Israeli protesters resist influence of ultra-Orthodox

by Michele Chabin in the January 25, 2012 issue

With its department-store-sized windows, the Kolben Dance Company's studio faces a busy Jerusalem plaza, but few passersby have ever glimpsed one of the troupe's rehearsals inside.

The studio's shades were drawn three years ago, after extremists from the city's large Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish community threatened employees and defaced their ads. The fundamentalists called the dancers' revealing clothes and mixed-gender moves "provocative" and a violation of Jewish modesty laws.

The management acceded to the pressure, but inspired by grassroots protests against religious coercion that took place in Israel last year, it reopened the windows in late November.

"In the past few years, women have been segregated and eliminated from the public sphere by religious extremists," said Rachel Azaria, a Modern Orthodox Jew and a member of the City Council, as she watched the dancers, dressed in tight costumes, rehearse a contemporary piece. "Now," she said, "the public is finally out here campaigning."

Israel's highly insular Haredi minority—roughly 8 percent of the total population and about a third Jerusalem residents—values piety above all else. What worries outsiders is when Haredi Jews use their size and influence to impose that piety on everyone else.

Haredi Jews have strict dress codes and enforce gender separation in their schools,

synagogues and weddings. Men who study Torah full-time are exempt from mandatory military service, and large families barely scrape by on the wife's wages, study stipends and public assistance. As their ranks have swelled in recent years, so too has their influence in both the public and governmental spheres, and not only in Israel.

Israel's
increasingly Haredi Chief Rabbinate, which has sole authority over Jewish religious matters within the country, has raised the bar for Orthodox conversions performed at home and abroad.

Haredi leaders
have convinced some merchants and government agencies to host men and women separately. They have tried to ban women from singing at public and military events and insist on gender segregation on certain bus lines. Until recently, it was difficult to find advertisements in Jerusalem featuring women or girls; that has started to change after a public outcry.

Kimmy Caplan, an expert in Haredi society at
Bar-Ilan University, said the desire to impose rigid Haredi standards on the wider world stems largely from fear. "There is a battle by certain people in the community, who see women working and what men are being exposed to" in secular society, "and are trying to put up barriers to defend the community. That's what's happening in the public sphere."

Seth
Farber, a Modern Orthodox rabbi and director of Itim, an organization that helps Israelis deal with the religious establishment, places much of the blame on politicians. "To a large extent, nonreligious politicians have handed over religious issues to fundamentalists to acquire yes votes on other issues," he said. "As a result, a small minority are controlling Jewish life in this country."

Unless
Israelis actively counter this trend, Farber warned, "it could cause a major schism in the social fabric of Israeli society."

To some degree, that's already happening. A recent study by the Smith Research Institute for Hiddush-Freedom of Religion in Israel, found that nearly two-thirds of Israelis say "tensions between secular and ultra-Orthodox communities" are the no. 1 or no. 2 most acute domestic conflict.

"I think there's a feeling of empowerment, a feeling that enough is enough, perhaps inspired by the Arab Spring in our region," said Anat Hoffman, director of the Jerusalem-based Israel Religious Action Center, which has spearheaded many campaigns and filed numerous High Court petitions on religious freedom issues.

For the past year, Hoffman's office (affiliated with the Reform movement in the U.S.) has dispatched hundreds of volunteer "Freedom Riders" to ensure that public bus lines remain free of forced gender segregation. Israel's High Court has called such segregation illegal, and Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar has said the idea is "not Jewish law."

In November, thousands of Israelis called on the country's Religious Affairs Ministry to restart issuing marriage licenses to Tzohar, a Modern Orthodox rabbinical group; the group was denied licenses because of pressure from Haredi leaders, according to Tzohar director Rabbi David Stav.

The same month, hundreds of people, ranging from secular to Orthodox, held songfests on street corners to protest attempts to ban women from performing in public places.

Military and government officials have also begun to take action. A group of retired generals appealed to the defense minister not to yield to Haredi pressure to exclude religious male soldiers from events—or military operations—where female soldiers are present. Israeli women, like their male counterparts, are required to serve their country.

Jonathan Rosenblum, a Haredi commentator,
said the vast majority of Haredi Jews are law-abiding citizens who reject extremism carried out in the name of religion. Writing in the Orthodox journal *Cross-Currents,* Rosenblum said Haredi hardliners "distort the Torah to make it something ugly," even as some Haredi live in complete "harmony" with their neighbors. —RNS