Conservative leaders see ‘hope’ in bar mitzva cancellation

By SAM SOKOL

The recent controversy over the cancellation of bar mitzva ceremonies for disabled children in Rehovot, while unacceptable to conservative Jews, is also in a way indicative of positive progress on issues of religious equality, one of the denomination’s senior leaders said Tuesday.

That controversy, as well as others centered around the place of non-Orthodox Judaism within the State of Israel, contains “seeds of hope,” Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, told The Jerusalem Post on the sidelines of the Jewish Agency’s Board of Governors meeting in Tel Aviv.

“I absolutely see hope,” she said.

President Reuven Rivlin and the Conservative movement been at odds since negotiations to hold a bar mitzva ceremony for disabled schoolchildren at his residence fell through earlier this month.

The celebration, initially slated to be held in Rehovot, was canceled by Mayor Rahamim Malul in April because he objected to it being conducted in a Conservative synagogue by a Conservative rabbi.

Schonfeld explained she believes the furor surrounding the incident is indicative of Diaspora Jewry being more comfortable with the idea that advocating for social change in Israel is not incompatible with staunch support for the country.

“Hope is a word that has made a significant inroad here. Despite this, however, he believes that such popular support does not translate into greater government support.

“I think in Israel’s current political climate the ultra-religious parties still have political clout that goes beyond their numbers and that is the problem,” Wernick said. “I don’t think the status quo is tenable because not only is Israeli society changing but Diaspora communities, especially American, are changing.”

“These issues are driving a wedge between the Jewish people at a time in which... we must have unity.

“The challenge today is to hold both values, which is an unambiguous support for Israel... we are zealous Zionists... but at the same time it is becoming increasingly more frustrating and the issue cannot no longer be pushed aside for a time when Israel is not facing an existential threat,” he said in agreement with Schonfeld.

“We love Israel but it doesn’t always feel that Israel loves us. I want more than respect, I want access,” he said, comparing the treatment of non-Orthodox streams to that of religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims who receive recognition and funding from the state.

Despite equal rights for non-Jews, Israel “doesn’t seem to protect all the rights or provide equal access for the diversity of the Jewish people itself,” he said.