

THE MANY FACES OF IRAC

The Israel Religious
Action Center's
Annual Report 2021



Israel Movement for Reform
and Progressive Judaism

"THE TORAH HAS SEVENTY FACES"

Midrash Bamidbar Rabba 13:15

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Facing the Facts: IRAC's Impact	Page 4
The Face of Religious Freedom	Page 6
The Face of Pluralism	Page 8
The Face of Gender Equality	Page 9
The Face of LGBTQ Equality	Page 11
The Face of Racial Equality	Page 13
The Face of Democracy	Page 14
The Faces of Converts and Immigrants	Page 15
Facing the Future	Page 17
The Face of the IRAC Community	Page 18
The Faces of IRAC	Page 19
Support IRAC	Page 20

**"WHEN YOU HIDE YOUR FACE FROM
THE WORLD, YOU CAN'T SEE THE
WORLD"**

Jonathan Safran Foer

FACING THE FACTS: IRAC'S IMPACT

Thanks to IRAC:

- Gender segregation on public buses is illegal.
- Jewish supremacist, Kahanist candidates were disqualified from running for Knesset.
- An indictment was filed against Bentzi Gopstein, head of the hate group Lehava.
- Reform and Conservative rabbis receive state funding towards their salaries.
- Reform and Conservative converts are recognized under the Law of Return and are eligible for Aliyah.
- Humanitarian considerations carry more weight in cases of immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence and are seeking permanent residency in Israel.
- The Jerusalem Open House for Pride and Tolerance receives municipal support.
- Modesty signs, which aim to limit women's dress and movement, are illegal.
- An Ultra-Orthodox radio station which refused to allow women to be heard on air was ordered to pay 1 million NIS in damages in the first class action suit on civil and women's rights.
- The Supreme Court ordered that Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, the city Rabbi of Safed, must undergo disciplinary proceedings for racial incitement.

IRAC helped approximately **35,000** people in 2021

We had **65** victories this year, including:

14

Major legal
victories

50

Legal Aid Center
for Olim clients
were granted
residency status

1

Racism Crisis
Center client
was awarded
damages for
being refused
service because
he is an Arab



60

Participated in 60 court hearings and 3 mediation sessions.



360

We filed 360 claims in all levels of the Israeli court system, including the Supreme Court, District Court, and Family Court.



24

Participated in 24 Knesset meetings, meetings with Members of Knesset, and meetings with other government officials.



200

Were featured in the press 200 times.

THE FACE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The ultra-Orthodox religious hegemony extends to nearly all spheres of religious and civic life in Israel, leaving matters such as marriage, divorce, burial, and conversion in the exclusive realm of the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate. **IRAC faces off against the ultra-Orthodox monopoly** and works to dismantle it through legal and political means and advancing alternative pluralistic services.

Facing off against marriage inequality

In August and September 2020, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Municipality of Jerusalem opened up some of the city's scenic outdoor spots for couples to get married, as many had been required to cancel wedding plans thanks to the pandemic. Michal dreamed of getting married on the beautiful Haas Promenade, and when she and her fiancé Netta, saw this initiative they jumped on the opportunity to sign up. After already starting the process to join the initiative, the municipality added discriminatory clauses to their contract barring couples who did not intend to marry legally in Israel from participating in the initiative. This meant that no couple marrying outside of the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate could participate. No same-sex couples, like Michal and Netta, would be included, and no couples marrying through the Reform Movement, like Mor and Haggai, could participate.

We took legal action against the Municipality after the Attorney General sided with us, stating that the municipality operated illegally. We filed a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the two couples, and all couples who were discriminated against, but that was not the correct course of action. We are now working to advance individual lawsuits on behalf of Michal and Netta and Mor and Haggai.

“Suddenly, after proposing during Corona, when everything was uncertain and we did not know when we would be able to get married, the municipality served up my dream on a silver platter.



Michal and Netta

On the one hand, I've lived in Jerusalem long enough and have had to struggle. On the other hand, the beginning seemed so promising: the Municipality of Jerusalem sent us a contract, we signed it, and we even got a phone call from the producer, but then she stopped taking our calls.

Later, we got an email with an updated contract, which included the discriminatory clauses. It's not as if we hadn't experienced homophobia, but it had been a long time since I had felt so personally insulted. I have given to this country, I am an IDF officer and am now a doctor in some of the city's health clinics.

The municipality basically said – we changed the contract specifically so you can't be here, it is personal against you. It was such an insulting experience. We were already planning on it, we already told the kids.”
-Michal

THE FACE OF PLURALISM

IRAC provides direct services through legal representation and support for the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel and their institutions. IRAC works to **show the face of Progressive Judaism and pluralism in Israel** by achieving state recognition of, and equal representation for the Reform and Conservative movements in Israel.

Showing the Face of Anti-Reform Incitement

Throughout 2021, we witnessed a rise in anti-Reform incitement throughout Israel. We saw the ugly face of incitement on the streets of Shoham in the attempt to prevent the construction of a Reform synagogue;

on Twitter by Jerusalem's own Deputy Mayor, whose tweet directly led to the defacement of Jerusalem congregation, Kehilat HaDror's advertisements; and by state-employed and funded rabbis.



A vandalized advertisement for Kehilat HaDror

Thanks to our Supreme Court petition, Rabbi David Yosef was forced to resign from his position as a Jerusalem neighborhood rabbi for incitement against the Reform movement and Women of the Wall. This was the first time in Israel's history that a state-funded rabbi was forced to resign for incitement against the Reform movement.

THE FACE OF GENDER EQUALITY

IRAC plays a leading role in battling attempts by religious extremists to limit the participation and visibility of women in the public sphere in Israel. IRAC has been reversing the trend of gender segregation and exclusion with remarkable success. IRAC ensures that all women can exercise their right to **show their face** in all areas of the public domain.

Facing Defacement in Jerusalem

The defacement and vandalism of women's faces on the streets of Israel, but especially in Jerusalem, has been on the rise. When vandals **repeatedly defaced the photo of Holocaust survivor Peggy Parnes** in Safra Square, in the courtyard of the Municipality of Jerusalem's offices, we **filed a lawsuit** against the municipality for failing to take appropriate action against this growing trend of vandalism and defacement of women's faces in the public domain.

In December 2021, **the Jerusalem District Court ruled that the Municipality of Jerusalem must actively take significant steps to prevent the defacement of images of women in the public domain.** According to the ruling, the municipality must work together with representatives from the police to create a plan to actively combat and prevent the defacement of women's images throughout Jerusalem. This must include 1) installing security cameras to monitor areas of repeat vandalism; 2) hiring workers who will respond in real-time to incidents of vandalism; 3) working with the police to enforce the law; and 4) appointing an official who will be responsible for filing police complaints on this issue. We plan to ensure that the municipality complies with the ruling by monitoring their progress and taking further legal action if necessary. **This ruling sets a precedent for actively working to end and prevent the defacement of women's images in Israel and is another victory towards gender equality in Israel.**

“My dear Aunt Peggy, those who desecrated your picture in Safra Square don’t know you... They don’t know what the 11-year-old went through as she held her 4-year-old brother in her arms while they said goodbye to their parents at the train that sent them to a strange land on the “Kindertransport” ... They don’t know what a girl goes through when she wanders between orphanages and foster homes, and does the best she can to protect her little brother...They don’t know that you became a warrior for justice and work



Keren scrubbing graffiti from her aunt's photo

to advance human rights...that you wrote books, gave lectures, acted in movies, and got numerous degrees and honors for your actions... None of this interests them. They paint over your picture time and time again because you are a woman. A beautiful, strong, confident 94-year-old woman.”

“The desecration of your photo, similar to the other women’s photos that were desecrated, is a call to law enforcement agencies and publicly elected officials to wake up and take action now, using all of the tools available to them. To work to eradicate this disgraceful trend of harming women because they are women.”

-Keren, niece of Holocaust survivor Peggy Parnes’

THE FACE OF LGBTQ EQUALITY

IRAC combats discrimination against the LGBTQ community in Israel by demonstrating strong support by providing legal representation to the Jerusalem Open House, helping organize the Jerusalem pride march, as well as organizing the Reform faction to pride marches around the country, and by taking legal action against the exclusion of the LGBTQ community from essential opportunities such as adoption, marriage, and Aliyah. We work to ensure that members of the LGBTQ community can comfortably and equally **show their faces** in the public domain.

Facing Same-Sex Adoption

The Israeli Ministry of Welfare adheres to a 1981 law that adoption is only allowed for “Ish v’Isha (man and woman) together,” rejecting same-sex couples as unfit to care for children. The Ministry of Welfare often only allows same-sex couples to adopt children only after a heterosexual couple could not be found to adopt them, whether due to the child’s age, background, or special needs.

In 2017, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of our petition with the Israeli Gay Father’s Association and the government promised to change the language of existing adoption legislation to include same-sex couples by mid-2018 and grant them equal rights to adopt.

Years have passed, and the government has made little move to change the law. In July 2021, we filed a new Supreme Court petition on behalf of two same-sex couples: Shai and Shahar, and Tzafrir and Ido. In not changing the law, the Ministry of Welfare continues to treat same-sex couples as second-class citizens and undesirable parents. This is reflected in the treatment of these couples who wish so much to become parents and raise a family of their own. Shai and Shahar reported that when they called to check on their position on the list to adopt, they were informed that they would only be called if there was no heterosexual couple before them who wished to adopt a child. The State declared that it is working on a legislative amendment and will supply an update in March 2022.

“We have been waiting many years to adopt a child in Israel. We hoped that the Israeli government would uphold its promise to the Supreme Court in 2017 to stop adoption discrimination against LGBTQ couples.



Shai and Shahar with Tanya

Unfortunately, not only were we deceived, but the passing years brought no change for us. Even today, in 2021, the State of Israel’s message is that we are second-class parents and will not be allowed to adopt a child in Israel in the near future. This is a painful violation of our rights. Our daughter is getting older, and we are getting older and can’t wait forever to expand our family.”

“Today, our daughter Tanya is 3 and a half years old. In addition to our longing to have another child, Tanya dreams of having a brother or sister. In our conversations with her she has shared her wish for a brother and sister numerous times – ‘We’ll have babies at home, a boy and a girl, and I’ll feed them, and calm them down. I’ll give the girl my unicorn bag and the boy will love Spiderman. I’ll also let them sleep in my bed.’ Tanya has successfully expressed in words the feeling that we struggle to express, her wish to become a big sister and our wish to expand our family.”

-Shai and Shahar

THE FACE OF RACIAL EQUALITY

Israel's Declaration of Independence commits to "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex." Nonetheless, racism and discrimination remain a disturbing and prevalent problem in Israel. We use innovative and groundbreaking public, legal, and advocacy tools to **face racism and hatred head-on.**

Facing Racism in the Public Domain Head On

Our Racism Crisis Center faces racism head-on by providing direct assistance to victims of racism and mapping and working to eradicate racist trends.

In 2021, we reached a settlement and won compensation for our client who was refused service for being an Arab. In February, Ibrahim (name changed for privacy) entered a shop in Jerusalem with one of his friends. When the shop owner heard them speaking Arabic, he refused them service, called them "Arab garbage", and told them to get out of his store or he would kill them.

Following the incident, Ibrahim went back to the shop while there was another client there, and approached the shop owner. In addition to there being a witness, Ibrahim set his phone to record the interaction:

Ibrahim: "You called me 'Arab garbage', right?"

Shop owner: "Yes, go complain to the police...get out you garbage."

Ibrahim: "You are a shop owner, how can you say that?"

Shop owner: "Because you are Arab garbage."

Ibrahim filed a police report that day, and turned to us for help. We sent a complaint to the shop owner, and came to an agreement according to which Ibrahim was awarded 10,000 NIS (approx. \$3,000) in damages for racial discrimination, the shop owner apologized for his discrimination and committed to being respectful and providing equal service to all customers.

THE FACE OF DEMOCRACY

Israel was founded as a Jewish and democratic state that promises equal rights to all its citizens. But **Israel does not hold democracy at face value** by failing to live up to its fundamental values. IRAC works to strengthen Israel's democracy by building relationships with politicians we see as allies, and advancing the values of equality, pluralism, and democracy in the Knesset and other government bodies.

The Face Value of Voting Rights

The right to vote is one of the fundamental rights of a democracy, and is even written into Israel's constitution-level Basic Laws. Nonetheless, tens of thousands of Israel's Bedouin citizens who live in the unrecognized villages in Israel's Negev region do not have access to this fundamental right. As of 2019, there were 35 unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. Some have existed since before the foundation of the State of Israel, while others have been in existence for a number of decades since the 1980s, when the State began to push Bedouins to live in more organized towns and villages.

We are working together with the Abraham Initiatives and the Council of Unrecognized Villages in the Negev towards more accessible polling places for Bedouins living in unrecognized towns and villages in the Negev. In May 2021, we went on a tour together of some of the unrecognized villages, and are working to advance legislative amendments that will allow residents to vote in polling places closer to where they actually live.



IRAC and Abraham Initiatives staff on a visit to the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev

THE FACES OF CONVERTS AND IMMIGRANTS

The Legal Aid Center for Olim (LACO) provides indispensable assistance to olim (immigrants) who face legal and bureaucratic hurdles in their new homeland. **LACO works to ensure that Israel does not close its doors in the faces of those who wish to make Israel their home.**

The Legal Aid Center for Olim was established in 1992 after Operation Solomon. LACO, the only program of its kind, offers vulnerable immigrants the best immigration lawyers in the country and other forms of support to navigate the red tape of governmental bureaucracy, effectively replacing frustration and hopelessness with a sense of promise, opportunity, and dignity, by helping olim resolve difficult legal problems.

In 2021, LACO helped approximately 1,000 people and opened 353 new cases. These cases were related to:

- registering conversions
- requesting Aliyah status or citizenship
- humanitarian requests for legal status on behalf of immigrant women victims of Intimate Partner Violence, divorced women, or widows and more...

The Face of Conversion

In March 2021, the Supreme Court ruled to recognize Reform and Conservative conversion performed in Israel within the Law of Return. This ruling was a result of our pending petitions of over 15 years on behalf of several Reform converts. Since, all of the petitioners were granted Israeli citizenship, and six out of 30 from our waiting list were granted citizenship. However, we still have a long list of those waiting to be granted citizenship, and the Ministry of the Interior is dragging its feet and has even denied a number of our converts citizenship, including Erika (below).



Erika Belovai. *I felt that I could be a Jew, but my way*

“I’m already like an Israeli - I live here, work here, I go to the hospital... I’m sick here, everything. I think that after 20 years, I can ask for a little. The court ruled that the Orthodox monopoly cannot control conversion and that the Law of Return defines Israel as a state for all Jews and all streams. The Supreme Court also granted justice to converts who have been struggling for more than 15 years. I converted Reform because I felt that I could be a Jew, but my way.”

-Erika Belovai, converted in 2006

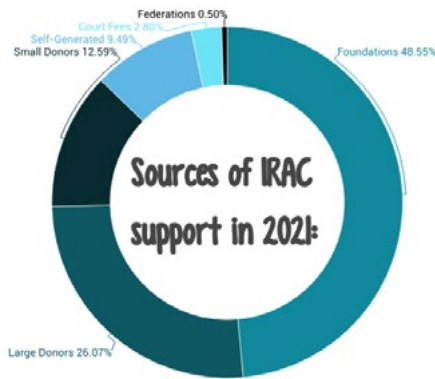
FACING THE FUTURE

These are just some of the issues we will face in 2022:

- Equal rights for progressive Judaism
- The Western Wall Agreement
- The defacement of women and Reform Judaism in the public domain
- Gender segregation and discrimination in cemeteries
- Incitement against Arabs, the Reform movement, and the LGBTQ community
- The lack of State recognition of emerging communities, communities made up entirely of converts
- The deportation of foreign mothers of Israeli children after the marriage to an Israeli spouse has ended (due to death, divorce, or Intimate Partner Violence)
- Racial profiling
- The classification of hate organizations Lehava and La Familia as terrorist organizations.

THE FACE OF THE IRAC COMMUNITY

These achievements and successes are thanks to the support and partnership of the wonderful IRAC community.



Thank you to each and every one of our supporters in 2021!

Join the IRAC Community

You can become a member of the IRAC community by:

- Make a donation to IRAC (see next page).
- Subscribe to the Pluralist, our weekly newsletter, and stay up to date on our activities.
- Join our Facebook group.
- Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

THE FACES OF IRAC

Dear friends, partners, and supporters,

It is with great pleasure that we share the many faces of IRAC, our 2021 annual report which will give you a taste of our progress and achievements throughout the past year. This past year we worked hard to ensure that everyone can show their faces and be heard in Israel. In 2022, which marks IRAC's 35th anniversary, we will continue to advance the pluralistic and democratic Israel that we all strive for.

We are deeply grateful for your friendship, your partnership, and your support – it gives us the strength and motivation to face inequality and injustice and build a better Israel!

Yours,

Anat and Orly

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. The spiritual energy and humanist worldview of Progressive Judaism informs our defense of the freedoms of conscience, faith, and religion from the global resurgence of racism that has manifested in Israeli society.

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.

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!



Increase your impact by becoming an action hero!

Did you know that you (and your donation!) can acquire superpowers? A recurring donation achieves a 42% greater impact than a one-time donation.

Join IRAC's Action Hero Club, our monthly giving program where you can automatically donate a specific amount on a monthly basis.

Leave the legacy of a pluralistic Israel by joining our Social Justice Legacy League!

Legacy giving is a way to make a lasting impact towards the Israel you believe is possible. It is a way for you to ensure the existence of an egalitarian, just, and pluralistic Israel.

By choosing to join our **Social Justice Legacy League** and making a legacy gift to IRAC you are expressing your Jewish value of tikkun olam - repairing the world. Allow us to empower you and represent the Jewish values that tie us together so that we may breathe a new life into Judaism and into Israel.



Israel Movement for Reform
and Progressive Judaism

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