The Conversion Scandal

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Rabbi Haim Amsalem is an important figure in the religious and political life of the State of Israel. Among his publications are two learned volumes on the topic of conversion to Judaism. A book providing a Hebrew synopsis of these works, Mizera Yisrael, was published with the co-sponsorship of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The Conversion Scandal

By Rabbi Haim Amsalem

We have a scandal in Israel relating to the evil practice that is spreading: the annulment or non-recognition of conversions performed by private rabbinical courts in their localities. These conversions are performed according to the halakha, with circumcision, ritual immersion in the mikva, and acceptance of the mitzvoth.

This unprecedented aspersion of halakhically valid conversions emanates from Israel's Chief Rabbinate which sees itself as though it were the great Sanhedrin of old. The Rabbanut unjustly invalidates conversions not performed under its authority or by those who are obedient to its authority. They annul or invalidate halakhic conversions [not done under their authority], something unprecedented and blatantly against the halakha. This position is in violation of the Talmud's clear statement (Yevamot 47b): "One who has immersed and emerged from the mikva is a Jew in all matters. What is the legal implication of this statement? If he later repudiates [his conversion] he is to be considered as an apostate Jew. If he marries a Jewish women, the marriage is valid [since he is Jewish]."

Maimonides rules according to this Talmudic passage (Laws of Forbidden Relationships 13:18), as does the Shulhan Arukh (Y.D. 268:12). Even if the convert repudiates the conversion—the conversion is not annulled! Yet, today, the Rabbanut [and its followers] invalidate and annul conversions with a light hand even when the convert loudly proclaims that he/she is Jewish!!! Maimonides ruled that even a convert with many shortcomings is still a valid convert. Even if the rabbinic court did not check on his motives, even if he did not openly accept the mitzvoth, even if it was known that he converted for ulterior motives, and even if he later changed his mind—even so, such a person is a valid convert!

Maimonides (Ibid., 15 and 16) explains that even though the Great Court was not pleased with conversions done for Samson and King Solomon, [these conversions were done under private auspices], the Great Court did not invalidate them….

Rabbi Shimon ben Tsemah Duran, in his Responsa (3:47) acknowledged the principle that conversions are valid and not subject to annulment even if the convert changes his mind immediately after the conversion. But now the Rabbanut and its followers overlook the previous halakhic rulings and issue

unfounded and incorrect rulings that annul and don't recognize conversions done by other rabbis.

This creates a situation of absolute desecration of God's name….It simply has not happened in recent history that a conversion performed by proper and learned rabbis has been invalidated. Rabbinic authorities have urged that one should not be overly lenient in accepting converts etc; but to actually invalidate a conversion once it has been performed—this is unheard of!...

It is an obligation for all those who seek truth and upright thinking to rise and protest loudly against this great sin that entails an absolute desecration of God's name. Certainly in this matter there is not only a desecration of God's name but also the sin of oppressing converts. Terrible problems arises when halakhic converts are deemed to be non-Jewish. Those who [so oppress converts by not accepting the validity of their conversions] stand guilty and they will have to face the judgment of Heaven.