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The confrontational politics of conversion

Thursday, 12 August 2010

The establishment of Israel, the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and the unprecedented renaissance that this has triggered are momentous developments, but there are some unresolved issues.



Gerald Steinberg

For example, for 62 years, we've been unable to decide on key questions such as "Who is a Jew?" or "Who is a rabbi?" and what role religious traditions, developed over 4,000 years, should play in our modern Jewish state. The struggle over these issues also causes some discomfort for Jews in the Diaspora, who are far away from the debates, but strongly affected by their outcomes.

The recent storm over a proposed change in procedures for Israeli converts to Judaism provided a strong reminder of these difficulties and how they're exploited for political gain. Of the more than one million Israelis who arrived from the former Soviet Union over the past 20 years, about 300,000 aren't Jewish under religious law, meaning their mothers were not Jewish.

However, most have always considered themselves Jews and want to be recognized as such. Without conversion, they're also unable to get married in Israel. (Some go to Cyprus or further away to get married, and when they return, their union is recognized. But this is humiliating, and their children are likely to face the same exclusion.)

Instead of helping resolve this growing problem, the Israeli rabbinical establishment, which is empowered and funded by the state, gained control of the process, demanding that candidates for conversion demonstrate commitment to a religious lifestyle. Since the Reform and Conservative movements are seen as foreign inventions, even among secular Israelis, the haredim hold a virtual monopoly. And to protect their power, as well as deeply held convictions, the future of the Jewish people is threatened by the rebellion against religious law and practice. This has resulted in slow-moving conversion procedures that alienate most applicants.

A number of efforts have been made over the years to make conversion more user friendly, but the rabbis in charge responded by tightening procedures even further. After the 2009 elections, Knesset members and ministers from different parties made another effort to break this impasse with legislation to introduce competition among rabbis. Instead of having to go through local religious council and accepting their dictates, candidates for conversion could go to rabbis from other localities.

At this point, the rabbis who head the religious parties, with support from about 20 per cent of Israeli Jews, demanded amendments in return for support. Ultimate authority for conversion would have been formally granted to the Chief Rabbinate, either as a symbolic gesture or to block meaningful changes. Because the religious parties hold the balance of power and can bring down the government, no prime minister, including Benjamin Netanyahu, is willing to risk their wrath.

Mirroring their Israeli counterparts, the rabbinical power structure in the Diaspora chose confrontation, rallying Reform, Conservative and unaffiliated Jews through shrill and misleading allegations. This legislation would not have changed the status of Jews and conversions carried out in the Diaspora, but the hype ignored this point. And while the proposal would have provided incremental improvements, at best, predictions of a "disaster" for the Jewish people were part of a campaign of fear.

The New Israel Fund (NIF), which is involved in other controversies, added more fuel to this fire. Daniel Sokatch, NIF's executive director, grossly mischaracterized the complex Israeli debate as dominated by "the Orthodox, the hardliners and the evangelicals." These and other self-described liberals showed that their tolerance and calls for dialogue don't extend to groups that don't accept their agendas.

As the storm increased, Netanyahu, Jewish Agency head Natan Sharansky and other Israeli leaders intervened to scrap the legislation, meaning that the failed procedures will stay in place until another attempt can be made.

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Sunday



To resolve the conversion crisis, Israel's modern Orthodox leadership will have to stand up to the haredi power structure, and they'll need positive support from Jews around the world, in contrast to the recent confrontational approach. The challenges of posed by Israelis realities are difficult enough without adding more conflict.

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