

## NCJW Board Calls for Civil Marriage in Israel

April 3, 2013, New York, NY — The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) has called on the government of Israel to adopt a system of civil marriage and divorce. The NCJW board of directors released the following statement:

“NCJW is committed to the letter and spirit of respect for democratic values and civil liberties. The monopoly of authority given to Orthodox rabbinical courts in Israel regarding issues of personal status, particularly marriage, weakens rather than strengthens the state itself by causing disunity, disrespect for the law, and even hostility among Israelis and between Israel and Jews abroad. In addition, twenty percent of the Israeli population is made up of members of minority groups whose marriages are similarly governed by the religious authorities of each faith, and who, as a result, face marital issues of their own. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens are denied the right of marriage solely based on issues of religion.

“The government of the State of Israel should take immediate measures to create a mechanism for civil marriage in Israel and to sanction marriage under alternative religious avenues. Such measures will not only deepen respect for Jewish and religious diversity, they will enhance the principles of democracy in Israel and strengthen the ties between Israel and world Jewry.

“Among those affected by the rule of rabbinical courts are:

- > Approximately 350,000 Israeli citizens from the former Soviet Union (who gained citizenship under the Law of Return) whose mother or grandmother is not halachically Jewish;
- > All diaspora Jews who are eligible to obtain Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return but who, nevertheless, may not be recognized as Jews by the Chief Rabbinate because of non-Orthodox conversions and, therefore, cannot marry;
- > Any couple in which the bride is a divorcee and the groom’s name is derived from the traditional priestly caste (eg. Cohen, Katz, Kaplan, Azoulay, etc.);
- > Individuals who have been declared *mamzerim* (illegitimate by a religious court, such as children born from a second relationship after the first marriage was not terminated by a halachic get (writ of divorce), unless they marry other *mamzerim*; and,
- > Same-sex couples or couples of different religions who are not allowed to marry each other in Israel but must marry elsewhere in order for the marriage to be registered by the state.

“Such reform would end the need for those thousands of Israeli couples every year to leave Israel for a civil marriage abroad in order to be recognized as legally married, since Israel must and does recognize marriages performed in other countries as part of its commitment to international law. It would also eliminate the predicament of any Jewish woman in Israel who, required to seek a divorce through

the Orthodox rabbinical courts, must now obtain the consent of her husband or become agunot, chained to an untenable marriage. She (or any couple) could opt for civil divorce.”

The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms.