

The Israeli government's system of religious services consists of hundreds of rabbis employed by the state – chief rabbis, city rabbis, neighborhood rabbis, rabbis of regional councils, and of kibbutzim and moshavim. All of them are Orthodox men. In 2013, as a result of our legal struggle, the State began to fund Reform and Conservative rabbis, but instead of employing them directly, financial support is funneled through the movements.

Now, while Israel is still at war, and while so many needs require extra government funding, like helping displaced families, reservists, and wounded soldiers, the government has decided to push a bill that will dramatically increase the number of Orthodox rabbis employed by the State. This bill is nicknamed "The Rabbis Law" or "The Jobs Law", since it will give the ultra-Orthodox controlled Chief Rabbinate the power to appoint hundreds of additional rabbis in cities all over Israel, including in secular cities where the municipality refuses to employ them.

This bill was first introduced in the summer of 2023, but was frozen after October 7th. In March, the government tried to revive it, but it was frozen once more due to the opposition of Benny Gantz, who recently left the government. Last week, the government decided to bring the law back to the table. In addition to appointing hundreds of new rabbis, the bill will enshrine the Orthodox monopoly on religious services into law for the first time, clearly violating basic rights of equality and freedom of religion.

Of course, IRAC quickly responded. We took part in a hearing of the Knesset's Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, and produced a short video of me explaining the absurdity of pushing such a law at this time, which was viewed by more than 40,000 people on social media within a few days.

We were not the only ones opposing the law. A few Likud members of Knesset voiced strong opposition. In addition, during a committee hearing, mayors from across Israel, including mayors who belong to the Likud from the southern cities of Ashkelon and Dimona, communities that lost dozens of residents on October 7th, asked the government to freeze the law. They pleaded that the government should help them cope with the current crisis rather than forcibly post rabbis in communities that neither need nor want them and argued that it is infuriating that instead of offering financial assistance to their residents, the bill will put an additional burden on them. Furthermore, instead of allowing them to run their cities in this difficult period, they had to waste their time opposing this unnecessary law, which they called a grave mistake.

Public opposition made a difference, and the bill was frozen once again.

But the government continues its unreasonable behavior, privileging certain constituencies, such as the ultra-Orthodox, over others. This week, the Knesset Finance Committee discussed transferring NIS 722 million to fund sectorial demands, such as the Chief Rabbinate, state-sponsored rabbinical courts, ultra-Orthodox schools that do not teach required core

subjects (English, math, science, and civics), and additional ultra-Orthodox “Jewish heritage programs”, the nature of which remain unclear. IRAC, together with other organizations, approached members of Knesset who sit on the Finance Committee and asked them to demand additional details about the proposed transfers and to oppose all discriminatory transfers of funds, which are especially outrageous at this time of crisis and need.

Once again, pressure made a difference. Yesterday, during a three-hour hearing of the Finance Committee, opposition members of Knesset posed numerous questions and prevented the approval of the transfer of funds. In the end, just three requests out of dozens were approved: NIS 5 million instead of NIS 722 million - intended for the President's Office, the Agriculture Ministry, and the Culture Ministry.

Our work on this issue was part of our new initiative called "the budget watchdog" in which IRAC, together with other organizations, will closely monitor the budget to ensure that dubious and dangerous transfers are not approved under the table, and to demand that public funds – especially those relating to Jewish identity – will be distributed in an equal and pluralistic manner to all streams.

In discussing inappropriate sectorial budgets, I must also mention the dramatic decision handed down today by the High Court of Justice, which ruled that action must be taken to recruit ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students into the IDF. The court also ruled that the state should stop funding yeshivas for those students who are eligible for the draft. This can have significant impact on the integration of the ultra-Orthodox public into Israeli society and economy. We will, of course, continue to monitor this issue as well.

In the face of the government's reckless behavior, we will not stay silent. We will continue to raise a voice against corruption and discrimination and for transparency and fairness. We will call for sharing the military burden equally and for a fair distribution of resources, which aligns with our values of justice and equality.

Learn more here.

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