

## **Hiddush: Promoting Religious Freedom and Diversity – Realizing the Promise of Israel’s Founders**

*The State of Israel ... will ensure complete equality of social and political rights of all its inhabitants irrespective of religion ... it will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience.* - Israel Declaration of Independence, May, 1948

The vision of Israel’s Declaration of Independence truly inspires and is a source of great pride. Most Israelis and world Jewry support it wholeheartedly, yet - sixty-one years after its founding as a Jewish and democratic state - Israel lags far behind all other world democracies in implementing this declared principle. Ironically, it is for the majority of its Jewish citizens that Israel has yet to secure true religious freedom. Moreover, the politicization of religion creates harsh discrimination against those who bear the responsibility for Israel’s security and economy. This reality runs counter to the principles of Judaism and the core values of justice and equality central to Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

This discrimination and the lack of religious freedom severely impact nearly all aspects of life. The overwhelming majority of Israelis and of world Jewry yearn for religious freedom and equality in Israel. The will of the majority and the moral weight of its demands can no longer be disregarded. **The time has come to make the promise of Israel’s Declaration of Independence a reality.**

The close alliance between religion and politics creates laws that undermine democracy, human dignity and civil liberties. There is hardly an area that is not adversely affected, for instance: For instance: fragment

- The right to establish a family through legal, state-endorsed marriage is denied to hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, Jews by birth, Jews by choice and new immigrants.
- The rabbinic courts make miserable the lives of many Israeli women (i.e. *agunot*) who seek divorce to gain their liberty.
- Rather than open wide the gates to admit converts from new immigrant families, there is growing extremism and rigidity in the rabbinic establishment, as recently expressed by retroactive nullification of conversions.
- The non-Orthodox streams in Judaism, which constitute the majority of world Jewry, are discriminated against in Israel.
- The prohibition against public transportation on the Sabbath undermines the freedom of movement of the most vulnerable Israelis-the elderly, the poor and new immigrants.
- A growing number of public bus lines force women to sit in the back of the bus.
- The state continues to disregard its legal obligation to establish civil cemeteries.

On allegedly religious grounds, tens of thousands of Israelis shirk the responsibility of military or alternative national service claiming that “the Torah is their vocation.” They also refuse to enter the labor force, living instead on welfare from the state. Approximately twenty-five percent of Jewish boys study in state-funded ultra Orthodox educational institutions which

illegally refuse to incorporate core studies into their curriculum. These schools either do not teach or teach very little civics, mathematics and English, dooming their students to lives of poverty and dependency on State funds. Worse, they often transmit the message that democracy is incompatible with Jewish values. The rapidly growing harm is immense and affects Israeli society as a whole.

“Freedom of Religion for Israel” and its Israeli counterpart “*Hiddush*-For Religious Freedom and Equality” is supported by a diverse spectrum of religious and secular Jews, *olim* and the native born. Israelis and Diaspora Jewry share in our concern for the character and the soul of the State of Israel and aspire to correct the severe infringements that are caused in the name of religion, and that ultimately hurt Judaism’s image.

We fully support the rights of observant Jews and the protection of their religious freedom. We believe that there is no contradiction between the ability to uphold the Jewish character of Israel and the values of democracy, religious freedom and equality. On the contrary, ensuring religious freedom will contribute to strengthening both Judaism and democracy and will enhance the opportunity to pursue religion out of choice, rather than coercion.

**Our mission is historic: to realize the founding vision of the State of Israel as articulated in the Israeli Declaration of Independence.** We will raise consciousness and public discourse on these critical matters. We will demand that existing laws are enforced and that all necessary changes in legislation be enacted. We will struggle to change the priorities for the use of public funds. We will assist victims of discrimination and the lack of religious freedom. We hold that failure to act now could doom the vision of Zion reborn. Supported by the majority of Israeli and world Jews we demand that which is the foundation for all enlightened democracies and healthy societies – **FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND CONSCIENCE!**

**7/27/09**