

**Reform and Conservative Jews fuming ahead of Knesset vote on conversions  
Knesset to vote in first reading Monday bill to grant Chief Rabbinate sole authority  
over conversions in Israel.**

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The Reform and Conservative movements both in Israel and abroad were up in arms on Sunday, a day before the Knesset plenum was to stage its first vote on a proposal that would grant the chief rabbinate exclusive authority to oversee conversions in Israel.

The bill submitted by the Knesset Law and Justice Committee has already spurred a wave of criticism for its proposal that would for the first time make the rabbinate the sole power able to supervise and authorize the conversion process. According to the law, local rabbinical councils – themselves under the rabbinate's jurisdiction – would be able to carry out conversions. If passed, the law would enable those seeking conversion to choose the rabbi with whom they wish to undergo the process.

However, the rabbinical movements not affiliated with the rabbinate see the bill as a method of usurping their authority and subverting the desires of those not affiliated with Orthodoxy to convert according to their chosen religious stream.

The Interior Ministry currently recognizes Conservative and Reform conversions carried out abroad. Those opposed to giving the rabbinate exclusive authority believe that if the bill is passed into a law, the option of converting abroad without Orthodox supervision will be nullified.

MK David Rotem, who initiated the bill on behalf of the committee, said that the proposal should have no effect on conversions carried out abroad. He added that it should also not influence the relationship of Israeli Jews and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

The head of the Reform Movement, Rabbi Gilad Kariv told Haaretz on Sunday that "this bill, in its own words, clearly shows that the cat is out of the bag: MK Rotem cut a deal with the Haredim according to which the Orthodox establishment in Israel will, for the first time, have a monopoly on conversion, in direct contravention of Supreme Court decisions, and promises that were given by political leaders, and contrary to the absolute interest of the immigrants."

Rotem rejected the claims against him. "This is no a change of the status quo on matters of conversion. The claims made by the Reform and Conservatives are an attempt by them to make some sort of gain at the expense of 400,000 new immigrants."

Rotem says that he intends to put forth a much milder version of the bill following the preliminary reading. He is planning to carry out the change through a vague formulation of the bill as it currently stands.

"In the bill it says that the Chief Rabbinate will be given responsibility on matters of conversion in Israel, but it does not way that it will receive exclusive responsibility to

this. Prior to the second and third reading I intend to sit with both the Reform and Conservative in order to incorporate them into the framework of the law."

The Yisrael Beitenu MK explains his indirect approach to passing the bill into law with the need to "ground" the demands of the ultra-Orthodox through a vote and not allow them to set further preconditions on the issue of conversion.

"The Haredi demands are constantly increasing. The more the other communities clash with the Haredim, the more opportunities the Haredim are given to react," Rotem says.

Kariv, for his part said yesterday that "the formula that Rotem is using is a very vague. Rotem is playing with words. The minute the laws says that the responsibility is in the hands of the Rabbinat, it will become necessary to turn to the Rabbinat and ask them every time there is a case of conversion. And this, after for 20 year our conversions abroad have been recognized in Israel in terms of the population registry."

The bill that will be brought to the Knesset this morning comprises four main articles. The first, that the Chief Rabbinat will be give, for the first time, "responsibility for matters of conversion in Israel."

The second includes a significant easing of the process for those wishing to convert: the authority of those able to carry out conversions will be expanded and will include city and local authority rabbis. This will make the locations where conversions will be possible more numerous and lower the delays.

The third will allow conversion candidates with Israeli citizenship to select where they wish to undergo conversion. This will allow them to select an "easier" rabbi, who may make the process easier for them.

The fourth important element in the bill states that "it will not be possible to revoke a conversion that was carried out by a special court, unless the court that carried out the conversion decides that it was done on the basis of false information, or information that was kept from it, by the candidate for conversion, prior to the conversion."

This will bring an end to the arbitrary decisions for revoking conversions that were made in recent months.

"In this way I resolve in a single law the issue of conversion, the issue of revoked conversions and marriages in Israel," Rotem told Haaretz.

"The entire country will become one conversion zone. The number of courts that will enable conversions will increase significantly. This is a historic revolution," the MK said yesterday, stressing that the bill does not affect Reform and Conservative conversions being carried out abroad, which will continue to be recognized by the Ministry of Interior.

Rotem and his colleague in Yisrael Beitenu, deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, traveled to the U.S. recently for talks with the heads of the Jewish communities there in an effort to reach an agreement on the issue of conversions.

Rotem admits that the reason the bill is being brought to a vote today is the deal that has been made with Shas that is expected to help him pass the bill.

"I have been asked repeatedly when will this bill be brought to a vote. I told them that I will do this the minute I have a majority in favor. I think that I have succeeded in this."

When asked about the benefits to his party from the passing of the bill Rotem says that "Yisraeli Beitenu will not have any benefit from this law. But if I want to go to heaven I will present this law at the gates."

We asked for a meeting [with Rotem] and he didn't agree", said Reform Movement head, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, "but we had an impression it was under control. They told they won't pass this bill if we were opposed to it."

"We are shocked, it's contrary to all the assurances that we received," he added. "And the version that is being put forward is worse than the version that he brought in the first place. We are astonished. It's foolish, disruptive. It will cause an anger amid American Jews when Israel needs its support the most."