

Pluralism in Israel
WRJ Board Statement: September 2017

Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ) has enjoyed strong bonds with, and a deep connection to, the State of Israel from its earliest days. WRJ collaborates with and supports the work of the [Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism](#), [Women of the Wall](#), and the [Israel Religious Action Center](#), to name a few, and, through the [YES Fund \(Youth, Education and Special Projects\)](#), WRJ grants tens of thousands of dollars each year to Israeli organizations. WRJ organizes missions to Israel, and members and staff visit Israel often and have family and friends there. WRJ-Israel was founded in 2009 and today includes 27 Israeli WRJ-affiliated women's groups.

WRJ is committed to advancing religious pluralism and equal rights for women and minorities in Israel and works collaboratively with the [World Union for Progressive Judaism \(WUPJ\)](#) and other organizations to secure the rights and well-being of Jews wherever they live. WRJ's commitment to and interest in Israel is best demonstrated by the many times it has spoken out for and about Israel through statements and resolutions. Since 1915, WRJ has issued [almost 100 statements and resolutions that relate to Israel](#). In 1993, WRJ passed a resolution on [Pluralism in Israel](#) reaffirming our commitment to religious pluralism in Israel and our support of religious rights for all Israelis.

Today, deeply troubled by recent developments in Israel, we, the Board of WRJ, feel compelled to speak out against the abuse of power by ultra-Orthodox authorities in Israel and the escalating discrimination against those who do not share their beliefs. These alarming developments include suspension of the promise of an egalitarian prayer space at the Kotel, demeaning body searches of female [Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion](#) students at the Kotel, and introduction of the Conversion Bill, which would diminish the rights of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel.

We yearn for a State of Israel where Jews can freely practice their religion according to their beliefs, where the rights of minorities, women, converts, and non-ultra-Orthodox Jews are respected and recognized. Yet, we are increasingly fearful for the future of Israel as a pluralistic democracy that will uphold the rights of all its citizens.

On June 25, the Netanyahu administration's decision to freeze its previously agreed-upon plan to develop an egalitarian worship space at the Kotel sent a clear signal to both Israeli Jews and Jews of the Diaspora that it is not interested in building a pluralistic, all-encompassing, tolerant society worthy of the Zionist ideals of its founding mothers and fathers. Government officials have routinely relinquished their responsibility to assure the safety and rights of all worshippers at the Kotel as women are harassed, sometimes violently, during the monthly [Women of the Wall](#) Rosh Chodesh celebrations. Most recently, young women from our own Reform Movement seminary, HUC-JIR, were inappropriately searched by Israeli authorities as they sought to worship with other women in that holy space. Until there is an egalitarian section at the Kotel, and until Israeli authorities fully implement their own laws regarding equal rights for women, such abuses are likely to continue.

On the same day that the Prime Minister of Israel announced the abrogation of the Kotel agreement, the government advanced a Conversion Bill that would exclusively place the power of Jewish conversions in Israel in the hands of the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. This bill would delegitimize conversions performed in Israel by the Reform and Conservative movements, potentially excluding conversions of thousands of people already converted, and excluding such conversions going forward. We were heartened by the subsequent decision to delay the Conversion Bill for six months and hope it reflects a growing recognition by the Israeli Government that this legislation will accelerate the divide between Jews of the Diaspora and Israeli Jews, precisely at a time when global Jewish unity is more important than ever. Nonetheless, we remain deeply outraged by the Conversion Bill and oppose it in the strongest terms.

During these Yamim HaNoraim, these Ten Days of Awe, a holy time of repentance, prayer, and serious introspection, we, the Board of Women of Reform Judaism, call on the Government of Israel to:

1. Recognize, uphold, and preserve the rights of minorities, women, converts, and non-ultra-Orthodox Jews.
2. Support religious pluralism and equality in Israel for all streams of Judaism.
3. Reverse its position on the Conversion Bill now under consideration.
4. Lift the freeze on the Kotel resolution.
5. Recognize the right of all Jews to practice their faith in Israel according to their beliefs.

We pray that Israel will become a home for all Jews, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox alike, where all can practice their faith according to their beliefs.