

Chief Rabbis: Abortion is 'Like Murder'

Israel's two chief rabbis, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger and Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Moshe Amar, have come out in support of the controversial Efrat organization, which opposes abortion in Israel.

"Killing a fetus is like murder," the two rabbis wrote recently in a letter to local community rabbis. They asked the local rabbis to speak about the issue in their sermons, calling on women not to go through with abortions.

In the letter, the rabbis describe Efrat's activities as "working to save the lives of fetuses." The rabbis wrote that in the last three years, ever since a Rabbinic Council meeting was held to discuss the "plague of abortions," there "has been a significant improvement, due to the activity of rabbis and of Efrat."

"The Council of the Chief Rabbinate appreciates the life-saving activity of the Efrat organization," they wrote.

The two chief rabbis also instructed local rabbis to distribute booklets entitled "On the road to happy marriage," and urged rabbis who were consulted about abortions to contact Efrat Chairman Dr. Eli Schussheim for guidance.

Organizers of the right-wing Jerusalem Conference, sponsored by Israel National News and the B'Sheva newspaper, recently announced their plan to award their "Jerusalem Prize" to Efrat.

Women's groups have expressed concern over the rabbinic letter. "Support by public figures for an organization like Efrat is worrisome," said Hedva Eyal, who runs an abortion hotline in Haifa on behalf of the Isha L'Isha organization.

"This is another step in the radicalization of religious figures, and is part of the discrimination against women that we are witnessing not only in the public arena but also with respect to their decisions over their own lives and health."

The Efrat organization achieved notoriety in October after an 18-year-old, Raz Atias, threatened to kill his pregnant girlfriend and commit suicide. Atias was killed in a shootout with police on Oct. 19, while his girlfriend survived, in shock, but unharmed. It later turned out that the couple had been suffering great emotional distress after the girl was pressured by the Efrat organization not to have an abortion.

Two weeks ago, Israel Hayom published an investigative report describing the emotional manipulation that the organization's volunteers employ against vulnerable girls and women considering abortions.

The investigation found that Efrat receives extensive cooperation from municipal welfare services and hospitals, and that Efrat volunteers even work inside hospitals to persuade girls and women not to have abortions. Efrat has an army of 3,000 volunteers, and a budget of more than 12 million shekels per year received from contributions in Israel and abroad.

"Seventy years ago about six million people were eradicated from the Jewish nation," Rabbi Yona Metzger told *Israel Hayom*. "It is our duty today to bring as many children into the world as possible. I am not talking about a pregnant woman who has psychological, medical or familial reasons [for an abortion]. Rather, a woman should never have to have an abortion due to financial considerations, and that is where Efrat comes in."

"The Chief Rabbinate no longer represents the Israeli mainstream but has been infiltrated by haredi (ultra-Orthodox) elements in recent years," said Nurit Tsur, former executive director of the Israel Women's Network. "Israel is turning into a conservative, religious nation that restricts women's

rights over their own bodies and health.

“There is no question we should reduce the number of abortions carried out in Israel, because this is a women’s health issue. But it should be done through better sex education, subsidizing and widely distributing birth control and raising awareness among women of childbearing age.”

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