

Conversion – Israel Style

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Not all religious inhumanity is physical. Mental cruelty is regarded by the Talmud as just as heinous. The games being played in Israel by the State Rabbinate are an absolute scandal. If it were just a matter of religious standards I would only be saddened, frustrated and angry. But when it is simply a matter of power, turf wars and one-upmanship I can find no saving grace at all.

The problems started long ago when the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, agreed that personal religious status would be the sphere of the rabbinate. And this included conversion to Judaism; a matter of some significance in a State which was set up as a refuge for Jews by birth or conversion. From the start the rabbinate only agreed to accept conversions carried out by Orthodox authorities in Israel and the Diaspora. Under the dynamic and brilliant Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren (1917-1994) the Army Rabbinate converted recruits who wished to rectify their status. His lenient approach became the standard and, because of his religious Zionist values, made conversion easier for anyone already living in Israel.

He continued this policy when he became Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi. All the different Rabbinate courts throughout the country were authorized to perform conversions and they were all recognized. Simultaneously, the Charedi courts did their own conversions according to their own standards. Trouble was those standards varied and in both cases there were too many scandals of conversions for money and influence.

To complicate matters, the UK Beth Din, never fans of Religious Zionism, refused on principle to accept Israeli conversions. They chose to be stricter than almost any other Diaspora Beth Din. Had they been acting only on the basis of principle they might have had a point. Sadly they too often found ways of making exceptions when big money played a part.

Originally the Israeli State Rabbinate was dominated by like-minded Religious Zionist rabbanim. But as with all else in Jewish life, over the years they have slowly lost ground, power, and influence to the Charedi rabbinate. In my younger days, no Charedi of any self-respect would deign to take a job in the State Rabbinate and the Charedi world completely ignored them. The current Charedi elder, Rav Eliashiv, once served as a judge for the State Religious Court in Jerusalem. If one mentions that nowadays it is regarded as Lashon Hara. I would say it is compliment. I saw the two camps as being a good thing. The rabbinate catered to the masses, the Charedi world to the super-pious. At least that meant choice. But the need to assert its power and find jobs for its boys has led to the Charedi infiltration of the rabbinate, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi.

The problem of conversions has grown over time, because of the large number of Russians and other non-Jews living in Israel who serve in the Army, may

die for Israel, but cannot be buried in military cemeteries because they are not Jewish by religious standards (only for purposes of the Knesset's Law of Return). Secular and Religious Zionists want to ease their way into the Jewish people. Charedi opinion is that only really genuine and serious converts who intend to lead religious lives should be accepted. Politicians have tried desperately to find a compromise, but have consistently failed.

In 1997, Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman thought he had succeeded in setting up a moderate government conversion agency as part of the Prime Minister's Office, under the Chief Rabbinate. Rav Haim Druckman, an Orthodox Zionist rabbi, was in charge. At the same time, the Army Rabbinate continued to process its own converts within the armed forces. As have further attempts by Member of the Knesset Rotem to moderate the standards while leaving the rabbinate as the final arbiter. Partly because the American Reform movement working through the Jewish Agency blocked any change in Israeli law unless they would be allowed equal standing with the Orthodox, and partly because of suspiciously defective paperwork for Army converts, all these attempts have failed. Last year some Druckman conversions were nullified by more rigid rabbis within the rabbinate. Then the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Amar tried his hand at a solution. No luck. No solution.

I cannot think of a more cruel and religiously hypocritical position than telling people who believe they have been legitimately converted that it was all a mistake. If this is our religion, then no wonder so many Israelis want little to do with it.

So who is going to deal with Orthodox conversions? The State Rabbinate? The Chief Rabbinate whose present Ashkenazi incumbent was planted by the Charedi vote? The Charedi suspected ordinary rabbis of being too soft. So they, in turn, retaliated by refusing to accept Charedi conversions. The crazy situation developed in which some of the most respected Charedi rabbis had their converts rejected by the State rabbis.

A similar problem arose with regard to the USA. Not all Orthodox rabbis were Orthodox enough for the Charedi rabbinate (rightly, so in my opinion, because some really were converting for money). So you would be recognized as a Jew civilly in Israel if a Reform rabbi converted you, because that was deal the Americans worked out with the State authorities. But if were converted by an Orthodox rabbi the Israelis did not recognize, your luck was out! A sort of compromise was reached and the Rabbinical Council of America was asked to submit a list of approved rabbis (which came back suitably emasculated) and the stand-off remains unresolved.

So practicing Orthodox Jews converted by Orthodox rabbis in the USA are now being refused Aliyah as Jews. The Orthodox world has gone mad. There is only one solution, get rid of the rabbinic monopoly on status. Open up the market the way it is in the USA. Anyone can find someone to do what they want to do, just as anyone can give degrees. But if you want to get into a specific college you have to meet their criteria. In fact some Chasidic groups are much easier to convert through, but then would you necessarily want to join them?

There are wonderful, admirable organizations, such as ITIM under Rabbi Seth (Shaul) Farber, are trying to fight for the rights of genuine converts. There are noble and fearless rabbis like Rabbi Marc Angel, who has written an impassioned appeal to find a reasonable solution and stop this nonsense. But in the meantime the situation of conversion in Judaism is a sad joke that only brings all rabbinates into disrepute.