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Every year, thousands of non-Jews make the fateful decision to convert to Judaism. Some are seeking spiritual fulfillment. Many are married to or planning to marry a Jewish spouse. Others have a Jewish father or grandparent and desire a full sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Some have discovered Jewish ancestry and wish to reconnect with their roots. Many are living in Israel and want acceptance as Jews in the Jewish State. Whatever their original motives, they are a remarkable--and growing--part of the Jewish people.
The conversion phenomenon should be a source of celebration for Jews. Each convert gives eloquent testimony to the ongoing attractiveness of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood.

At a time when thousands of people are considering conversion to Judaism, however, Israel's Orthodox rabbinic establishment is raising ever higher barriers to them. While Israel's chief rabbinate accepts candidates who are willing to become fully committed Orthodox Jews, it will not readily accept those who are not ready for total commitment. Thus, a would-be convert must usually spend years studying Torah and halakha, or Jewish law, and adopt an entirely Orthodox lifestyle in order to be considered for conversion.

Now, Israel's increasingly extreme chief rabbinate is attAempting to impose its views on the Jewish Diaspora. Here in the United States, it has already forced the Rabbinical Council of America--the Diaspora's largest Orthodox rabbinical association--into line.

In the spring of 2006, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, Israel's chief Sephardic rabbi, proclaimed that the chief rabbinate would no longer accept conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora, except for those specifically approved by the chief rabbinate. The RCA had to decide how to respond to this affront to the integrity of its members. After all, the chief rabbi was basically saying that RCA members cannot be trusted to do proper halakhic conversions.

Sadly, the RCA leadership capitualted to the demands of Rabbi Amar. The RCA agreed to establish regional rabbinic courts to handle conversions in line with the dictates of the chief rabbi. This means that individual RCA rabbis may no longer perform conversions and expect them to be sanctioned by the RCA--or by the chief rabbinate in Israel. Power is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, and only into the hands of those who agree to adopt stringent and restrictive positions. The result is that many non-Jews who considered halakhic conversion will turn to non-halakhic means of conversion, or will give up on conversion altogether.

This is a tragedy--and an unnecessary one at that, since there is no halakhic reason why the chief rabbinate's view should carry the day. The Talmud and classic codes of Jewish law actually grant considerable leeway in the halakhic acceptance of converts. While converts must "accept the mitzvoth" there is wide latitude in understanding what this phrase means. The Talmud itself says that we must instruct the candidate for conversion in "some of the major and some of the minor commandments." There is no requirement or expectation that the candidate must learn all the mitzvoth in advance of conversion, nor that he or she will promise to keep all the mitzvoth in every detail after conversion.

Yet, many contemporary rabbinic authorities have taken a far narrower and more exclusionary view. Zvi Zohar and Avi Sagi (in their book Giyyur veZehut Yehudit) found that the narrow view gained traction only as recently as 1876 when Rabbi Yitzchak Shmelkes ruled that conversion was to be equated with an absolute commitment to observe all mitzvoth. Any candidate for conversion who was not committed to becoming fully Orthodox in observance was to be rejected. Later rabbis adopted this new position, until it became normative among right-wing (and much of the rest of) Orthodoxy.

Of course, great rabbinic voices opposed this radical change in approach. They favored maintaining the far more flexible and inclusive views of the Talmud, Maimonides and Shulhan Arukh. A great representative of the classic halakhic view was Rabbi Benzion Uziel, who served as Sephardic chief rabbi, first in British Mandate Palestine and then in the State of Israel, from 1939-1953.

Rabbi Uziel argued that not only may rabbis do conversions in less than ideal circumstances, but they are obligated to do so--even when the would-be convert is not expected to become fully observant religiously. Since so many conversion cases involve intermarriage or potential intermarriage, Rabbi Uziel believed we should perform conversions in order to maintain whole Jewish families that can raise Jewish children within the Jewish community. He viewed himself as being

"strict" in his opposition to intermarriage, not as being "lenient" in matters of conversion.

Historically, the halakha has allowed rabbis to draw on the full array of halakhic sources; to consider the nuances of each individual conversion case; to use their own judgment on whether to accept or reject a candidate for conversion. Now, the halakhic options have been sharply curtailed. A rabbinic bureaucracy is usurping the authority of individual rabbis.

Several important Orthodox voices in Israel and the United States have risen in protest of the vast injustice being committed in the realm of halakhic conversion. In matters of conversion, we are not dealing with an abstract legal nicety: we are dealing with real human beings with real families. We have a responsibility to address issues of conversion with a full halakhic toolbox. Indeed, our tradition demands this.

Rabbinic tradition teaches that one who oppresses a convert is violating 36 Torah laws. How many laws will be broken by the Orthodox rabbinic establishment in causing torment to halakhically valid converts and their children? How many tears will be shed by victims of religious narrowness? How many would-be converts will be turned away from any possibility of a life of Torah and mitzvoth due to the intransigence of certain rabbis?

This is precisely the time when we need a visionary, inclusive Orthodoxy that can convey the messge of Torah Judaism in a spirit of love and compassion. I believe this kind of Orthodoxy will rise again. I believe that every Jew can help make this happen.