



The Rotem Conversion Bill – Views and Facts

“The critical point will be giving ultimate authority to the Chief Rabbinate, which is a fundamental violation of the status quo in Israel.” Rabbi Eric Yoffie

1) What is the current Israel law regarding conversion to Judaism in Israel?

- a. The conversion process in Israel is *defacto* under the supervision of the Chief Rabbinate.
- b. Over the past 30 years the Reform movement has won many concessions over conversion through the Israel Supreme Court. The Court has mandated the acceptance of Reform and Conservative conversion in many specific cases.

2) Does Israel recognize conversion of individuals outside of Israel?

- a. The *Government* of Israel recognizes all conversions to Judaism performed outside of Israel for purposes of *granting citizenship* under the Law of Return and for being registered on the population registry.
- b. The *Rabbinical authorities* of Israel do not generally recognize conversions performed outside of Israel for *religious purposes* within Israel.
- c. This dichotomy allows a person to be an Israeli Jewish citizen but the individual or one’s offspring may not be able to marry under the religious status rules within Israel.

3) How is this dichotomy a problem?

- a. Israeli law is that people must be married within their own religious tradition. Moslems must go to the Khadi for a marriage license, Christians to a minister or priest and Jews to a Rabbi. There is no option for civil marriage.
- b. *The only authorized rabbis are orthodox and appointed by the Chief Rabbi.*
- c. Reform and Conservative Rabbis are not authorized to perform weddings within Israel.

4) What are the practical implications of the current situation?

- a. Many couples that wish to wed and do not want to engage with the Rabbinate or do not qualify must leave the country to do so.
- b. There are estimated to be more than 300,000 Israeli citizens from the former Soviet Union who do not qualify as Jewish under the rules of the Chief Rabbinate and thus they or their children can not marry in Israel. This is a potential socially divisive time bomb within the fabric of the society.

5) Will the Rotem bill solve the situation?

- a. The initial purpose of the bill was to solve this problem. It would have authorized the rabbis of every city in Israel to do conversions. The idea was that decentralization from the Chief Rabbinate and Rabbinical courts would allow for greater flexibility in meeting the needs of those who wish to convert. This was premised on the view that with multiple Rabbis doing conversions the central defacto authority would not have the time to effectively monitor the situation, thus providing for multiple standards by multiple rabbis.

However, in the negotiation process, several problems arose.

- b. The current bill gives *de jure* control of conversion to the Chief Rabbinate for the first time in Israel history.
- c. The Chief Rabbis are increasingly ultra orthodox and require anyone who wishes to become Jewish to agree to live an ultra orthodox life.
- d. Most Israelis from the former Soviet Union have no interest in living such a life but do desire to formally be members of the Jewish people in addition to being Israeli citizens.

6) Why should we, Jews of the diaspora, care about this issue?

- a. This bill would have the effect of creating two classes of Jewish people: those who are “legitimate” (i.e. living an ultra-orthodox lifestyle and/or can prove that their parents and grandparents were Jewish) and those who are not legitimate.
- b. Israel is the Jewish homeland. As Jews, we have not only the right, but the obligation to speak out about what it means to be Jewish in the Jewish state and to have our Jewish identity represented there.