

THE RECENT CONTROVERSY over conversions to Judaism raises profound questions about the very essence of the Israeli state.

Is it to be an Israel which truly reflects Theodore Herzl's vision of a liberal democratic society, with freedom of religion for all, including Jews, so that rabbis from all streams of Judaism can conduct conversions, and all streams recognize conversions by the others? Or is it to be a blinkered Israel in which a small dogmatic coterie of religious zealots rules on key social issues? On the face of it, for the now mainly ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate to have exclusive powers to decide who can join the Jewish people is an affront to Jews of all other denominations, especially to the large concentration of Reform and Conservative Jews in America, as well as to the large majority of secular Jews in Israel.

For now, the showdown in Israel and the rift it threatened to cause with American Jewry have been postponed. In late July, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ruled that there would be no new legislation on conversions and no change in the status quo at least until next January. As part of the deal, Reform and Conservative Jews withdrew petitions to the Supreme Court against proposed legislation that would have handed exclusive powers on conversions to the Chief Rabbinate, and agreed to participate in a committee headed by Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, whose aim will be to reach broad consensus on a new conversion law.

The need for new legislation on conversions goes back to the 1990s and the huge wave of immigration to Israel from the former Soviet Union. About one third of the more than one million new arrivals were not Jewish under traditional rabbinic or halakhic law, which considers Jewish only someone born to a Jewish mother or who has converted to Judaism. To many Jews in Israel, the immigrants whose Judaism was not automatically recognized, would have to convert.

To ease and speed up the conversion process, Netanyahu, then serving his first term as prime minister, set up a committee under then-justice minister Yaakov Neeman. Neeman's solution was to establish conversion schools, in which rabbis from all streams would teach Jewish customs and practice to would-be converts, but in which the final authorization of a successful conversion process would remain in Orthodox hands.

Much of the converting took place in schools for halakhically non-Jewish soldiers, run by National Religious movement Rabbi Haim Drukman. Although Drukman is strictly Orthodox, some ultra-Orthodox rabbis impugned his conversion process as too lenient, and in May 2008, a Rabbinical Court of Appeal retroactively revoked thousands of his conversions. Although most were reinstated, the Neeman solution had been gravely undermined, leaving in limbo former Soviet immigrants in need of conversion.

As part of its election campaign in 2009, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, which is supported mainly by immigrants from the former Soviet Union, promised to find a solution. So that it was with the commendable intention of easing the plight of some 300,000 immigrants not considered halakhically Jewish that Yisrael Beiteinu's David Rotem, chairman of the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, proposed that Orthodox municipal rabbis across the country be empowered to convert.

That would have greatly simplified and accelerated the conversion process. The municipal rabbis, however, are Chief Rabbinate employees, a fact exploited by the ultra-Orthodox parties to step in and

demand that the ultimate authority for all conversions, including those by the municipal rabbis, be vested in the hands of the chief rabbis. Rotem, an Orthodox Jew, and Lieberman agreed, creating a strange alliance on the issue between the largely secular Yisrael Beiteinu and the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas, bete noir to most Russian immigrants.

That alerted the Reform and Conservative movements. What began as a liberalizing process to ease conversions, ended up giving the Chief Rabbinate sole authority on the matter of conversions, undoing all the Neeman Committee's balanced, liberalizing work. Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel feared that the proposed new arrangement would squeeze them out of the conversion schools and invalidate a milestone 2002 High Court ruling requiring the Interior Ministry to recognize conversions by all denominations whether performed in Israel or abroad.

For American Jews, the new legislation held several terrors. It could prove to be a slippery slope to their Reform and, Conservative conversions not being recognized in Israel. And it could drive a massive ideological wedge between the world's two largest Jewish communities, implying that for the Israeli Jewish establishment, most American coreligionists are only second-class Jews.

The looming crisis brought intense pressure from American Jewish leaders on Netanyahu. They warned that if the "Rotem Law" passed, they would be less inclined to use their influence on the American administration when it comes to policy on Israel and that American Jews as a whole might be less willing to raise funds for Israel

But the potential breach goes much deeper, and reflects a growing rift between American Jews and Israel's right-wing government, of which Yisrael Beiteinu and Shas are the most hawkish components. Israel is in serious danger of losing the support of the younger generation of mostly liberal Americans, if it is seen as not fully committed to democratic values and free religious expression. And that has implications not only for Israel's position as leader of world Jewry but for its standing in the international community. An Israel that is perceived as less democratic and pluralistic will be in danger of losing traditional bases of Western support.

How Israel deals with the conversion issue is not only a question of its essence as a state, but of how that essence is perceived, with all the attendant ramifications.

Leslie Susser