

THE CONVERSION BILL BACKGROUNDER



The Conversion Bill refers to the pending legislation in Israel that would grant the Chief Rabbinate exclusive control over matters of conversion. This bill threatens the legitimacy of Reform, Conservative, and even many Orthodox communities in Israel and beyond. The question of who is a Jew and which denominations are considered valid in the Jewish State are at the heart of this issue.

Understand the background here.

- ❖ On June 25, 2017, the Knesset approved for passage the Conversion Bill, a law proposed by the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) parties to grant the Chief Rabbinate total authority over Jewish conversions in Israel. If passed, conversions performed outside of the Chief Rabbinate's supervision will be unrecognized, with consequences for immigration, marriage, divorce and more.
- ❖ The Reform and Masorti (Conservative) Movements petitioned the Israeli High Court in response to this bill, refusing to allow the Haredi monopoly to further entrench its power unchallenged. In response to this conflict, Prime Minister Netanyahu brokered an agreement to freeze both the petition and the offending legislation for a period of six months.
- ❖ The Chief Rabbinate, **הראשית ליהודים הרבנות** Ha-Rabanut Ha-Rashit Li-Yisra'el in Hebrew, is a seat of power for religious extremists in Israel. Although the role of Chief Rabbi is shared between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, it is ultra-Orthodox and there is no denominational variation in its leadership. This means on issues overseen by the Chief Rabbinate including personal status, kosher laws, burials, and marital arrangements progressive Jewish sects have no state-sanctioned authority.
- ❖ In addition to the monopoly held by extremists in religious matters, they also exercise power as members of the current majority coalition in the Israeli government. Shas and United Torah Judaism hold 7 and 6 seats, respectively. Although they represent a relatively small percentage of the Israeli population, PM Netanyahu's government is so fragile that these parties can gain concessions by simply threatening to leave the ruling coalition. This political math may have informed PM Netanyahu's decision to renege on the Kotel Agreement, a move that emboldened extremist right-wing groups to advance the Conversion Bill as well.
- ❖ The right-wing parties made a dire miscalculation, though. They likely expected progressive Jews to disengage or to respond with limited strength, but the backlash from the Reform and Conservative Movements both within Israel and in the Diaspora was swift and passionate.
- ❖ The Conversion Bill has far-reaching implications touching the very soul of Israel and Jewish peoplehood. The question of who is a Jew is one that all denominations have a right to weigh in on, both within and outside of Israel. If the Jewish State grants exclusive privileges to one group to act as gatekeeper, it diminishes its identity as a Homeland for the entire Jewish people.

- ❖ Some claim the impact of this bill is narrow because its current language only affects conversions performed within the state of Israel. While that is technically true, it does not diminish the concerns of the Reform Movement for two reasons. First, we are present in Israel. The fastest-growing Reform population is in Israel. The number of Reform congregations there has doubled in the last 15 years; the Movement will ordain its 100th Israeli rabbi this year. We will not stand for efforts to exclude and delegitimize our rabbis and communities. Second, as Jerry Silverman, CEO of the Jewish Federations of North America warned when speaking of the Conversion Bill, “The biggest challenge for the North American Jewish community is codifying the rabbinate as the sole owners of conversion in Israel. We think that it will be a **domino effect**, and it opens the door to give them more decision capability well beyond Israel.”
- ❖ The Chief Rabbinate quickly affirmed these fears just days after the Conversion Bill was approved for passage in the Knesset by publishing a “blacklist” of 160 Diaspora rabbis whose letters confirming the Jewish identities of immigrants are not to be trusted. These rabbis span 24 countries and all denominations, from Reform to Conservative, and even to Orthodox.
- ❖ The Haredi parties claimed the Conversion Bill and the “blacklist” exist to solve a security problem. Interior Minister Aryeh Deri attacked those he considers untrustworthy, aiming specific malice at leaders of the Reform Movement. Deri claimed URJ President Rabbi Rick Jacobs would have representatives in Israel “convert anything they come across,” thereby allowing “infiltrators” into the country. This despite no shred of evidence that any individual or group has sought conversion under progressive rabbis in order to immigrate to Israel for illegitimate reasons.
- ❖ The stakes in this debate are incredibly high. Logistically, Jewish status impacts every aspect of life in Israel including marriage, divorce, immigration and related financial issues including tax benefits. The Conversion Bill also has major implications for the recognition of all non-Haredi Jews in the Jewish State. Israel’s Declaration of Independence reads

“The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions”

The Conversion Bill directly threatens the character of the Jewish State that its founders envisioned. This bill widens the chasm between Israel and the Diaspora, extremists and all other Jews, the government and its own citizens. The soul of the Jewish State is on the line.

To ensure the future of the Jewish State as an open, accepting, pluralistic and democratic society, please join the Reform Movement’s [Campaign for Religious Equality](#). With your help we can:

- ▶ Support additional advocacy and legal work in Israel.
- ▶ Strengthen the Reform Movement in Israel by building additional congregations.
- ▶ Assist the reach of the Israeli Reform Movement's public awareness campaign.

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