

IRAC Wins Landmark Court Victory on Conversions May 27, 2009

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), the legal and advocacy arm of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, last week won a precedent-setting case before the country's High Court of Justice that says the state must provide funding for conversion classes of the Progressive and Masorti (Conservative) movements.

According to IRAC executive director Anat Hoffman, "the case itself may seem inconsequential but the implications are huge. This is the first time that the court has declared that government funding must be provided to non-Orthodox Jewish religious services in Israel."

The three-judge panel, led by Chief Justice Dorit Beinisch, found that favoring Orthodoxy was discriminatory and ran counter to the state's responsibility to ensure freedom of religion. It cited a previous high court ruling (in a case brought by IRAC, together with the Naamat women's movement in 2002) that "Jews in Israel cannot be seen as only one religious sect." The panel ruled that the state now has to fund all private conversion preparatory programs, and not just those of the Orthodox stream, and must reimburse the non-Orthodox programs back to 2006.

Hoffman called the verdict "amazing." She added that it went "well beyond simply requesting equal funding" and also addressed the "core issue of religious freedom in Israel."

Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, the World Union's vice president for philanthropy, concurred, calling the court decision a "victory in the long, drawn-out battle over the question of 'Who is a Jew' and, often, 'Who is a rabbi.' By recognizing that conversion through the auspices of the Reform and Conservative communities is an important part of the klita (absorption) process, the court is recognizing the legitimacy of Jewish identity and expression as promoted by the liberal movements. This is a victory, pure and simple."

Rabbi Gilad Kariv, executive director of the IMPJ, said the ruling would give new impetus to the movement's conversion activities, which this year have included some 200 candidates in 20 classes. "With this recent verdict - which puts oil in our wheels - the IMPJ will focus in the coming year on expanding and developing its conversion efforts, addressing more and more potential conversion students and offering them a pluralistic gate to the Jewish world," he said.

The court ruling has already elicited predictable results among Israel's ultra-Orthodox leaders. MK Moshe Gafni of the United Torah Judaism party and chairman of the Knesset's Finance Committee, said he'll work to block the transfer of funding to non-Orthodox conversion programs.

"The Reform movement is not a legitimate form of Judaism," Gafni told The Jerusalem Post in a phone interview. "The Reform are a bunch of treacherous backstabbers to Judaism. They are jokers who operate without hierarchy and without rules. MKs are not a bunch of marionettes who will do whatever the Supreme Court tells them to do. I will block any attempts to provide state funds to [the] Reform."

The IMPJ's Kariv replied to Gafni's statements by calling the haredi MK "one of the prominent examples in Israeli public life of how religious faith becomes a source of hatred and prejudice, instead of a source of love for the other and respect for humankind."

The conversion issue has lately been at the forefront of news in Israel, where the High Court of Justice recently gave the country's top religious court 90 days to explain why it overturned conversions performed by the National Conversion Authority, a special body operating under the auspices of the prime minister's office. It was established over a decade ago as a compromise aimed at easing the way for the estimated 300,000 non-Jews who immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return in the 1990s.