

Freedom Riders, Israeli style

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

Vera Kreidlin boarded an empty No. 56 bus for the 25-minute ride from a religious neighborhood in the heart of the city to Ramat Shlomo, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish enclave in East Jerusalem. Dressed in a cotton shirt and jeans on a sweltering July day, Kreidlin opted for a seat near the front, three rows behind the driver.

It would have been enough to make Rosa Parks proud.

Along the way, the bus stopped to pick up fervently religious men in crisp black suits. The vast majority of the women who boarded the bus, all of them modestly dressed, entered through the bus's center door. And every single one headed for the rear.

For years, the No. 56 route has been known as a segregated line, one of nearly 60 public bus lines around the country where women have felt compelled to sit in the back of the bus while the men rode up front.

Although Kreidlin, a 25-year-old graduate student at Hebrew University, appeared relaxed, she was on high alert for passengers who might try to force her—verbally or physically—to join the other women at the back of the bus.

In the ultra-Orthodox world, it is religiously immodest for unrelated men and women to interact on a casual basis, even if they're all crammed onto a crowded bus. In recent years, public bus companies in Israel have tried to woo religious passengers by promoting gender separation.

Last January, Israel's High Court ruled that gender segregation must be entirely voluntary.

"I'm

here to see whether the court's ruling banning religious coercion on public buses is being enforced," said Kreidlin, a secular Jew. "The court ruled that every bus must have a sign stating that passengers may sit wherever they choose, and that intimidating someone is illegal."

The

sign was nowhere to be found on the No. 56. Gazing at the women and girls in the rear, Kreidlin said she has taken many such rides in recent weeks "to show the passengers, and especially the religious women, that they're free to sit wherever they want. Sometimes, when they see other women already sitting in the front, they decide to sit up here too."

On

July 7, the Jerusalem-based Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), which had successfully petitioned the High Court to ban religious coercion on public transit, officially launched a program to encourage visiting Jewish tour groups to ride the once-segregated buses.

Anat

Hoffman, who heads IRAC, said the Freedom Rider program, which was inspired by the civil rights activists who challenged racial segregation in the American South, is a way to share Israelis' struggle against religious coercion with Jews around the world.

Prior to the court

ruling, Israelis and foreigners rode the segregated buses, and their reports were eventually tallied and submitted to the court, Hoffman said. Like the female passengers who initiated the court petition, some of the volunteers were subjected "to verbal abuse, pushing, name calling and shouting," Hoffman noted.

Since the court's decision, Hoffman

said, the number of bus lines that are segregated has fallen from 56 to 16. "On some of these buses," she said, "women can't even go up to the front door to pay for their tickets." Still, she noted, reported incidents of violence or of the driver actively prohibiting women from the front of buses have "decreased considerably."

A bus company named Egged, which runs most of the once-segregated bus lines, declined to comment on the bus monitors. But Egged spokesman Ron Retner said the company has trained drivers and installed signs on every route to comply with the court ruling.

"Except for occasional incidents that interfere with public order, there has been no need for any further involvement," Retner said. The volunteer riders will be expected to sit near the front half of buses on the segregated routes, space permitting, and report any harassment by the driver or fellow passengers.

Amy Milin, a recent graduate of Florida Atlantic University who spent three months interning at IRAC, said the atmosphere on the buses has recently changed for the better.

Standing at a Jerusalem bus stop, Milin, who rode on 60 buses during her internship, said "there were times a group of people crowded around me and said I don't belong here and I'm ruining their religion." But it got better toward the end of her internship, she said.

Milin said the struggle is worthwhile "because there are many, many Orthodox women" who have called IRAC and other organizations "to say they want to be able to sit with their husbands or sons but are afraid to out of fear of being ostracized in their communities."

At another stop along route 56, an ultra-Orthodox high school student who would only give her name as Sarah said she'd head to the back of the bus "not because anyone is forcing me to, but because the Torah commands us to live modestly.

"This is my decision," she asserted, "no one else's."

As for Kreidlin, the Hebrew University grad student who sat up front, if women like Sarah truly want to sit in the back of the bus, that's fine with her. "I would never try to convince a woman to sit in the front.

The goal is to inform people of their option to sit wherever they want," she said. "The issue is free choice." —RNS