

Empowering Local Rabbis: Revisiting the Conversion Issue

The Israeli government recently moved to decentralize the conversion system by allowing local courts to convert individuals on their own.

Ironically, as Israel moves away from centralization, here in America the Rabbinical Council of America is enthusiastically embracing it. The modern Orthodox rabbinical organization recently reaffirmed its commitment to its centralized conversion system, which it calls GPS (Geirus Policies and Standards). Under the system, the RCA accredits only those conversions conducted under RCA's batei din, or rabbinical courts, using the GPS process.

Since its inception in 2008, we have opposed this centralized approach. We still do today. Here's why.

Dangers of centralization: When one rabbi or court controls the conversions of an entire region, the potential for danger is magnified because inappropriate conduct can implicate the entire system. Investing power in a select few invites the question: Who oversees the overseers? And if the court or rabbi is corrupt or abusive, a prospective convert has no alternative but to submit and comply. A decentralized system that gives local rabbis the right to convene and serve on the beit din allows for choice.

Overly strict standards: The centralized beit din system almost invariably relies on the most stringent opinions of halachah, or Jewish law. As a result, the mainstream halachic tradition, which is far more inclusive and compassionate, is ignored. This overly strict approach to conversion causes unnecessary suffering on the part of would-be converts.

Emotional distress: Conversions require that rabbis have a deep understanding of the condition of the particular convert. While clear guidelines are required for conversion, within those parameters halachah provides latitude for individual rabbis to decide who is worthy of conversion. But unlike local rabbis, the centralized rabbinic authority has far less sensibility to the convert's particular situation. Rather than face a rabbi who knows them, the converts must appear before a tribunal. While GPS supporters maintain that local rabbis can be "sponsors" who advocate for their candidates, some of these rabbinic sponsors have told us that they and the converts they represent were often distraught by the rigid, inflexible and often callous approach of the centralized beit din and felt that the convert's particular circumstances were ignored.

Fewer converts: A centralized system, which by definition limits the number of rabbis who sit on conversion courts, can deal with only so many converts, and too many converts are being forced to wait for too long. Only 1,200 people have been converted through the GPS since its creation 6 1/2 years ago - on average fewer than 200 converts per year. With most of the conversions taking place in New York, the system yields fewer than 100 converts annually in the rest of the United States. Certainly every convert who comes forward must undergo a significant process, but we must be more welcoming. These dismally low numbers simply don't reflect this value.

"Out of town" cities suffer: Large cities in America like Baltimore, Denver, Houston, San Francisco and St. Louis have no local GPS court, so potential converts in these cities must travel to a GPS beit din elsewhere. Prospective converts in Denver, for example, must fly to Chicago, where the nearest beit din is located. Bearing in mind that the convert must meet with the beit din even before the actual conversion takes place, this process is frustrating, onerous and uninviting. With relatively few GPS courts across the country, significant backlog and scheduling problems arise. This results in many converts feeling disrespected and unwelcome.

Undermining the local rabbi: The centralized system sends the message that local rabbis are not to be trusted, weakening their position as spiritual leaders within the community. The mission of rabbis is to spread Torah to their communities and help shape the Jewish world. The centralized system undermines their mission and effectiveness.

Slippery slope of centralization: If local rabbis cannot be trusted to do conversions in their own communities, one wonders what the next step will be. Will only select rabbis be able to perform weddings?

Questioning earlier conversions: Despite repeated RCA assurances that pre-GPS conversions would not be revisited, the facts on the ground are otherwise. Institutions that turn to the RCA for guidance regarding past conversions are advised to obtain a retroactive certification from the GPS. Thus, post-GPS guidelines are imposed on conversions done pre-GPS. Just recently, a young man converted by a prominent RCA rabbi 25 years ago told us that he was questioned about his level of observance and then required to immerse again in the mikvah, or ritual bath, for purposes of conversion before being accepted to a graduate-level yeshiva. The policy of reevaluating conversions leaves open the possibility that GPS rabbis of today will have their conversions questioned tomorrow.

Now that Israel is finally doing something to address the harmful influence of centralization of rabbinic authority, we in America should be celebrating our tradition of decentralized and locally empowered rabbinical leadership. The welfare of converts, our communal health and our religious vitality depend on it.

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