**Democratization and decentralization of religious powers in Israel: Continuing our program of separation of religion and state—*Kadat V’Kadin* (in accordance with law and religion)**

**The need**

There is a growing alienation among the Israeli public toward the official, state-sanctioned face of institutionalized Judaism—in the form of the Chief Rabbinate, with its various branches and arms. At the same time, the growing crisis among Diaspora Jews regarding the unilateral actions of the Chief Rabbinate is undermining the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora. These two factors, together with extremist trends in the country’s religious education system, are endangering Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state and threaten to upset the balance between its diverse values and fuel polarization.

**The answer**

*Ne’emanei Torah Va’Avodah*, a liberal religious Zionist movement, has been working for decades to strengthen the moderate religious public and prevent religious extremism. In this context, the movement works to regulate State-religious relations in Israel while serving as a moderate religious voice for the Israeli public as a whole, and the religious Zionist public in particular. To streamline its activities in the field of religion and the State, the movement is currently developing its *Kadat V’Kadin* [Heb: “In accordance with law and religion”] Center for the Reform of State-Religious Relations (Kadat V’Kadin), which works to formulate and promote policy solutions for issues in this area, with the goal of driving change and democratization of Israel’s religious services.

Over the past year, the movement has enjoyed a series of achievements, including the passage of the *Kashrut* (kosher) certification reform bill (Chapter 20 (Increasing Efficiency of *Kashrut* System) of the Economic Plan Bill). The bill, which we have supported since 2005, opens up kosher supervision to competition and abolishes the monopoly of local rabbinates and rabbis. In addition, over the past year, we have worked to amend the regulations for the appointment of municipal rabbis by re-regulating the appointments procedure and giving the community a central role in electing their municipal rabbi and determining his tenure. In addition, we worked to launch a strategic move to transfer religious councils to local authorities.

**Our aims**

Our goal is to shape the face of Judaism in Israel in a multidimensional way that connects the State’s Jewish and democratic identities. For this, we advocate democratizing religious services via public participation, decentralizing and applying the principles of transparency and adequate representation.

In the coming year, we aim to work to reduce the power of the religious establishment and strengthen the local community in terms of determining the policy and nature of religious services. Our plan is to return religious services to the community, and to drive change in State-religious relations at the national and municipal levels.

**Operating methods**

We promote policy using a variety of methods and tools, including policy research, lobbying, litigation and legal tools, awareness-raising campaigns, and field activities (activism). The focus of our activities varies according to changes in the existing situation (election period / type of government, and more).

**Spheres of influence**

We strive to change existing policy by creating new policy directions and integrating them into Israeli policy via actions in the Knesset, vis-à-vis the government and local authorities, and through public discourse in general and **internal religious discourse in particular**.

**Key plans and goals**

1. Decentralization and democratization of religious services management—transferring the authority and responsibility for managing religious services to local authorities and reducing the influence of national politics. In this context, Kadat V’Kadin is working to abolish the institution of religious councils currently under the aegis of the Ministry of Religious Services, and to transfer responsibility for providing religious services to local authorities.
	1. We will work to change regulations and establish departments within local authorities that will provide a variety of services in the fields of *Kashrut*, marriage registration, *mikvahs*, and more.
	2. In the interim phase, we will work to transfer the powers for providing religious services to five central authorities to be selected.
	3. We will work to pass a government decision for regulating local authority independence in religious service provision to ensure that they are independent of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its Minister. This includes allocating budgets for local authorities to provide religious services as part of their activities. In addition, we will work to establish a basic package of religious services in legislation that will anchor these services in a manner ensuring their independence from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and any new minister selected.
2. **The Kashrut revolution—implementing reform and promoting change in kosher supervision in Israel**

In the first part of the year, a Kashrut (kosher) supervision reform is expected to take effect, which may lead to significant changes regarding Kashrut supervision and significantly reduce the power of the Rabbinate and the religious councils in this area. In this context, we will work to implement kosher supervision reforms based on the bill that was initiated by the Department and to continue to improve the kosher supervision system and reduce the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate by:

1. Advancing regulations for operating the new kosher supervision system—regulating the activities and working practices of private kosher supervision, regulating the conditions for granting kosher certification in Israel, and more.
2. Making assessments for operating the new kosher supervision system—promoting a round table with participation from representatives of government ministries and organizations, private corporations, and the Chief Rabbinate as part of the assessments for advancing the new kosher supervision system.
3. Promoting a public campaign to address misleading kosher labels, designed to prevent use of a strict kosher label under the framework of the kosher label as determined by law.
4. Supporting “Kosher on Shabbat”—ongoing activities to provide kosher certification to businesses and restaurants operating on Shabbat. This will be done, inter alia, through the continuation of a petition in the High Court of Justice against the Chief Rabbinate and the Religious Council in Jerusalem.
5. **Various issues regarding personal status**
6. Matrimonial partnerships to promote marriage—the promotion of a bill initiated by Kadat V’Kadin or other solutions that Kadat V’Kadin has promoted to permit a recognized, regulated path for marriage for hundreds of thousands of Israelis.
7. Conversion—the promotion of a conversion bill based on a law drafted by Kadat V’Kadin in 2013. We will work to establish new panels of judges, enable municipal rabbis to perform conversions, and create equality between the various conversion certificates issued by the newly-established panels of judges.
8. The Beit Din (religious courts) in Israel—a new project that aims to promote specific changes in the Beit Din system, with the aim of expanding the partners involved in its management and creating adequate representation for women in determining Beit Din policy. This includes amending the Equal Rights of Women Act, which exempts religious institutions in Israel from the obligation to maintain equality; promoting an amendment that would require the appointment of women to the Committee for the Appointment of Judges; and promoting standards for the female legal assistants who sit alongside the panel of judges in the Beit Din.
9. **Creating and expanding women’s presence and leadership in public roles**
	1. Opening new roles and expanding existing positions (a female rabbi in the IDF rabbinate, municipal rabbinates, local authorities, and communities), expansion of the number of female legal advisors in the Beit Din, and in the religious education system—standards for State Religious Rabbis).
	2. Exposing the community to opportunities and encouraging women to apply.
	3. Exposing Torah training programs to decision-makers and to women who have the potential to play leadership roles.
	4. Other aims:
* *Mikvehs*—accessibility, preventing and addressing violence, implementing *tevilah* (ritual immersion) without a *balanit* (female *mikveh* /ritual immersion assistant), raising awareness of physical and mental health.
* Separation and exclusion—formation of a position and public relations strategy on separate bathing in public spaces.
1. **Strengthening moderate religious Zionist institutions and reducing the growth of extremist institutions. This will be achieved through equalizing budgets and the internal and peripheral infrastructure of ultra-Orthodox schools and institutions and their moderate counterparts:**
	1. Blocking the mechanisms that prioritize Haredi institutions based on budget, e.g., dividing institutions for gender segregation, opening small institutions without justification.
	2. Equalizing and making transparent budgets obtained through the Ministry of Education (regulations, packages, and more).
	3. Transferring 20% of the peripheral budget granted to Haredi institutions and their active members to the active members of moderate institutions (religious and secular), including: *Garin Torani* “Torah Nucleus,” religious Zionists who settle in populations with low religious populations) groups, social and research institutions, Jewish culture, anti-Galilee regulations.
	4. Equalizing budgets provided by local authorities (this is a complex and difficult goal to achieve).

These goals will be achieved primarily by changing the criteria for support, consolidating regulations, reducing “tailor-made regulations,” curbing various prioritization mechanisms, applying transparency to municipal budgeting and the *tekenet* system [a system used by the Ministry of Education to manage standards of education institutions] (a difficult goal to fully implement), directing Jewish renewal organizations to submit applications, and more.

**Measurement and evaluation**

1. Practical achievement—passing laws, introducing new regulations, appointments, and more.
2. Exposure—tracking the number and quality of advertisements, exposure on the internet, number of conferences, participants, and more.
3. Periodic analysis of opinions, according to opinion polls (compared with results from surveys carried out by us previously).

**Appendix 1:**

**Background summary of Ne’emani Torah V’Avodah’s plan to decentralize religious services in Israel**

Today, religious services in Israel are perceived as corrupt and alienated from the public. It is essential that they be transformed into drivers of participatory democracy,[[1]](#footnote-1) on both the national and municipal levels.

While the system of religious services in Israel has shifted since the 1980s from a governmental status quo to a state of pluralism, competitiveness, and decentralization,[[2]](#footnote-2) this process still requires proper work and adjustment.

At the municipal level:A trend of independent action—mainly secular— has arisen in local authorities in relation to religious and municipal issues in response to the last local elections, which addressed municipal and religious issues more than any in the past, in part because of the “Supermarkets Law” mandating the closure of small grocery stores on Saturday, and which witnessed the election of municipal leaders and councilors who are more attentive to this issue.

We plan to promote the independent development of religious services in municipalities, with the goal of driving a revolution in conversion and kashrut supervision, and subsequently reducing the power of the Chief Rabbinate. We seek to initiate this process in a number of municipalities, which will serve as a national catalyst for interest and precedent in other local authorities. This will include the transfer of religious councils from the centralized control of the Ministry of Religious Services to local government control and the transfer of much of the powers to appoint rabbis from centralized to local municipality control.

At a national level: We will seek to continue and advance the range of issues that we have focused on to date, including solutions for marriage. Our aim is to continue to affect a shift in consciousness in religious society, while adapting to and exploiting relevant political realities. We will continue to drive change on a national level and to ensure that reforms are realized – that they do not “wither on the vine.”

We believe that this work will lead to the center of power of religious services management shifting from the Chief Rabbinate and Ministry of Religious Services to local authorities. Such a change will increase democratic responsibility toward, and accessibility to, religious services in Israel. Not only will local religious authorities be more responsive to their constituents, but the Rabbinate will no longer be able to gain power by allocating municipal posts and patrons.

**Courses of action include:**

1. Creating awareness among city council members and mayors, while providing tools and assistance in terms of materials, legal opinions, and drafting resolution proposals and parliamentary questions.
2. Creating a network of council members and local activists who can coordinate their work on key issues (collective impact) and peer learning.
3. Campaigning to raise awareness of issues in selected cities, both with a focus on the general public and with particular focus on the religious public, with the aim of reducing opposition.

We have been running our “Religion and the City” project for a number of years. In this effort, we have worked to promote the community-democratic model, and have achieved legal successes in creating transparency and increasing local power. Five years ago, we began to prepare for local authority elections against the background of the “Supermarkets Law” that had been passed in Knesset. The law created a great deal of resentment among local authorities because it limited their powers to regulate the Shabbat in public spaces. Over the past year, we have met with mayors and senior council members from a great many local authorities, and have seen the start of a number of achievements and processes in some authorities. We are in contact with around 30 councils and local authority leaders from various local authorities, including large cities like Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa.

In the field of education, it should be noted that we are currently networked with parent leaders in 78 different schools around the country. Our direct connections in this area have helped us to curb the trend of “Haredification” of schools and, over the last three years, there has been a small increase in the number of students attending liberal religious schools. Coordinating this educational work alongside our efforts around municipal religious services has helped to cross-pollinate both projects.

**Appendix 2:**

**Background on extremist processes in the religious education system:**

The religious education system is undergoing ideological changes. Alongside the progress that is being made in a number of areas, in many other areas, the system is undergoing a process of radicalization that empowers the forces that threaten the very fabric of Israeli society.

**Differing values**

The differences between the open and the national Haredi worldviews mainly center on the following: attitudes toward democracy and state institutions, attitudes toward education and open-mindedness, attitudes to the status of women and mixed gender society, attitudes toward rabbinic authority versus responsibility and freedom of thought, attitudes to “the Other” (non-Jews, different streams of Judaism, secular society, and more), breadth of knowledge in Torah study, and more.

The differences between the educational institutions can be broadly presented as follows:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Management**  | **Open Religious Institutions** | **National Haredi Institutions** |
| Ownership of institution | State religious | Private or public acting as private |
| Gender | Mixed or partly mixed | Segregated |
| Population  | Diverse | Not diverse |
| Has counseling/psychological system | Yes | Some |
| Variety of fields of study | Religious & various subjects | Mostly religious |
| Response to special & individual education | Yes | Some  |
| Torah study method | Mostly analytical, broad perspective | Mostly rote learning, narrow perspective |
| Employment of teachers | As per Ministry of Education guidelines | Minimal training and supervision |

**We can assume that a graduate of a homogeneous education system, who has studied in a same-sex environment alongside children who are similar to himself and his peers, will be more likely to acquire a standoffish, one-sided, and less democratic worldview. An individual who did not learn to recognize or acknowledge difference from childhood will find it hard to do so when he or she becomes an adult.**

As a result of the lack of counselling, lack of response to special educational needs, and lack of individual attention from teachers—features that are often favored by religious extremists—there is a greater chance of the dropout and alienation culture that is a key stage in extremist radicalization, as is manifested for example by the phenomenon of the “hilltop youth.”

In the religious education system, there are currently 510 elementary institutions (and approximately another 24 recognized non-official institutions that are part of religious society), as well as 328 post-elementary institutions that are divided into yeshivas, religious girls’ high schools (*ulpanot*), and high schools.

In a rough, generalized assessment, every year, approximately three elementary schools and two post-elementary schools are transferred from the more open education system to the national Haredi system.[[3]](#footnote-3) Most of these changes occur in areas that are underpopulated or where there is a lack of stability in the management of the institution.

**Key reasons for the strengthening of Haredi education**

1. **Society**: Open schools absorb more than twice as many students from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds (27% versus 14%). This is a crucial consideration for Haredi parents, who are fearful about sending their children to open schools.
2. **Community**: The national Haredi community is more united into communities or through “Torah nuclei,” which provide it with strength and cohesion that help reinforce national Haredi schools. Parents prefer to send their children to schools that provide a greater sense of cohesion and community.
3. **Resources, budgeting, and lobbying:** Schools with a national Haredi worldview are successful in obtaining many more resources and achieve better connections with political, local, and national leadership, which gives them a relative advantage.
4. **Human resources:** Most graduates of yeshivas and seminaries from the so-called “open” or “liberal” stream do not enter the religious education system. Of those who do decide to enter the religious system, drop out at the study and placement stage, or a few years later. In addition to the regular attrition of educators from the field, liberal teachers do not feel comfortable in the religious education system and therefore members of this group leave at a higher rate. In contrast, however, the national Haredi population does not believe in openness to the world, and as a result, there are few other employment options for them apart from education. This longstanding process is self-reinforcing and exacerbates the problems in the religious education system.

**What is the situation on the ground?**

There are open schools and open education networks in religious Zionism as well as relatively open teaching colleges. There are also training and enrichment institutions with open worldviews, along with open yeshivas and seminaries; in addition, there are excellent curricula.

However, even if an excellent curriculum is developed or if new open schools are established, the main problem will remain unchanged, because there are not enough teachers to teach the program or staff the new schools. Even existing institutions suffer from a lack of open human resources, and excellent programs are shelved.

In addition, there are difficulties in attracting students to these institutions because of the real or imaginary benefits of Haredi schools that prevent parents from sending their children to open schools.

**The uniqueness of the Ne’emani Torah V’Avodah movement**

These problems are in the public domain and require a conscious change in worldview and public policy. This is the field in which the social movement Ne’emani Torah V’Avodah operates. Our action strategy is to undertake action in areas where education institutions are limited—public activism, consciousness-raising work, advocacy, and legal work. We operate in four different areas: at the social level, budgetary-legal action, work with human resources, and work to disseminate ideas and educational positions.

1. [דוגמאות למודלים דמוקרטים שונים שהתנועה קידמה לאורך השנים ובהתאם למציאות הפוליטית הרלוונטית.](https://toravoda.org.il/%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%93%D7%9C-%D7%A7%D7%94%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%93%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%98%D7%99/) [Heb: Examples of various democratic models that the Movement has promoted over the years, in accordance with the relevant political reality] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [דת ומדינה, מסטטוס קוו ממלכתי לשבטיות, תחרותיות וביזוריות/ בהוצאת נאמני תורה ועבודה, ינואר 2022.](https://toravoda.org.il/%D7%9E%D7%A1%D7%98%D7%98%D7%95%D7%A1-%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%95-%D7%9E%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%99-%D7%9C%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%98%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%AA%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%95%D7%91/) [Heb: Religion and State, From a National Status Quo to Tribalism, Competitiveness, and Decentralization. Ne’emani Torah V’Avodah, January 2022.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that according to our research, the above number is an improvement following a peak in the *Haredification* process that occurred between 2003–2011. Since 2015, there has been a moderate positive trend in the number of students attending mixed gender classes in first grade and as of 2021, the number stands at 47% compared to 44% in 2015.

Further positive trends can be seen in the reduction of social disparities between open and Haredi institutions, and also in relation to improvements in the levels of secular studies. However, this is a very moderate, insufficient, and unstable positive trend and could be subject to a reversal at any moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)