

THE END OF ISRAEL'S RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT?



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If you read the standard media reports on Israel, particularly on core identity issues such as religion and politics, it's easy to conclude that the religious establishment, including the Chief Rabbinate, is getting stronger, and efforts to build alternatives are all failing. But this would be a false impression, reflecting too much emphasis (including from media reports) on formal structures, while missing informal – but far more important – social and cultural flows.

In Israel, the Jewish religious establishment, in different forms, is closely integrated into the political structure and represented by political parties that, while small, are often the linchpins in governing coalitions. As a result, they're able to exert power far in excess of their actual support among the population, which gives institutions such as the Chief Rabbinate disproportionate impact. And like other political actors around the world, these groups cling tenaciously to power, which in this case means attempting to block all efforts at significant reform and liberalization.

In the current situation, with a very narrow government majority (61 to 59 in the Knesset), survival rests on co-operation with the small religious parties that represent these entrenched interests. As a result, the Knesset has walked back some of the earlier agreements to liberalize positions on personal religious status, particularly on such issues as conversion, marriage and divorce.

Thus, in formal terms, it appears that nothing is changing.

However, informally and unofficially, the process is very different, although less visible and below the radar of most journalists. A large and increasing number of young Israeli Jews are experimenting with new and interesting forms of Jewish life.

In Jerusalem and other cities, there are dozens of new and unaffiliated minyanim (prayer groups and congregations), reflecting the full range of options and far removed from the official rabbinate, which is rapidly moving itself into irrelevance. Many young couples choose to ignore the state religious structures when they get married and are developing new twists on ancient Jewish rituals to make the occasions meaningful to them.

None of this is easy, the power of the rabbinate and its accompanying institutions is deeply rooted in 2,000 years of Jewish history in the Diaspora, and working out how to adapt to the return to our homeland and national sovereignty is one of the major challenges of modern Israel. Although democracy is not entirely foreign to Judaism, there is also a long tradition of fealty to rabbinical authority.

In addition, during this long history, women were largely excluded from power-sharing, but in 21st-century Israel, this is changing, although not smoothly in the formal religious institutions. Instead, many women are active in the alternative and unofficial structures – particularly in the advanced educational frameworks focusing on evolving Jewish law and traditions, as well as in kosher certifications (a major source of political and economic power).

Much of the media attention has been focused on the Western Wall in Jerusalem, where the conflicts over symbolism are played out in public view. Recently, the government voted for the first time to remove part of this area from official rabbinical control, allowing pluralist groups, including women, to gather and pray without the previous restrictions. This move, which was taken against the strenuous objections of the religious establishment, is primarily designed to appeal to Diaspora groups, particularly in the Reform and Conservative movements, where mixed prayers (men and women) is the norm.

None of this means that the conflict has been resolved – nothing in Israel, and particularly Israeli politics, is that easy and straightforward. But Judaism as a religion, tradition and culture has always evolved through the actions of the kehillah – the congregation. Rabbis can persuade, educate and cajole, but they cannot impose their views on the wider public. And in Israel, as Jewish society changes, so will the rabbinate.

