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Progressive Jews worry over coalition

By ALLISON HOFFMAN, JPOST CORRESPONDENT IN NEW YORK

Reform and Conservative Jews in the US are watching nervously from the sidelines as Likud negotiates between partnering with Kadima in a national unity government or building a narrow coalition with Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu and Shas.

A deal on the Right could erase modest gains made in recent years by the more liberal branches of Jewry - and would come just as disputes over the power of the Chief Rabbinate are coming to a head amid calls from the Conservative rabbinical association for the rabbinate's dissolution.

Rabbis who spoke to The Jerusalem Post on Thursday declined to endorse any particular coalition - with one saying it would be "foolish" for Diaspora religious authorities to intervene in Israeli domestic politics - but several expressed frustration that Lieberman had acquired a liberal mantle by predicating his participation in a Likud coalition on legislating civil marriage and an eased conversion process.

"He's just attacking the tip of the iceberg," said **Rabbi Ellen Weinberg Dreyfus**, who was elected Wednesday as the new head of the **Central Conference of American Rabbis**, the organized rabbinate of Reform Jewry.

She declined to express any political preference, but said she felt it was important that Israel be open to the myriad ways in which "everyday people" practice their Judaism - particularly Reform Jews, who make up the majority of American Jewry.

"Israelis shouldn't think that this doesn't matter to us - people are watching and people are concerned," Weinberg Dreyfus told the Post. "It seems unreasonable that anyplace else in the world one can become part of the Jewish community in a variety of ways, except in the Jewish state."

Others were more pointed about the realities at stake. "From the standpoint of all of us who want a democratic, pluralist, tolerant Israel, there's not much choice there - it's a choice between two evils, and it's not clear who the lesser is," said Naomi Paiss, communications director for the New Israel Fund, a Washington-based organization that supports progressive causes in Israel, including civil marriages and support for religious pluralism.

She compared the current situation on the Israeli Left to the state of the American progressive movement in 2002 - when Congress, the presidency, "and Fox News" were

all controlled by the Republican Party - and expressed hope that NGOs and nonprofit groups would step in to defend liberal causes.

"The exclusion of non-Orthodox Jews is a slap in the face to the American Jewish public that does support Israel," Paiss added. "You don't have to be in the position of making aliya to resent that our community, which supports Israel in so many ways, is viewed as suspect by the self-appointed guardians of Judaism in Israel."

Yet others said the focus should be on forcing change within religious bodies, rather than through the backdoor of politics.

"I would hope that Lieberman's approach does not divert people from understanding the real challenge, and that is to break the monopoly of the chief rabbinate," said Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

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