The Conversion Crisis--a New Glitch

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Questions of personal status are among the most sensitive issues in Judaism and thus require responsible rabbinic leadership.
That is one reason why there was such an outcry last year when Israel's Chief Rabbinate refused to allow my teacher, Rabbi Avi Weiss, to vouch for the Jewishness of a couple marrying in Israel. While the Chief Rabbinate ultimately backed down and agreed to accept Rabbi Weiss' word, there are still unanswered questions regarding this episode.

On Jan. 4, 2014, the Rabbinical Council of America — a leading Orthodox rabbinic association — issued this statement: "Recent assertions that the Rabbinical Council of America advised the Chief Rabbinate of Israel to reject the testimony of RCA member Rabbi Avi Weiss are categorically untrue."

The problem with this statement is that when I visited the chief rabbi's office with Weiss' attorney, we were told directly that the chief rabbinate was acting upon the recommendation of RCA officials.

We may not know who is telling the truth in this case, but we do know that the RCA has not been candid about its recent approach to conversion.
In 2007 the RCA drafted a new centralized policy on conversions. This policy brought conversions under the auspices of a new and more stringent approach. At the time, there were some who warned that this new policy could lead to retroactive annulments of previously accepted conversions.

But the RCA protested loudly that it would never retroactively reject conversions and that to do so would be a blatant Torah violation. In 2008, the RCA's Rabbi Steven Pruzansky dismissed suggestions that the new policy would lead to the reevaluation of all past conversions by RCA rabbis as "an especially despicable falsehood, as it serves only to make generations of converts in the Jewish community anxious about their status and acceptance in the community at large."

"The reality is that not one past geirus is being reviewed by the RCA or the Beth Din of America, and such was never contemplated," he wrote, using a term for conversion. "To even suggest otherwise is to blatantly violate the Torah's numerous admonitions against tormenting the ger."

Yet we now know that the RCA is casting aspersions on prior conversions by its own members. We know this thanks to Karen Brunwasser, who last month wrote about her personal ordeal in The Washington Jewish Week.
Brunwasser spelled out how, despite her Orthodox conversion nearly 35 years ago, she was rejected by the Israeli chief rabbi's office in her initial attempts to establish her Judaism and thereby marry her beloved fiancé. She wrote movingly of the emotional turmoil she went through and how she was concerned that it might affect forever her relationship with the new family she was hoping to join.

The RCA, through its Beth Din of America, played a crucial role in actively hindering Brunwasser's effort to marry.

Brunwasser converted as an infant with a beit din made up of Orthodox rabbis who were graduates of Yeshiva University's rabbinical school and RCA members. Rabbi Bernard Rothman, a former RCA vice president, wrote a letter to the chief rabbi's office vouching for Brunwasser's conversion. In this letter, Rothman praised the head of the beit din that converted Brunwasser, Rabbi David Wachtfogel, as an Orthodox rabbi of the highest standards.

However, as was the case with many RCA rabbis of that era, he was for a time a rabbi in a synagogue in which men and women sat together. Many of these rabbis took jobs at synagogues with mixed seating after receiving explicit guidance on the matter from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, mainstream American Orthodoxy's leading authority.

In the past, conversions by Orthodox rabbis who had served in mixed-seating congregations were routinely accepted in the Jewish community. But now, thanks to the direction of the current leadership of the RCA, such decades-old

conversions are being rejected.

Thus, on Aug. 11, 2013, Rabbi Michoel Zylberman of the RCA's Beth Din of America wrote the following in an email to Israeli chief rabbi's office regarding Brunwasser's conversion: "We are unable to approve the conversions done by a rabbi who serves in a synagogue without a mechitza."

Zylberman continues: "Of course, one can argue with this position and if you want to be lenient here on the basis of other authorities you can do that which is right in your eyes."

Responding to apparent confusion on the part of the chief rabbi's office regarding Rothman's current status with the RCA, Zylberman concludes: "With respect to the letter of Rabbi Rothman in which he is signed as a 'former Vice-President of the RCA,' that was twenty years ago and he did not sign in the name of the organization."

Despite what the RCA promised in 2008, it is retroactively negating and rooting out converts who were for decades fully integrated into the Orthodox Jewish community. In doing so, it has set a dangerous precedent that should make every convert afraid and all of us angry and disappointed in its leadership.