

Decade in Review: For Israel's Reform and Conservative Jews, an Uphill Battle With Some Reprieves

The non-Orthodox movements have experienced impressive growth in their number of congregations since 2010. However, the Chief Rabbinate's grip on matters of religion and state is proving hard to loosen | 2010-2020 roundup: Part 2

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Robinson's Arch at the southern end of the Western Wall, which is the only site at the

Kotel where non-Orthodox Jewish streams are allowed to conduct egalitarian prayer. Emil Salman

The best proof that something fundamental has shifted in the mind-set of folks in Galit Cohen-Kedem's hometown is that she no longer has to explain her title.

It has now become second nature for neighbors and acquaintances – “including my mechanic,” she points out – to address her as “*Raba*” (the Hebrew term for a female rabbi). “And that’s major progress when you consider the fact that people here used to tell me there was no such thing as a ‘raba,’ or that I must be confusing myself with a ‘*rabanit*’ or ‘*rebetzin*,’” says Cohen-Kedem, 43, using the respective Hebrew and Yiddish terms for a rabbi’s wife.

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It has been 10 years since she and her husband Adar Cohen, 46, left Jerusalem and founded the Reform congregation in Holon, a largely working-class city south of Tel Aviv. It was hardly a natural place for the [Reform movement](#) – still widely perceived in Israel as an American form of Judaism – to plant roots.

After all, as Cohen-Kedem notes, Holon is the “quintessential” Israeli city: Very secular with a large traditional component and, until their arrival on the scene, not even a hint of progressive, egalitarian Judaism.

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Galit Kedem-Cohen teaching a class of preschoolers in Holon. "When we first arrived in town, we felt like Martians. Today, we are a fact on the ground."Tomer Appelbaum

But a decade down the road, Kehillat Kodesh V'Chol is by most counts thriving. Close to 90 families are due-paying members. The Kabbalat Shabbat service held two Fridays a month is attended by dozens of local residents. The congregation runs – in partnership with a well-established network of schools and preschools that emphasize Jewish culture and heritage – two local day care centers, one kindergarten and a special Jewish studies track for grades one through six within the public school system. Nearly 200 preschool and school-age children are enrolled in these programs, while another 24 high-school graduates from around the country attend the pre-military gap year program affiliated with the Reform congregation.

In addition, Kodesh V'Chol runs various benevolence projects in Holon, including a boutique-style "gemach" for used clothing and knickknacks where Cohen-Kedem regularly volunteers.

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- “When we first arrived in town, we felt like Martians,” the mother of three says. “Then we went through a period of feeling like anusim [secret Jews]. Today, we are a fact on the ground.”
- Part of their success, she and her husband concede, is that they haven’t overly pushed the Reform movement brand. As Adar Cohen explains, “It’s important to understand that this is a very different type of congregation from the Reform congregations in the United States or even some of the older Reform congregations in Israel. The reason people join is not because of religion and beliefs, but because they want to be part of a community, a Jewish cultural community.”
- Take, for example Rifka Miyara, 38, a professional fundraiser who grew up in what she describes as a “quasi-Orthodox” home. “I’d call myself traditional today, and my husband is an atheist,” she recounts at an informal gathering of congregation members. “We were looking for a different kind of day care center for our child. We liked the one run by the Reform movement, and that’s how we got involved.” Her proud nonbeliever husband now serves as president of the congregation.
- Growing up, Anat Rubin says, she fled from “anything with religious markings.” But then she married the son of American immigrants active in a Reform congregation in Jerusalem. “And that was my entry into Reform Judaism,” says the 31-year-old social worker. “I discovered that I liked it. I liked that it wasn’t threatening and that there weren’t strict rules.”
- Reli Katzav grew up in a very different type of environment. “Mine was a religious home, and over the years my siblings became more and more religious – to the point that they are now pretty much ultra-Orthodox,” says the 45-year-old single mom.



- Galit Kedem-Cohen at the used clothing boutique run by Kehillat Kodesh V'Chol in Holon. Tomer Appelbaum
- When asked if she identifies as a Reform Jew, Katzav responds: "I can't say yes and I can't say no. Maybe it's because of the type of home I came from. But neither do I make any effort to hide my affiliation with this congregation."
- Israel does not officially recognize non-Orthodox Judaism, creating quite a few challenges for congregations like Kehillat Kodesh V'Chol, which still does not have a permanent house of prayer. On Friday evenings and religious holidays, the congregation holds services in the lobby of an assisted living facility in town. All requests for a building of its own have thus far been rebuffed by the municipality. Because of this lack of space, the bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies of congregation members' children are often held at a Reform movement-affiliated kibbutz located some 45 minutes away.
- Welcoming a visitor into her home, Cohen-Kedem provides a concrete example of the daily challenges she faces as congregation leader. "That kitchen table where you're sitting – that's our office," she says. "That's where all the important decisions in our congregation are made."
- **Different form of Judaism**
- Ten years ago, around the time Kehillat Kodesh V'Chol was taking root, Arie Hasit was beginning what he describes as his "rabbinical

journey.” Born in Philadelphia, he grew up in a Conservative home in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and was very active in the movement.

- Soon after graduating from Harvard – where, among his claims to fame, he shared a suite with Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg – Hasit moved to Israel, joined the army and tried his hand at music journalism (his thesis at Harvard was on the history of Israeli hip-hop). But it had always been his dream to become a rabbi and, six years after making aliyah, he enrolled in the rabbinical seminary run by the [Conservative movement](#) in Israel.



- Arie Hasit. “My goal is to bring meaningful Judaism to this place, not to turn more people into Conservative Jews.” Moti Milrod
- “People have asked why it took me that many years,” says the 36-year-old father of two. “What I tell them is that I first had to become Israeli before I could become an Israeli rabbi.”
- After completing his rabbinical studies he moved to the central Israeli town of Mazkeret Batya, where he was appointed rabbi of 70 Faces, the local Conservative congregation (also known in Israel as the Masorti movement). He chose this particular town after learning that a small community had already formed of families who would get together in each other’s homes to hold Kabbalat Shabbat services that fulfilled their craving for a different form of Judaism – “both non-Orthodox and non-secular,” as Hasit describes it.

- “By the time we arrived, they were ready to be taken to the next level,” he recounts. Very much like his rabbinical peers in Holon, Hasit says he is not out to push a particular brand of Judaism. “My goal, as I see it, is to bring meaningful Judaism to this place,” he says, “not to turn more people into Conservative Jews.”
- From the original group of five families who would meet in one another’s homes for Shabbat services every few weeks, the community has grown to 75 families “who have made some sort of financial contribution in 2019 that says ‘Count me in,’” Hasit says. And they now hold services every Friday night.
- A few months ago, the congregation celebrated the dedication of its first Torah scroll. And although it still doesn’t have its own building, Hasit is not complaining. “We’re not itching for our own permanent space,” he says.



- A Torah dedication ceremony at the Mazkeret Batya congregation in central Israel. Louis Weijl
- **Jewish prayer book app**
- These congregations in Holon and Mazkeret Batya are in many respects the jewels in the crown of the non-Orthodox movements in Israel. Proof, as it were, that they have succeeded in penetrating the hearts and minds of mainstream Israelis and spanned out beyond their English-speaking comfort zones.
- Both the Reform and Conservative movements have experienced impressive growth in Israel over the past decade: Since 2010, the

Reform movement has grown from 22 to 53 congregations, and the Conservative movement from 50 to 87 (including small groups, such as havuras and minyans, as well as groups that don't meet regularly). Somewhere between 8 and 10 new rabbis are ordained by their seminaries in Israel each year.

- Highlights for the Reform movement over the past decade include the establishment of two congregations that [cater specifically to Russian-speaking Israelis](#); and the introduction of special elementary school programs not only in Holon but also in Haifa and Modi'in.
- The Conservative movement counts among its big achievements the publication of its own siddur, which has sold tens of thousands of copies in Israel and was recently made available as an app. It also established its own watchdog organization, Jewish Pluralism Watch, to keep tabs on Israeli lawmakers and how they vote and express themselves on matters of religion and state.
- Another major coup for Conservative Judaism in Israel was the official recognition of its youth movement, Noam, by the Education Ministry, thereby qualifying it for state funding.
- The two non-Orthodox movements won a [landmark ruling in 2012 when Israel's High Court of Justice](#) forced the state to pay salaries to some of their rabbis. Currently, about a dozen Reform rabbis and one Conservative rabbi are on the state payroll.



- The Torah dedication ceremony at the Mazkeret Batya congregation in central Israel. Louis Weijl
- According to a study published late last year by the Jerusalem-based Jewish People Policy Institute, as many as 13 percent of Israeli Jews (around 800,000) identify with the non-Orthodox movements – 8 percent with Reform Judaism and 5 percent with Conservative Judaism. The survey found that 280 rabbis were affiliated with the two movements and that their respective youth movements together have about 1,800 members. This represented “significant growth” from a decade earlier.
- But their biggest success, according to the study, has been in conducting alternative life-cycle events for secular and traditional Israelis. Each year, Conservative and Reform rabbis in Israel conduct some 1,000 weddings, more than 3,000 bar or bat mitzvah ceremonies, about 400 conversions, and close to 1,000 other events, like circumcisions and funerals.
- Despite that, the study showed, the two movements together have only about 12,000 registered adult members. The big gap between this number and the number who identify as Reform or Conservative tends to be explained by the fact that religious services in Israel – that is, Orthodox religious services – are provided by the state. As a result, there is no tradition of paying dues to a synagogue as there is in places like the United States. That, in turn, explains why most of the growth in the non-

Orthodox movements in Israel has come from activities that take place outside the confines of the synagogue.

- “In the past, Orthodoxy was the fallback Judaism for secular and traditional Israelis – that is to say, the acceptable and legitimate Judaism that they didn’t regularly practice,” says Dan Feferman, a fellow at JPPI and author of the report. “That paradigm has been broken in the past decade. More of these Israelis are now identifying or willing to engage with the post-halakhic or egalitarian forms of Judaism that the Reform and Conservative movements provide. So when they’re looking to make a bar or bat mitzvah for their kids, or looking for a rabbi to marry them, there’s a greater likelihood that they’ll now turn to these movements.”
- Feferman cautions, however, against reading too much into surveys like his that show growing numbers of Israelis identifying as Reform or Conservative Jews, especially considering that many Israelis are unaware of the differences between the two movements. “It would seem that for many of them, this is more of a statement against Orthodoxy, a statement against the Chief Rabbinate, and the details don’t matter so much,” he says.
- **Wall for nothing?**
- Although the two non-Orthodox movements seem to be gaining new followers in Israel, they have also suffered serious setbacks in the past decade – mainly because they are still not recognized by the state as legitimate forms of Judaism.
- Much of their time and energy in recent years has been invested in salvaging the government deal that would have provided them with their own egalitarian prayer plaza at Jerusalem’s [Western Wall](#). The deal, [approved in early 2016](#), was suspended by the government [18 months later](#), in response to pressure from the ultra-Orthodox members of the governing coalition. Hailed as “historic,” it would have granted the non-Orthodox movements official status at the Jewish holy site.
- Despite their failed attempts at reviving the deal, the leaders of the non-Orthodox movements insist that not all hope is lost.
- “The fact that we were able to reach such an agreement that grants us recognition with a right-wing, Orthodox government – even if it hasn’t been implemented – is an asset in itself that will serve us whenever the next round of negotiations begins. And I’m convinced that will happen,” says Yizhar Hess, executive director of the Conservative-Masorti movement in Israel.



- Yizhar Hess, executive director of the Conservative-Masorti movement in Israel, during a clash with ultra-Orthodox protesters at the Western Wall, Jerusalem, February 2016. Emil Salman
- The movements have drawn criticism for putting so much focus on prayer at the Western Wall at the expense of other issues deemed to be of greater significance to non-Orthodox Israelis, such as the Rabbinates' monopoly on Jewish marriage. Rabbi Gilad Kariv, executive director of the Reform movement in Israel, defends the effort invested in the Kotel deal. "It was not only about securing the right for egalitarian services there," he says. "It was supposed to show that it is indeed possible for us to reach a reasonable compromise with the Israeli government that is sensitive to the needs and anxieties of the Orthodox population, and it should have been a model for future deals on other issues."
- The failed Western Wall deal was not the only major disappointment of the past decade. The non-Orthodox movements were no more successful in achieving other stated goals, such as obtaining recognition for conversions performed by their rabbis and winning government funding for their programs and activities.
- Considering these obstacles, Hess says, it is "nothing short of a miracle" that they have expanded so much over the past decade.
- For Kariv, no less important is where they are expanding. "Who would have believed 10 years ago that we would have a thriving

community now in Bat Yam?” he asks, referring to the working class city south of Tel Aviv.

- **American stigma**
- Prof. Yedidia Stern, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute’s Center for Religion, Nation and State, is not so impressed. If anything is a surprise, he says, it is that the Reform and Conservative movements haven’t gained more traction in Israel.
- “Many Israelis who call themselves traditional, especially [Mizrahi Jews](#) [those of Middle Eastern or North African descent], are basically conducting their lives in a Conservative or Reform way,” he says. “They care about their Judaism, it provides meaning to their lives, and yet they’re not committed to full observance of the mitzvahs. And these traditional Jews are the majority, so I’ve often asked myself why haven’t the Reform and Conservative movements gained a following among them?”
- The answer, he believes, is that these movements have still not succeeded in shedding the stigma of being perceived as American.
- “I’m a proud Orthodox Jew but I think both these movements have a big role to play in Israeli society, which they are not yet fulfilling,” he says. “And that’s because they have basically duplicated their agendas from the United States. They are very liberal, leftist and human rights-focused. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s not something that’s going to win over traditional Israelis.”
- Eli Lederhendler, a professor of American Jewish history at the Hebrew University, does not believe there is much hope that the non-Orthodox movements will ever penetrate mainstream Israel in a significant way – because they are still perceived by most Israelis as foreign.
- “Unless they happen to come from North America, Israelis don’t understand the concept of Jewish denominations, because in the places where they came from – mainly Eastern Europe and the Middle East – no such concept existed.”
- Even though growing numbers of Israelis are being exposed to these movements, he does not believe it will translate into membership or active engagement. “These couples who are getting married with Reform and Conservative rabbis, they’re not going and joining Conservative and Reform synagogues afterward,” he notes. “It’s just not happening. It’s not their experience.”

For that reason, Lederhendler doesn't expect the percentage of Israelis who identify as Reform or Conservative to grow significantly in the next decade.

"For that to happen, you'd have to have a huge increase in aliyah from America, and specifically of non-Orthodox Jews," he says. "I don't see that happening either."

- *This text is part of a special roundup of the past decade by Haaretz. Over the next 10 days, 10 writers will reflect on the past 10 years|*