



Dear Friends:

On Tuesday night and again on Wednesday I had the pleasure of representing ARZA at meetings with Member of Knesset David Rotem, the author of a bill that deals with conversion. The first meeting was with the top leadership of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. The second was with the key leaders of the Reform movement.

Without going into a lot of detail here, MK Rotem is a member of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party. He is an Orthodox Jew who lives in Efrat, though he does not classify himself as an ultra-Orthodox Jew. Rotem's stated purpose for introducing this bill is to help the new immigrants from the former Soviet Union who wish to be converted to Judaism. The problem is that a growing number of rabbinic judges are ruling that even lenient Orthodox conversions are null and void. Similarly, some Chief Rabbis of cities in Israel refuse to marry these converts if they are not seen as sufficiently observant. MR Rotem wants to solve this problem by mandating that any nullification of conversions be in the hands of a special panel of the Rabbinic Court of Appeal, which is appointed by its President, currently Chief Rabbi Amar. He also thinks his bill will eliminate the logjam that currently exists because local rabbis are refusing to grant conversions. No matter how laudable Rotem's stated goal may be, the fact is that for the first time the Knesset would pass a law giving the authority for conversion to the Chief Rabbinate. The bill is silent on the authority of the non-Orthodox movements, though there is absolutely no reason to believe that the Chief Rabbinate would ever endorse our conversions.

The original version of Rotem's bill says that the Chief Rabbinate will have the authority to "engage" in matters of conversion. After negotiations with the ultra-Orthodox parties, the language was changed to "responsible for" conversions, which, from our perspective, is even more troubling because that words "responsible for" seem to imply exclusivity.

The other troubling article in the bill amends the Citizenship Law by adding an extra paragraph denying automatic citizenship to anyone who has made a prior visit to Israel and then converts to Judaism. The stated goal is to prevent foreign workers from leaving Israel, converting, and then returning under the Law of Return. In actuality, this bill, if passed, would amend the Law of Return through the backdoor. Automatic citizenship—a cornerstone of the Law of Return—will no longer be available for those converts/spouses who have previously visited or stayed in Israel. That is, two classes of converts would be created, each entitled to different privileges under the Law of Return.

During our meetings with him, MK Rotem made it clear that he was not there to negotiate, but to listen to our concerns and to explain the bill. I must say that the most remarkable aspect of our meetings was the unanimity of opinion around this bill. Everyone was respectful and cordial, including MK Rotem. However, everyone with whom Rotem has met has voiced opposition to this bill because of the effect it will have on Jewish unity at a time when Israel needs the support of the American Jewish community, the overwhelming majority of which identifies with the three movements represented at the meetings.

I am not sure we changed Rotem's mind, though he did say that given our objections he will withdraw the bill and the consequence of not having solved the problem of the Russian Olim will then be on our heads. Of course, when we offered to help him find a different way to solve this problem, he didn't accept our offer. It will be interesting to see what happens when Rotem returns to Israel. In any case, there is still much work to be done with those who will decide whether or not this bill should be brought to a vote.

Stay tuned!

Rabbi Robert Orkand, President
ARZA