

**THERE IS A CRACK
IN EVERYTHING
THAT'S HOW THE
LIGHT GETS IN**



**THE ISRAEL RELIGIOUS
ACTION CENTER'S
ANNUAL REPORT 2023**

IRAC
Israel
Religious
Action
Center

**התנועה
הרפורמית**
The Israel Movement for Reform
and Progressive Judaism

**“THERE IS A CRACK, A CRACK IN EVERYTHING
THAT’S HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN”**

‘ANTHEM’ BY LEONARD COHEN

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INTRODUCTION

IRAC approached 2023 with the same resolve we do every year, working for a Jewish and democratic state that expresses the vision of its founders and our Jewish values of justice, tolerance, and equality. We expected to continue to fight for our causes: protecting religious freedom and especially the place of liberal Judaism in Israeli society, fighting racism, advancing equality for women and LGBTQ, and supporting the rights of immigrants. However, we were also very concerned because Israel's new government, which was sworn in during the last days of 2022, is the most religiously extremist, racist, homophobic, and misogynistic government in Israel's history. Our concerns were soon validated when the government began to promote a series of dangerous legislative initiatives, first and foremost the judicial coup, which was the government's effort to undermine Israel's fragile system of checks and balances as well as the independence and authority of the judiciary.

Fortunately, the Israeli public was not willing to surrender our values and our rights. IRAC played a key role in keeping Israel Jewish and democratic, fighting in the Knesset, the courts, and in the streets. We mobilized Reform congregations and members and together with millions of Israelis went to the streets to stand up for equality and freedom. Together with Jews outside of Israel, we succeeded in preventing the judicial coup and blocking many other dangerous bills and decisions.

After nine months of an intense and challenging struggle to save Israel's Jewish and democratic soul, our world was shattered on October 7th, when Hamas attacked the communities along the Gaza border, committing horrific atrocities against soldiers and innocent civilians. The scope of lives lost, people wounded and abducted was incomprehensible, and it touched all Israelis. Many of our friends and family members were called to reserve duty, and we went through unbelievably difficult months, worried for their safety.

When all our government ministries failed to respond properly to the October 7th catastrophe, Israeli civil society once again proved its strength and resilience, together with the enormous support of Jews around the

world. IRAC and the Israeli Reform Movement (IMPJ) were up to the task, organizing solidarity Havdalah ceremonies with the families of the hostages, responding to increasing racism, and monitoring government budgetary decisions and demanding equality in sharing the military burden.

In the following pages, we will share with you some of the issues we dealt with in 2023. It was a challenging year but even in the darkness we saw a lot of shining stars, which illuminated the way toward a better future.

Our work is more important today than ever. IRAC champions a vision for a better Israel. We shall overcome this difficult period. Together with you, liberal Jews from all over the world, we shall continue to fight discrimination and hatred and raise a voice for equality for all.

2023 AT A GLANCE



50

cases argued in court hearings



60

Knesset discussions attended



224

media appearances



377

inquiries for the RCC



600

new cases opened at LACO

DEFENDING ISRAEL'S DEMOCRACY IN THE NAME OF JUDAISM

Fighting the Judicial Coup

At the beginning of 2023, the newly established government set out to promote its dangerous agenda, beginning with the judicial coup,



Out in the streets - Billboard saying 'Defending Democracy in the name of Judaism'

which attempted to strip the Supreme Court of its independence and its power to strike down unconstitutional laws and illegal government decisions. Israel's democracy is as fragile as it is since the government has complete control over the legislative branch and the only checks and balances on the executive branch are through the judiciary. The

government took unprecedented steps to remove all restrictions on its power, endangering basic civil and human rights.

IRAC stood at the forefront of the fight against the judicial coup:

- IRAC's attorneys submitted dozens of position papers to the Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee and participated in numerous hearings of Knesset committees to express opposition to the extremist government's proposed judicial coup and to other dangerous initiatives.
- IRAC and the IMPJ played a major part in the pro-democracy protests, bringing a unique Jewish voice calling to protect Israel's democracy in the name of Judaism. We demonstrated for 40 straight weeks, held together with the IMPJ pluralistic Havdalah ceremonies at weekly Saturday night mass protests and mobilized the vocal participation of Reform congregants.

- We produced webinars and informational materials for both Israelis and liberal Jews around the world to supply necessary information about what was at stake. We also initiated a campaign that led to more than 20,000 emails sent by Jews from all over the world to Israeli consulates and embassies and the Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Justice, expressing opposition to the judicial coup.

Israeli Municipal Elections

Israel holds municipal elections every five years. The elections were supposed to be held at the end of October 2023, but due to the Hamas attack and the ensuing war, the elections were postponed to February 2024.

In the face of an extreme national government, the local elections presented an opportunity to promote religion and state issues on the local level, such as allocation of resources to liberal congregations, public transport on Shabbat, and liberal education in schools. Following the pro-democracy protests, which awakened the Israeli liberal public, these issues have risen to the top of many local officials' agendas.



Casting our ballots for pluralistic and egalitarian cities

In preparation for the elections, our Public Policy and Outreach Department worked with Reform congregations around the country to raise awareness regarding the importance of the local elections:

- We encouraged Reform congregants to run for local office
- We drafted a platform for equality and freedom in religion and state issues, and signed dozens of candidates to its commitments
- We encouraged Reform congregations to contact candidates to discuss how to turn their cities into more equal and pluralistic places
- We worked to increase voter turnout

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO BE JEWISH – PROTECTING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND EQUALITY FOR LIBERAL STREAMS OF JUDAISM

IRAC works to advance freedom of religion and opposes the Orthodox monopoly on Jewish religious life, demanding state recognition and equal funding for the Reform and Conservative movements.

In 2023, IRAC's accomplishments promoting religious freedom and pluralism included:

- We won an anti-discrimination civil suit against Channel 14 (Israel's Jewish Heritage Network) for excluding Reform and Conservative programming since its 2014 inception and were awarded the full damages we sought.
- After a 20-year struggle, the Supreme Court accepted our petition to cancel the discriminatory policy of the Welfare Ministry's Child Service Authority that conversion of non-Jewish children available for adoption by Jewish families could only be concluded through the ultra-Orthodox State Rabbinate, thus excluding Reform, Conservative, and secular families from adopting these children.
- The Supreme Court ruled that the state must pay for the circumcisions of Reform and Conservative converts, just as it funds the circumcision of Orthodox converts, accepting our 2009 petition.
- The court accepted our suit on behalf of Women of the Wall that security guards at the Western Wall were exceeding their authority in searching bags for Torah scrolls.
- This year, following a long legal struggle, the Ministry of Religious Services began funding Reform seminars for young Israelis offering pluralistic Jewish content regarding Shabbat

RACISM IS NOT OUR JUDAISM – WORKING TO ERADICATE RACISM

IRAC has been leading the fight against racism and incitement for years, especially when it is voiced by rabbis who base their racist incitement on Jewish sources. This toxic phenomenon has increased under the current government, which includes known racists in senior positions. IRAC responds with legal and public advocacy tools to combat hate and advance racial equality and a shared society. IRAC monitors hate speech and hate crimes, demands investigations for criminal and disciplinary proceedings, and offers legal aid for victims of racism.

In 2023, IRAC's accomplishments in the fight against racism included:

- As a result of our class action lawsuit against the Gett Taxi rideshare app for its discriminatory "Gett Mehadrin" (strictly kosher) option, which for eight years enabled Jerusalem users to intentionally select Jewish drivers, this discriminatory service was abolished, and the company agreed to pay Jerusalem Arab cab drivers damages.
- We continued to fight incitement to racism by extremist rabbis, petitioning for disciplinary proceedings against Rabbi Shlomo Amar, Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, Chief Rabbi of Israel for incitement.
- We appealed to the Attorney General to disqualify racist candidates who are part of the racist Jewish Strength party from municipal elections in Jerusalem and Maaleh Adumim.
- The Racism Crisis Center ran several successful social media campaigns to raise awareness of its services leading to hundreds of inquiries, some of which are under consideration for legal action on issues such as racial profiling and discrimination in provision of services.

FIGHTING FOR LGBTQ EQUALITY

IRAC is a leading organization advocating for LGBTQ rights and inclusion. In 2023, IRAC's accomplishments included:

- We continued our struggle to hold public figures accountable for inciting against the LGBTQ community.
- The Supreme Court accepted our petition on behalf of two LGBTQ couples and several LGBTQ organizations in a historic ruling abolishing discrimination against LGBTQ couples in adoption, so that they will now be considered equal to heterosexual candidates to adopt children.



Families & IRAC Lawyers - hopeful after LGBTQ adoption rights hearing

- We continued to help non-Jewish partners of Jewish olim join them in Israel and become citizens, just like heterosexual spouses. Due to our petition on behalf of an LGBTQ couple, the Interior Ministry recognized online Zoom weddings licensed by the State of Utah for citizenship eligibility under the Law of Return. This precedent will assist many families seeking refuge in Israel, including many heterosexual couples.
- We filed complaints in cases of discrimination against the LGBTQ community, such as against a hotel that demanded that an LGBTQ organization hold its conference in a certain room and not be seen in its public spaces.

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

IRAC continues to play a leading role in combatting attempts by religious extremists to restrict the participation and visibility of women in the public sphere. This work became more urgent after the inauguration of

the current government with its ultra-Orthodox partners, which led to a rapid rise in discrimination against women.

In 2023, IRAC's accomplishments to advance gender equality included:

- We continued our struggle against the exclusion of women at funerals, which are usually conducted by ultra-Orthodox burial societies. We won a lawsuit against a burial society that tried to separate brothers and sisters at their mother's funeral and was ordered to pay \$33,000 in damages.

- We continued to fight the attempt to exclude women's images in the public sphere. As a result of a suit filed on behalf of IRAC Executive Director Orly Erez-Likhovski against her HMO for omitting women's images in ads at its clinics in the name of courting ultra-Orthodox enrollment, the HMO agreed to correct this discrimination and include women's images in all of its clinics.

- This summer, as the weather turned warm, there was a sharp increase in incidents where male bus drivers forced female passengers to conform to ultra-Orthodox standards of "modest" dress. In response, we submitted complaints to bus companies and the Ministry of Transportation and launched a "Know Your Rights" social media campaign to provide women with the necessary legal information to defend their rights to equal treatment on public transit.

- We filed another lawsuit in the matter of a woman being asked to change her seat on an airline due to her gender.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS ON THE BUS!

- Following IRAC's landmark High Court ruling in 2011, you have the right to board any bus and sit wherever you want on the bus. There is no such thing as buses for Ultra-Orthodox only!
- If a driver asks you to sit in the back of the bus, you can (and should) refuse. Tell the driver that it is illegal! If a passenger harasses you, the driver must protect your right to sit wherever you choose! If necessary, a driver must call the police. That's their job!
- You have the right to dress as you please! Nobody, not a driver nor a passenger has the right to comment or to condition your boarding the bus based on what you are wearing! If a driver says that "you are not dressed modestly" you should respond that it is not the driver's business and it is illegal to block your access! If passengers harass you the driver must intervene! Demand the driver's help! A driver's duty is to intervene, including calling the police in case you are being harassed!
- Excluding women on buses is a violation of the law and a complaint can be filed with the police and the Ministry of Transportation. You can also sue the driver and the bus company for damages, which can range up to NIS 70,000.
- Document the event with your cellphone! It is important to have evidence! Take down the details of the bus company, the name of the driver, the bus line number, and the time of day that this happened. It is also important to get names and contact details of any witnesses.

Were you forced off the bus? Did you suffer discrimination? IRAC has been fighting back for 20 years! Contact us at irac@irac.org for free legal advice and assistance.

IRAC Israel Religious Action Center

Social media campaign - combatting attempts to restrict the participation and visibility of women in the public sphere



Immigrant rights for those most vulnerable and sacrifice the most

SUPPORTING THE RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANTS – LEGAL AID CENTER FOR OLIM

For more than 30 years, IRAC's Legal Aid Center for Olim (LACO) has provided legal assistance and support to immigrants and accompanying family members, converts, and also handled humanitarian cases such as widows and victims of intimate partner violence.

In 2023, IRAC's accomplishments in support of immigrants included:

- LACO won a precedent-setting judgment from an extended Supreme Court panel that widows and widowers of children and grandchildren of Jews are eligible for immigrant status based on the Law of Return.
- LACO assisted numerous Reform and Conservative converts in acquiring Israeli citizenship following our legal victory of 2021.
- We continued to assist dozens of refugees from Ukraine in their effort to find a safe haven in Israel.

RESPONDING TO OCTOBER 7TH AND THE ENSUING WAR

IRAC's world and all of Israel was catastrophically changed by Hamas' brutal attack on October 7th and the ensuing war in Gaza. We recalibrated the infrastructure we had laid in the fight for democracy with other organizations in order to fill the gaps left by Israel's government. One of our top priorities has been to advocate for Israel to make the redemption of captives, which Maimonides held as the most important mitzvah (commandment) the chief objective of our government and maintain it at the forefront of the public's agenda.

IRAC's work since October 7th has included:

- Conducting together with the IMPJ pluralistic Kabbalat Shabbat services in communities that were attacked, as well as Havdalah ceremonies with hostages' families at public rallies and vigils every Saturday night in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv
- Following a dramatic increase in racist incidents since the beginning of



Together making Havdala and demanding the hostages' return

the war, we published a statement calling for a shared society, condemning violence and discrimination toward Arab citizens of Israel.

- We confronted the drastic increase in racism by filing complaints and calling for action in instances involving threats to fire Arab workers, violence against Arab bus drivers, and a call to evict Arab students from their dormitories at Netanya Academic College.
- IRAC together with the IMPJ held inter-faith events during Hannukah called Mevi-or (bring in the light) to promote the idea of a shared society especially at this tense time
- After the Ministry of Transportation decided for the first time in Israel's history to operate buses and trains on Shabbat, for the first four weeks of the war, we campaigned for the extension of public transportation on Shabbat to assist displaced families and soldiers.
- We submitted a petition against a discriminatory order from the Ministry of Defense moving up enlistment dates for pluralistic and secular pre-military programs, but not for Orthodox yeshiva students.
- We petitioned the Supreme Court challenging the government's attempt to exploit the crisis to increase funding for ultra-Orthodox schools that do not comply with the law requiring they teach core subjects including Math, Science, English, and Civics.

LOOKING AHEAD

What a year this has been. A year of uncertainty, trauma, and strife. A year in which we confronted many challenges and faced difficulties. What kept us going was the strength of Israeli civil society and the amazing love and support of liberal Jews, like you, from all over the world. Our energy and determination are lifted by so many of you, our friends and partners. We know that our work is done also on your behalf. We remain bound by our shared love of Israel and our shared vision for its Jewish and democratic future.

As we marched for Israel's democracy in 2023, we felt you with us every step of the way. Then, when the unthinkable unfolded in October, we felt your support and embrace, both from afar and when you brought them with you on your solidarity missions, encouraging us to keep going.

Your partnership will be ever more vital as we face 2024. We will keep praying for peace and safety for all and keep working for a better future. Partner with us so we can be able to keep the fight for a more democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant Israel, a state which is the homeland for all Jews and which respects the rights of all its citizens.

JOIN THE IRAC COMMUNITY

You can become a member of the IRAC community by:

- Subscribe to the Pluralist, our weekly newsletter, and stay up to date on our activities.
- Follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.



SUPPORT IRAC

Become a member of the IRAC global community and show your support for a democratic and pluralistic Israel by making a donation to IRAC. Scan the QR code for more info!



ABOUT IRAC

The Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) is the preeminent organization working to secure civil and human rights in Israel, based on the precepts of Israeli law and Jewish tradition.

As the public and legal advocacy arm of the Reform Movement in Israel, IRAC is the leading Jewish organization advancing a shared society for all Israelis, without discrimination on the basis of race, religion and gender. We mobilize our own constituencies and the wider Israeli public through legal action, advocacy, and community organizing.

We are dedicated to the ongoing pursuit of a just Israeli society

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