

North American Reform rabbis to meet in J'lem this week

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More than 300 Reform rabbis from North America will convene in Jerusalem this week for their annual rabbinical conference, seeking to bolster the tiny Reform Judaism movement in Israel. The six-day event, which opens Tuesday, aims to strengthen the liberal movement's ties with Israel and build bridges to its religious and secular communities.

Although Reform represents the largest denomination of American Jews, the Orthodox establishment has a virtual monopoly on religious life in Israel, where both the Reform and Conservative movements are largely marginal.

The Reform movement in Israel operates 24 congregations, which, like the Conservative movement's synagogues, are not recognized by the state, and do not receive state funding.

"The fact that the largest Jewish community in the world still has not recognized Reform rabbis and Reform Judaism's institution of learning is something that must be fixed," said Anat Hoffman, executive director of the Israel Religious Action Center, the legal and political arm of Reform Jewry in Israel. "I want to see liberal Jews around the world break their silence and make their voice heard," she said, adding that "there was not much room for hope" within Israel on the issue.

The gathering of the **Central Conference of American Rabbis**, which will also focus on Arab-Jewish relations, will include an intra-religious study session with members of all streams of Judaism, and an east Jerusalem tour with "Rabbis for Human Rights," a fringe group which is most widely known for their vocal opposition to the demolition of illegally built homes in east Jerusalem.

The conference will include addresses by both Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat and Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, as well as Labor MK Ophir Paz-Pines.

Religious Jerusalem city councilmen from both Shas and United Torah Judaism, which are part of Barkat's wall-to-wall city coalition and view Reform Jewry as anathema, declined to comment Sunday on Barkat's scheduled address at the conference.

The event will also include the inauguration of the group's president-elect, **Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus**, who leads a small congregation in Homewood, Illinois. Dreyfus, 57, will become the second woman to head Reform's rabbinical assembly.



The annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, which is the representative organization of nearly 2,000 Reform rabbis, takes place in different cities around the world, with Jerusalem serving as host city once every seven years.

The last time the conference was held in Jerusalem was in March 2002, when more than 200 Reform rabbis came to Israel at a time of rampant Palestinian suicide bombings.

"To return to Jerusalem and Israel for our conference every seven years is an important symbolic statement for our movement in terms of our connection to the State of Israel," said Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback of Los Altos, California, a participant in the conference who is relocating to Israel this year to head the Hebrew Union College's year in Israel program.

"If Reform and Conservative Judaism want to stay alive in the world, they must take root in Israel," Hoffman concluded.

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