Most Israelis support equal recognition for non-Orthodox rabbis

Poll finds that 71% oppose Rivlin’s cancellation of disabled bar mitzva ceremony due to Conservative rabbi’s attendance

BY SAM SOKOL

A majority of Israelis support equal government treatment of Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis, according to a poll released by the religious equality advocacy NGO Hiddush on Monday.

Out of the 507 Israelis questioned by Rafi Smith Polling, 71 percent stated that they believe President Reuven Rivlin “was wrong to cancel the bar mitzva ceremony for disabled children scheduled to be held at the President’s Residence, only because one of the prayer leaders is a Conservative rabbi.”

Opposition to Rivlin in this matter was higher among secular respondents (93%) and Soviet immigrants (84%) than among traditional Jews (74%) and the national religious (67%).

Twenty-nine percent of respondents supported Rivlin.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents agreed that rabbis representing the Reform and Conservative movements should be treated the same as their Orthodox counterparts.

The president and the Masorti Movement (Conservative Judaism in Israel) have been at odds since negotiations to hold a bar mitzva ceremony for disabled schoolchildren at his official 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.

The Masorti Movement approached the Diaspora Affairs Ministry and asked it to find a suitable solution, and the ministry proposed the ceremony be held at the President’s Residence and began discussions with the President’s Office to bring this about.

The two sides were unable to come to an agreement, however, with the Conservative movement accusing Rivlin of “an act of cruelty” in having “reneged” on his offer to allow both an Orthodox and Conservative rabbi to co-officiate.

“Unfortunately, religious figures seeking to advance their agenda through the cynical use of children refused to respond to every framework proposed by the President’s Office, and we are saddened by this approach,” the President’s Office said in a statement at the time.

Commenting on the results, Hiddush CEO Rabbi Uri Regev called on the president to “reconsider his decision to cancel the ceremony.”

“The president must not act as if he is the exclusive president of Orthodoxy, to the exclusion of the largest streams of world Jewry. It’s time for President Rivlin to get over his disdain for religious pluralism. It’s very unfortunate that while the president expresses such praiseworthy concern for various marginalized sectors of Israeli society, even as they may often be controversial in his own political circle, he repeatedly demonstrates that he has a huge blind spot when it comes to freedom of religion and the equal treatment of all streams of Judaism,” he said.

Asked about the poll, Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, told The Jerusalem Post that she believes it shows that “there is tremendous openness, even eagerness, in Israeli society for a pluralistic approach to Judaism.”

“President Rivlin has a wonderful opportunity to bring his message of unity and civility in Israeli society to the streams, and we would welcome his leadership in that arena.”

Rivlin has had run-ins with non-Orthodox streams before, having famously told an Israeli newspaper in 1989 that Reform is “idol worship and not Judaism.”

Reform and Conservative leaders indicated concern when he was chosen as president, but he has since made overtures to mend the divide, seeking to assure Diaspora leaders in several forums that he is not against the largest Jewish denominations outside of Israel.

Jeremy Sharon contributed to this report.

MEMBERS OF Women of the Wall, some with tallit and/or tefillin, pray near the Western Wall. (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)