Reflections on the Current Conversion Crisis, by Rabbis Marc Angel and Avi Weiss

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Let us begin with the facts: Converts whose conversions were conducted according to halachah, or Jewish law, are 100 percent Jewish.

In the eyes of God and Torah, they are full Jews, just as Jewish as any born Jews. Their Jewishness is not contingent on the Israeli Chief Rabbinate or anyone else. Halachic converts are Jewish, their children are Jewish, they are obligated to fulfill the mitzvot like all other Jews.

Anyone who casts aspersions on the Jewish status of these converts is in violation of one of the most important laws in the Torah: not to oppress the convert.

Yet there are those who raise doubts about halachic converts. With a heavy heart, we note that modern Orthodoxy's Rabbinical Council of America is doing just that. (The RCA is a national organization that includes in its ranks several hundred synagogue rabbis.) Indeed, new information that has come before us leads us to believe that Jews who were converted by RCA rabbis prior to its institution of a centralized conversion system in 2008 known as GPS (Geirus Policies and Standards) should beware – their conversions are now being questioned by the RCA itself. This affects not only them but their progeny as well.

Let us explain:

Prior to GPS, members of the RCA routinely convened a beth din, or Jewish court, and performed conversions. Converts who desired to marry in Israel would turn to the Chief Rabbinate there, through which all Israeli marriages are performed. To

assure that an RCA rabbi's conversion was valid, the Israeli Rabbinate would consult the RCA leadership to ascertain the conversion's validity. The leadership of the RCA would pro forma verify that the RCA rabbis who performed the conversions were members in good standing, knowledgeable and reliable.

This would be good enough for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. In America, too, when leaders of synagogues and day schools were unfamiliar with the converting rabbi, they would seek similar confirmation from the RCA.

As rabbis of large synagogues for many decades, scores of our conversions were approved over the years by RCA leadership. We know firsthand that there are countless other rabbis whose conversions were similarly approved.

This longstanding process was shattered when the Israeli Chief Rabbinate proclaimed in 2006 that even if an RCA rabbi's conversion was confirmed by the RCA leadership, it would not be sufficient.

A few of us urged the RCA to challenge this decision. We urged the RCA to uphold the honor and integrity of its members and, more importantly, affirm the validity of their conversions. Regrettably, the RCA chose to "make peace" with the Chief Rabbinate by establishing the GPS system of centralized rabbinical courts in 2008. No longer would the RCA vouch for conversions performed by its members. Only those conducted by rabbis from the newly formed courts would be approved by the RCA.

In an article we wrote here in March 2008, we argued that the new system would raise questions concerning conversions done prior to GPS. It read: "What is most troubling is that conversions, done years ago with the informal backing of the RCA, are now being scrutinized. This, we believe, strikes at the very ethical fabric of halachah. Over the years, thousands of people have been halachically converted, and now they and their children, and for that matter their marriages, will all be questioned. The pain that this will cause the convert, a person whom the Torah commands to love, will be unbearable."

The RCA, clearly stung by this criticism, responded a day later, dismissing our concerns.

"Public written statements over the last few days have raised questions regarding the status of conversions performed by RCA rabbis in the past, and whether all such converts would be subject to special re-evaluation or scrutiny by the RCA or by Israel's Chief Rabbinate," the organization wrote in a statement. "There is nothing in the RCA/GPS protocol for conversions that implies or states such a

thing, and there was and is no intention to review or scrutinize, much less nullify, previous conversions. *All conversions performed by RCA member rabbis that were considered valid in the past will continue to be considered valid in the future."* (Emphasis added.)

Therefore, it was with deep pain that we read a statement issued recently by the current chairman of the GPS conversion program responding to media reports that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel had rejected several conversions done by leading Orthodox rabbis associated with the RCA beth din. The chairman explained that the RCA had an understanding with the Chief Rabbinate that all GPS conversions were valid. The conversions in question were performed prior to the creation of the GPS system, concerning which the Beth Din of America issued a ishur, a legal attestation, confirming their validity.

The statement went on to say that the RCA was taking "affirmative steps … in consultation with the office of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel to provide greater assurances to those who converted outside of the GPS network of Batei Din and received ishurim from the Beth Din of America."

Summing up the RCA position, the chairman wrote: "The Rabbinical Council of America stands behind every GPS conversion as well as every ishur issued to converts by the Beth Din of America, and recognizes all such converts and their children to be an integral part of the Jewish people, no less than every other Jewish person, including the community of RCA Rabbis and our families."

This statement makes the position of the RCA clear: It will *not* stand behind the conversions performed by its members prior to the establishment of the GPS system unless those conversions receive an ishur by the heads of the Beth Din of America.

This is a major deflection from the RCA's prior promise. Conversions done prior to the GPS system never involved the RCA Beth Din. Now an ishur from the Beth Din of America is required. For the RCA, this ishur will not only be necessary to prove the bona fides of conversions for the Israeli Rabbinate, but for Orthodox synagogues and schools in America, as well.

One wonders what the Beth Din of America will require from the rabbi to issue the ishur. Will it investigate the religious bona fides — as they now define them — of every converting rabbi? How far will the court go back and how deep will it dig? There were RCA rabbis in the 1950s whose synagogues hosted mixed dances.

There were rabbis who were sent by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the era's revered leader of modern Orthodoxy, to mixed-seating congregations in the '60s and '70s. Will all of these conversions be invalidated?

And how about the convert? Will non-observance nullify the conversion retroactively? Suppose the convert seeking the ishur is no longer observant. Or suppose the convert's grandson or granddaughter who is not observant is seeking the ishur. The RCA has a responsibility to be fully transparent and answer these questions.

Unfortunately, the concerns we expressed in 2008 were entirely valid. Any pre-GPS convert will not be pro forma accepted as a valid convert. If the Beth Din of America feels the convert does not meet its standards, for whatever reason, the ishur will not be issued.

With this development, many thousands of people who were converted by RCA rabbis and are fully halachic Jews are now having their status as Jews thrown into doubt. This is a great travesty. Converts with whom we have had contact feel betrayed.

Even RCA rabbis who support the GPS system should stand up with courage and vigorously demand that those who converted with RCA rabbis prior to the GPS system be recognized as the halachic Jews that they are – without an ishur from the beth din. Applying GPS standards to pre-GPS conversions that had previously been accepted is immoral. Members of the RCA must let their leadership know how disappointed and outraged they are by the RCA's change of policy.

It must also be added that not only is the RCA casting doubt on conversions done prior to GPS, it is also sending a message that conversions done today by modern Orthodox rabbis outside of GPS are questionable. This is precisely what happened in the recent case of the highly respected Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of New York, when a conversion he performed outside of GPS was turned down by the Israeli Rabbinate, resulting in grave anguish not only to one of the great modern Orthodox rabbis of our time, but to the convert herself.

By invalidating halachic conversions, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate continues on the path of alienating the masses of Jews in Israel. In linking itself to the Chief Rabbinate, the RCA undermines its credibility as an honest broker relative to conversions, placing power politics ahead of its responsibility to the Jewish people.

(Rabbis Avi Weiss and Marc Angel are co-founders of the International Rabbinic Fellowship. Angel is rabbi emeritus of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue and founder of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He is also a past president of the RCA. Weiss is the founding rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat.)