The Conversion Crisis

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The Chief Rabbinate of Israel has taken a restrictive, hareidi view on conversions to Judaism. They have imposed "standards" that are unrealistic for many would-be converts, and which are not required by the halakha itself. The Rabbinical Council of America has essentially capitulated to the Chief Rabbinate, and is now in the process of establishing regional courts in the U.S. and Canada that will adhere to the extremist opinions relating to conversions. Orthodox rabbis, members in good standing of the RCA, who perform conversions outside the RCA system will not have their conversions endorsed by the RCA. Thus, in order to be "accepted" by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, American converts will now be faced with an increasingly rigid rabbinic bureaucracy.

Some RCA leaders have said that the RCA did not capitulate to the Chief Rabbinate, but rather developed the new system independently. This is puzzling, since the RCA only began this "independent" process after the Chief Rabbinate announced it would no longer accept conversions performed by RCA members; after the RCA had ongoing meetings and consultations with the Chief Rabbinate to see what the RCA could do in order to stay in the good graces of the Chief Rabbinate; after the RCA feted Chief Rabbi Amar in New York and Chicago; after the RCA made a large media campaign proudly announcing the agreement it had made with the Chief Rabbinate. Can this really be described as an independent RCA process? In fact, all along the members of the RCA committee knew they would need to come up with a system that would be approved by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel. Whether or not the Chief Rabbis sat on the RCA's committee, they certainly influenced in a powerful way the results of the RCA's committee. Indeed, the committee's obvious mandate was to win the approval of the Chief Rabbinate for the RCA's plans.

In my view, the proper position of the RCA should have been to defend the honor and integrity of its members. It should not have allowed the Chief Rabbinate to dominate our policies and standards, but should have insisted that the Chief Rabbinate continue to recognize RCA conversions as it has done for a great many years.

My views on the topic of conversion are well known. I have written a book, Choosing to Be Jewish: The Orthodox Road to Conversion (available from the online store on this website), pointing out the diversity of legitimate views within halakha, and arguing that the Orthodox rabbinate and community should be fostering a far more compassionate and inclusive policy. Please see my article "Slamming the Door on Converts" in the Min haMuvhar section of this website; please also see the Responsa section on this website for Prof. Zvi Zohar's article, as well as the piece on Rabbi Uziel's wonderful responsa on the topic. Likewise, please see Rabbi Isaac Sassoon's essay in the Articles section of our website.

Why am I so upset--and why should all thinking Jews be so upset--about the current developments? Here are a few reasons.

1. Halakha provides an array of legitimate views in the area of conversion to Judaism. Indeed, the Talmud, Rambam and Shulhan Arukh are considerably more "liberal" in this area than are the current leadership of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel and the RCA in America. The attempt to create "unified standards" is simply a code phrase that means: the most stringent standards. All other views are dismissed and discredited. This is a crass violation of the halakhic process--that passes itself off as being in the category of "raising standards". It narrows halakha and robs it of its dynamism and grandness of scope. It allows a small group of rabbis to arrogate authority to themselves, at the expense of all those who differ with them.

2. Many people will suffer due to these rabbinic bureaucratic decisions. Over the past years, I have received calls, letters and emails from literally hundreds of desparate individuals seeking Orthodox conversions--but who have been turned away or treated callously by the Orthodox rabbis they approached. As bad as the situation has been, it will now sink to even worse levels. Rabbis who have been inclined to work with potential converts are now told that they either must cede their authority to the rulings of the RCA, or be effectively disenfranchised. Thus, there will be even fewer Orthodox rabbis to whom would-be converts can turn; and even these rabbis will have their hands tied by the dictates of the RCA's policies which grant very little individual discretion to the rabbis.

Another problem relates to the Jewish status of those who have been converted by RCA rabbis in the past. Some leaders of the RCA have stated that past converts should not worry, and that it is "patently untrue" that past conversions will be subject to review. Yet, the RCA (to the best of my knowledge) has never stated clearly and unequivocally that all past conversions performed by RCA members will be accepted as valid; nor has the Chief Rabbinate in Israel made such an assertion. Rather, statements of RCA leaders have been quite cautious--to the effect that conversions that were "previously deemed acceptable" will continue to be accepted. The question is: "previously deemed acceptable" to whom? Piecing together various statements of RCA leaders, it would seem that only those converts will be deemed acceptable who have been converted according to the current guidelines and standards of the RCA. If someone converted years ago, and has not been fully Orthodox in religious observance, it doesn't seem likely that the current RCA system or the Chief Rabbinate will deem these conversions acceptable--even though they have fulfilled the requirements of halakha according to the Talmud, Rambam, Shulhan Arukh and many great rabbinic decisors. In fact, the new system seems to promote the view that the burden of proof is on the convert to establish his/her status as a Jew.

Until this new policy came into effect, the usual procedure was for Orthodox rabbis to accept the conversions of other Orthodox rabbis (except in a few cases of rabbis who blatantly disregarded even minimal standards for conversion). When Orthodox converts went to Israel, the rabbanut there generally approved of their Jewish status; when they had questions, they would/could call the RCA office (or Orthodox rabbis whom they knew) for further clarification. This system was based on general trust and mutual respect. Although not perfect, it functioned well and served the needs of many converts and their families. Now, the new system works on the principle of mistrust and disrespect; it does not assume conversions were done properly or that rabbis have the knowledge and integrity to do conversions according to halakha. The new system will endorse only those rabbis who will follow its rules and are willing to give up their rabbinic autonomy.

3. The new policies have built in delay mechanisms so that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for a candidate to be converted in less than two years. In the case of women candidates, this can diminish the number of children they might have; if the women are around 40 years old, it may deprive them of having children at all. Is this fair to these women? Is it fair to the Jewish people? Is it morally acceptable to create unnecessary obstacles to conversion, to prevent Jewish children from being born, to hinder the possibility of couples and families to function within the (Orthodox) Jewish community?

4. The Chief Rabbis and the RCA say that conversions done outside their authority will not be "accepted". I had always thought--and continue to think--that the important thing is for conversions to be performed according to halakha and to be "accepted" by the Almighty! If individuals are converted according to halakha, then the Chief Rabbinate and the RCA have no right whatsoever not to "accept" such conversions. On the contrary, to deny or cast doubt on halakhic conversions is a sin of the first magnitude. Rabbinic tradition teaches that oppressing a convert is a violation of 36 (and some say 46) commandments! If the Chief Rabbis or the RCA do not endorse conversions done by Orthodox rabbis who follow halakhic procedures, then the Chief Rabbis and the RCA will have much to answer for when they have to explain themselves to the Almighty.

5. The rabbinic bureaucracy in Israel is notoriously unpopular and increasingly out of touch with the needs of the general population. A great many innocent people suffer due to the deficiencies in the rabbanut's system of operation. With the RCA's agreement with the Chief Rabbinate, the problems of rabbinic bureaucracy will be imported to North America as well. Many wonderful potential converts will suffer; others will turn to non-Orthodox rabbis; yet others may decide not to convert altogether. It is indeed time to "raise standards" for conversion: the standards of love and compassion, inclusiveness and respect, the love of God and the love of Israel. It is time to focus on the commandment to love the proselyte, and to help those sincere souls who wish to enter the fold of Israel.

6. If you share our views on this matter, please let your voices be heard by your rabbis and communal leaders. Rabbis and laymen alike must stand together in resisting the tide of extremism and authoritarianism. If not us, who? If not now, when?