered much of a threat to the Orthodox establishment. "We're not dealing with the core issues of marriage, divorce and kashrut, which is why nobody has that big a problem with us," she says.



A Conservative bar mitzvah for hearing-impaired boys in Netanya.

Gil Cohen Magen

sion they won't stay in Jerusalem, and it is my interest to keep them here."

In Tel Aviv, councilman Mickey Gitzin has been a driving force behind a host of new events and programs that foster Jewish pluralism in the famously secular city. "Jewish renewal has become a major pillar of community development in Tel Aviv," says Gitzin, who also serves as director of Be Free Israel, a movement that promotes religious freedom and pluralism in the country.

The Tel Aviv municipality today provides close to a dozen public spaces around the city each week for Friday night Shabbat services, it sponsors an all-night learning event each year on the Shavuot holiday,

the Jewish part of our identity."

The phenomenon is not restricted to Israel's two largest cities. Jewish pluralism advocates — many of them active members of Reform and Conservative congregations in their respective communities — today sit on local councils in cities such as Haifa and Holon as well as smaller towns like Even Yehuda, Kiryat Bialik and Rosh Pina.

Last Yom Kippur, more than 250 people showed up for the first Reform-style service ever held in Kfar Yonah, a largely traditional town near Netanya. "Since then we've celebrated together the holidays of Simhat Torah, Hanukkah and Tu Bishvat," says