

Press Release

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ORTHODOX JUDAISM'S NEWEST RABBINIC GROUP, INTERNATIONAL RABBINIC FELLOWSHIP (IRF), CONVENES CONFERENCE TO FORGE ITS FUTURE, ADOPT CONVERSION POLICIES, OUTLINE ROLE OF WOMEN AS SPIRITUAL LEADERS

The International Rabbinic Fellowship, an organization of over 150 American, Israeli, and world rabbis met this past week at the Pearlstone Conference and Retreat Center outside Baltimore, Maryland to strengthen collegial relationships, study torah, and discuss ideas that impact rabbinic practice. The group voted on and adopted several policies and resolutions that will guide Orthodoxy's future.

A highlight of the conference was the presence of Rav David Stav, Rabbi of the Shoham community in Israel, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Hesder Petach Tikva and founder of Tzohar, a large Israeli Rabbinic group. Conference attendees were privileged to

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discuss at length with Rabbi Stav critical issues facing the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

Resolutions that were discussed in depth and adopted by the IRF included the official establishment of the IRF's conversion committee (*Va'ad Giur*) that will oversee, guide, and ensure the thoroughness of conversions performed by IRF members. The committee consists of several American and Israeli well known rabbinic scholars and has been constituted as a body not to centralize conversions but to help guide the group's members in conversions that they may effect for their own congregants and constituents.

Said Rabbi Barry Gelman, IRF president, "The IRF's *Vaad Giur* will serve to ensure that each rabbi retains the proper ability to care for and guide their own candidates for conversion. The IRF *Giyur* process, which includes a very important mentorship component, guarantees that candidates for conversion will be well prepared and that the Rabbis are provided with ongoing guidance and support."

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Orthodoxy's broadest resolution yet outlining the role of and opportunities available for women working in Orthodox synagogues in Rabbinic capacities was also adopted at the conference.

The following is the text of the resolution as adopted by the International Rabbinic Fellowship:

IRF Resolution on Women in Communal Leadership Roles

The International Rabbinic Fellowship is thankful and grateful to the Almighty and to a cadre of visionary educators, rabbis and communal leaders of the Modern Orthodox community for the amazing growth of Torah learning for women, in all its forms, which has transformed the face of the Orthodox community for the better in the last fifty years.

We strongly support the work and efforts of the myriad of Torah learning programs and institutions for women, both long-established and new, both in the Diaspora and in Israel. We hope that these institutions continue to grow and that even more opportunities for talented women who would like to continue on to the next level of Torah scholarship, involving multi-year opportunities for serious Torah learning, will emerge in the years to come.

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We express our support for the sincere desire of the graduates of these learning programs to contribute their spiritual talents to the Jewish people as teachers, spiritual guides and mentors. We also affirm the dedication and sacrifice of so many women in our community, and their desire to serve their congregations and their people in formal leadership capacities, while affirming the specific areas that Halakha delimits.

We strongly encourage communities and their rabbinic leaders to create opportunities to discuss this important phenomenon in an open and reflective manner, in order to enable continuing progress in a spirit of *shalom* and communal harmony.

In an effort to outline some practical guidelines that we believe our communities should consider - recognizing that each community and its rabbinic leadership retain the authority to determine what is appropriate for their communal context - we affirm that:

Observant and committed Orthodox women who are learned, trained and competent should have every opportunity to fully serve the Jewish community:

1. As teachers of Torah, in all its breadth and depth - Shebikhtav, Shebe'al Peh and Practical Halakha - to both men and women.

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2. As persons who can answer questions and provide guidance to both men and women in all areas of Jewish law in which they are well-versed.

3. As clergy who function as pastoral counselors - visiting the sick, helping couples work through relationship difficulties, taking care of the arrangements for burial, speaking at life-cycle events and giving counsel to individuals and families in distress.

4. As spiritual preachers and guides who teach classes and deliver *divrei Torah* and *derashot*, in the synagogue and out, both during the week and on *Shabbatot* and holidays.

5. As spiritual guides and mentors, helping arrange and managing life-cycle events such as weddings, bar- and bat-mitzvah celebrations and funerals, while refraining from engaging in those aspects of these events that Halakha does not allow for women to take part in.

6. As presidents and full members of the boards of synagogues and other Torah institutions.

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