Reform and Conservative rabbis in South Florida were excited last week over a decision by the Israeli government to pay many of their colleagues in Israel just as the government pays Orthodox rabbis.

"This is the first time that non-Orthodox rabbis will receive government funding," said Fred Greenspahn, Gimelstob Eminent Scholar in Judaic Studies at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton and an ordained rabbi.

"It's clearly a historic change, a precedent-setting change," said Rabbi Paul Plotkin of Temple Beth Am in Margate, a Conservative synagogue. "These are baby steps, but they're significant. Cultural change takes place slowly."

Plotkin said the decision opens the door for Israelis to "express their Jewish religiosity in more pluralistic ways. They no longer have to be limited to the Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] practice of Judaism."

The announcement by Israel's attorney general followed a case heard in Israel's Supreme Court. A rabbi from a Reform kibbutz community petitioned the high court demanding that local government financing of non-Orthodox religious services conducted by community religious leaders be equal to financing for Orthodox rabbis.

Under an agreement with the government, regional councils and farming communities will receive financial assistance to pay non-Orthodox rabbis. Funding will come from Israel's Culture and Sports Ministry. Israel's Religious Services Ministry provides funds for Orthodox rabbis.

"It was unquestionably political," Greenspahn said. "The pressure has been building for many years for Israel to recognize non-Orthodox forms of Judaism."

Greenspahn said there have been campaigns among the Reform and Conservative movements in the United States who say they do not feel accepted by the state of Israel.

For Jews like those at Temple Beth El of Boca Raton, a Reform synagogue, the Israeli government's policy signals acceptance, said Rabbi Jessica Spitalnic Brockman, associate rabbi.

Reform and Conservative rabbis in Israel are "always practicing on the outskirts of Israeli
society," Brockman said. "This says, no, we're all Jews and we're fighting for the viability of the Jewish state. It recognizes the changing face of the Jewish world. It says there is not one path for Judaism in Israel."

But the agreement does not give Reform and Conservative rabbis authority over matters of religion and Halacha [Jewish law]. They cannot perform weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and other religious ceremonies.

"Providing equal financial compensation to non-Orthodox rabbis for providing pastoral needs when maintaining their communities' needs should not be misconstrued as identifying them as Halachic authorities," said Rabbi Donald Bixon of Beth Israel Congregation, an Orthodox synagogue in Miami Beach. "There is a difference between counseling individuals and understanding the Halachic imperative of conversions and marriages," he said.