

[An Appeal for Visionary Religious Leadership: The Issue of Conversion--a Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

Submitted by mdangel1 on Tue, 01/07/2020 - 00:00



Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Yitzhak Yosef, recently stated that it was a mistake for Israel to have taken in so many immigrants from the former Soviet Union. He noted that over 400,000 of them and their descendants are not Jewish according to halakha. He called for a change in Israel's "Law of Return" which grants citizenship to those of Jewish descent, even if they only have one Jewish grandparent. Rabbi Yosef went on to declare that many of these immigrants are not religious, and in fact are anti-religious. In his view, only halakhic Jews should be allowed entry under the "Law of Return."

Needless to say, Rabbi Yosef's words drew harsh criticism from many sectors of the Israeli population. Most Israelis view the immigrants as tremendous assets to the Jewish State. Not only do they constitute an important demographic increase for Israel, they also have brought high levels of education in science, technology, music and many other fields.

But, as everyone knows but few like to speak about in public, there are indeed many among these immigrants who are, in fact, not Jewish according to halakha. Their Jewish status is challenged by the rabbinic establishment when it comes to such things as marriage, divorce, and burial in a Jewish cemetery. There are at least 400,000 people of Jewish descent in Israel—who are not considered Jewish by the Rabbanut. These people and their children speak Hebrew, pay taxes, serve in the military...they share in the overall life of the country—and yet, they are not fully "absorbed" in the country since they are not halakhically Jewish.

Efforts at conversion of these individuals have been severely hampered by the Rabbanut. The Orthodox rabbinic establishment has taken stringent positions on conversion, ignoring the many far more inclusive voices within halakha. The Rabbanut and its cohorts demand that would-be converts—even those of Jewish descent—agree to become fully observant of halakha before being accepted for conversion. A great many of the 400,000 are not ready to make this total commitment.

Rabbi Chaim Amselem has written extensively on the overwhelmingly inclusive views within halakha, especially relating to those of Jewish descent. Our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has supported several of Rabbi Amselem's publications and has published his views in

our journal and on our website. He has made it amply clear that the halakha can accommodate many of the Soviet immigrants and facilitate their halakhic conversions. Unfortunately, the rabbinic establishment has chosen a different path. Instead of finding halakhically appropriate ways of including as many as possible, the Rabbanut—and its followers—create unnecessary stringencies and obstacles that alienate even those who might be interested in a sensible halakhic conversion.

It is truly remarkable that the government of Israel gives authority to a Chief Rabbinate that undermines the harmony of society, and that allows an extremist rabbinic clique to sow seeds of dissension and division in Israeli life. It would have been hoped that the Rabbanut would be at the forefront of responsible religious leadership, that the Rabbanut would seek every possible halakhic means of including—not excluding—many thousands of Israeli citizens.

The “Law of Return” is not the problem. The problem is the Rabbanut and the Orthodox rabbinic establishment in Israel (and the diaspora!). At this historic moment when a visionary religious leadership is so urgently needed...we get, instead, divisive and extreme statements from Rabbi Yosef; divisive and extreme policies vis a vis halakhic conversion; divisive and extreme attitudes that serve to drive people away from Torah and mitzvot.

The real question is: can the halakha address the current situation in a grand, dynamic and inclusive manner? Or is the halakha condemned to be a rigid system best used by a cult rather than by a world religion?

Derakheha darkhei noam ve'khol netivoteha shalom: The ways of Torah are the ways of pleasantness; all its paths are peace.

For important articles on conversion to Judaism, please see:

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/conversion-judaism-halakha-hashkafa-and-historic-challenge>

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/acceptance-commandments-conversion>

<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/periphery-core>

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