

Jehovah's Witnesses: military service, social hostility and state recognition

Yad Vashem has designated nineteen Jehovah's Witnesses Righteous Among the Nations, an honorific used by the State of Israel to describe non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis.

HRWF (16.01.2017) - There are approximately 1,600 Jehovah's Witnesses in Israel and 300 more in the areas of the Palestinian Authority. They obey the laws of the country, pay their taxes and believe that they are upstanding citizens, but refuse to fulfill one national obligation: to perform military service.

Military service

Young Jehovah's Witnesses are permitted to submit a formal letter to the army declaring that they are members of the community who have been baptized, whereupon they receive an exemption from service – a process that is repeated every year until they reach the age 30, when they are officially discharged from military service. They thus undergo a process similar to those of Orthodox youths studying in yeshivas, though in the case of the Witnesses it is regulated by the military draft law, the last version of which was approved in 2015.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from service since they belong to a special community, and must be presented with a proper alternative due to their way of life," according to the Israel Defense Forces Spokesman's Office. "The exemption is not part of an agreement [with the IDF per se], but is anchored in laws regarding the security services."

On 3rd December 2016, Haaretz published an article written by Netta Ahituv and entitled "A rare glimpse into the insular world of Israeli Jehovah's Witnesses" ([See full article here](#)):

Social hostility

Motti Danziger, 43, a former Jew who became a member of the community as a teenager, says that recently an ultra-Orthodox man followed him into the apartment building where he lives with his wife, who is also a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. The next morning, all the building's occupants found in their mailboxes a letter warning that, despite Danziger's affable exterior, he is a dangerous person who will try to convert them.

Danziger also encountered harassment during his missionary activity. In the town of Nes Tziona, south of Tel Aviv, he knocked on the door of an apartment and was invited in by the woman of the house. But when her husband arrived, he locked the door and threatened Danziger and his associate. After words were exchanged, and Danziger tried to call the police, the man agreed to let them go – on condition that they leave all their written material with him.

In several large assemblies of Jehovah's Witnesses from different cities, participants were met with violent demonstrations. The latest such incident occurred this past June, when adherents who attended an assembly in Rishon Letzion endured attacks that included stone-throwing and physical assaults, apparently organized by the ultra-right Lehava organization (the name is an acronym, meaning "flame") for Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land.

A similar event occurred a year earlier, in Ra'anana, which also involved a legal saga. On the morning of the assembly, the municipality announced that it was canceling the event, "for fear of offense to the public's sensibilities," after discovering that a public hall had been rented by Jehovah's Witnesses. The issue reached the Supreme Court (after the municipality appealed a decision of the District Court that ordered that the gathering could take place), which ruled that the city cannot cancel a gathering on the grounds of religion, as this would infringe on freedom of religion and worship. When it became clear that the assembly would proceed as planned, the city's rabbi, Yitzhak Peretz, organized a demonstration outside the venue. About 1,000 people showed up and tried to break in. Two demonstrators were detained by the police and released shortly afterward.

Unrecognized community

The primary confrontation Jehovah's Witnesses have in Israel is with the state, says Haaretz.

Recognition would accord them various rights, such as being able to marry according to their faith, as well as social, legal and cultural legitimacy, and certain tax benefits.

In August 2000, lawyers for Jehovah's Witnesses sought recognition for them as a formal religious community in Israel via the cabinet secretary, the attorney general and the Prime Minister's Office. Fully three years later, the attorney general's office replied that the decision was up to the government, as the community itself had noted in its request. Following another letter, they were told that only a cabinet minister could place the subject on the agenda, and therefore the attorney general was referring the matter to the interior, justice and religious affairs ministers. Seven years after that, the cabinet secretary informed Jehovah's Witnesses that no progress had been made.

In 2014, another request for recognition was conveyed to the cabinet secretary. A year went by without a reply. A month after the community sent a reminder, the legal adviser to the Prime Minister's Office informed Jehovah's Witnesses that she was rejecting their request. "There are many different groups in Israel that wish to be recognized as a religious community. Accordingly, in the past 40 years, given the broad implications entailed in recognizing new religious communities, the government has not seen fit to change the existing situation," the legal adviser wrote.

The "existing situation" is that the state recognizes only the following religious communities (in addition to Jews): Muslims, Christians, Druze, Circassians, Bedouin, Samaritans, Ahmadis and Bahais. (By comparison, Britain recognizes about 30 religious communities.) Jehovah's Witnesses now believe that, all other possibilities having been tried, the only remaining alternative is the High Court of Justice. A petition to the court to that effect is now being drawn up by attorney Yael Nagar from the law firm of Eliad Shraga & Co.

Concurrently, Jehovah's Witnesses are seeking recognition as a public institution from the Tax Authority as a nonprofit organization engaged in religious activity. This process, which is being spearheaded by attorney Amit Moshe Cohen from the law firm of Doron Tikotzky Kantor Gutman Cederbom, has been ongoing for three years. During that time, representatives of the Israel Tax Authority, after visiting the Jehovah's Witnesses offices in Tel Aviv and being persuaded that the required criteria were met, transmitted the request to the Knesset's Finance Committee. In a meeting held last March, the committee's chairman, MK Moshe

Gafni (United Torah Judaism), announced that he was referring the request to the attorney general because the issue is a matter of "deep public controversy."

No response was received from the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for the attorney general's office, by press time.

Jehovah's Witnesses hope that Haaretz article – the first to enter into the community's usually closed doors since their activity got underway in 1913, in Palestine and Israel – will help reduce social hostility.