



July 27, 2010

CONVERSION BILL SHOULD NOT DIMINISH DIASPORA SUPPORT OF ISRAEL

Rabbi Mark S. Golub
President, Shalom TV

The campaign of the Conservative and Reform Movements to generate American opposition to the Rotem Conversion Bill in Israel was remarkably successful. The bill has been tabled for six months and may never see the light of day again. Unfortunately, however, the campaign overstated the threat the bill posed to non-Orthodox American Jewry and unnecessarily angered large numbers of uninformed Jews over a bill which actually does not address them at all.

The Anglo Jewish media joined in the chorus warning of dire consequences were the bill to become law, while failing to separate fact from hysteria for their readers. Jewish headlines in newspapers and blogs echoed the erroneous notion that the bill resurrected the "Who is a Jew?" question and was an assault by the ultra-Orthodox establishment in Israel on Israel's Law of Return, on non-Orthodox conversions in America, and on the legitimacy of Conservative and Reform Judaism.

The most disturbing aspect of the campaign, however, was the subtle suggestion that the bill would jeopardize the bond between Diaspora Jewry and the State of Israel and would therefore threaten the security and future of the Jewish State.

The Union of Reform Congregations ran a headline in its weekly briefing, "Take Action Now! Attack on Pluralism Threatens Israeli-Diaspora Relations." Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Conservative movements Rabbinical Assembly, and one of the most articulate and passionate proponents of Jewish pluralism in Israel, also described the bill as a blow to Israel-Diaspora relations that would be "damaging to Israel's security" because "the great majority of American Jews" will consider themselves "second-class citizens officially in the eyes of the Jewish State."

A newspaper headline warned of a "conversion crisis" that could "threaten pro-Israel efforts" in America (*Jewish Week*, July 23, 2010), and described how the Rotem Bill is "alienating Israel's friends" (*Forward*, July 23, 2010). Articles declared that the bill threatens to contribute to "a seismic shift in the base of the pro-Israel movement in America."

Perhaps the most pernicious diatribe against the bill was Alana Newhouse's op ed piece in the *New York Times* (July 15, 2010). Her article misstated the real issue; inaccurately described the actions of the Talmudic sage Hillel (he "accepted" rather than "converted" a person for conversion on the spot); and, in an aside worthy of a supermarket rag, slandered the entire ultra-Orthodox rabbinate by citing the sins of one lone rabbi (I do assume Ms. Newhouse knows there are sinners within the Conservative and Reform rabbinates as well.)

Still, the Newhouse piece, however flawed, ran dead center on the *New York Times* op ed page and brought the issue to the attention of a legion of American Jews who normally are uninterested in such details of Israeli life but who, as a result of the *Times* piece, suddenly felt personally insulted and threatened. Ms. Newhouse announced to all of America that in the Rotem Conversion Bill Israel is telling "85 percent of the Jewish diaspora that their rabbis weren't rabbis and their religious practices were a sham, the conversions of their parents and spouses were invalid, their marriages weren't legal under Jewish law, and their progeny were a tribe of bastards unfit to marry other Jews."

In point of fact, the Rotem Conversion Bill says nothing of the kind. Despite what American Jews might believe after reading Ms. Newhouse's editorial and receiving emergency e-mails, the Rotem Conversion Bill does not address any aspect of American Judaism at all.

The bill never mentions the Law of Return and would have no impact on the way it would apply to any Diaspora Jew. If the bill were to become law, it would do nothing to change the current process by which Conservative and Reform conversions in America are accepted as valid for Jews seeking Israeli citizenship.

The Rotem Conversion Bill does indeed propose changes on the Israeli scene. To facilitate more opportunities for conversion in Israel, especially for thousands of Russian immigrants who now serve in the Israeli army and who wish to become part of the Jewish people, the Rotem bill would give local city rabbis the right to perform conversions. Most people approve of this goal of the bill.

The bill's author, K'nesset Member and Law Committee Chair David Rotem (Yisrael Bieteinu Party), added that the bill would formalize Orthodox control of conversions in Israel by placing them under the authority of the Chief Rabbinate and by stipulating that converts would have to commit to living a life of Halakhah (traditional Jewish Law).

For Israelis, there is nothing really new or dramatic in the Rotem bill. In contrast to what many American Jews might assume from the outcry among their leadership, the bill would do very little to change the current de facto ultra-Orthodox control of the conversion process.

The real issue, then, is not "who is a Jew" or the Law of Return. The real issue is the way the Rotem Conversion Bill might obstruct the future of Jewish pluralism in Israel.

It is perfectly understandable for the leaders of non-Orthodox institutions to be angered by the Rotem Conversion Bill. The Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements have been working tirelessly to bring Jewish pluralism to Israel, and their leaders describe with justifiable pride their significant progress. Were the Rotem Bill to become Israeli law, it would be a setback in their struggle.

Speaking on Shalom TV, Jerry Silverman, the brilliant and charismatic new leader of the federation movement of North America, put his finger on the only real danger posed by the Rotem Conversion Bill: it paves the way toward a "slippery slope." While there is nothing in the bill either critical of or relevant to American Jewry today, passage of the bill could embolden the Chief Rabbinate to try, at a future time, to extend their power in Israel and even seek to delegitimize non-Orthodox conversions in the Diaspora for the Law of Return.

This warrants opposition to the bill, but not with the sense of calamity that characterized the American response. Moreover, it is virtually inconceivable to believe the Israeli K'nesset would ever enact a law that would truly alienate the vast majority of Diaspora Jewry. It may be fun for media pundits to suggest that Israelis are that "stupid," but they are not suicidal. They well understand, and have just been given an object lesson in, how powerful and effective the Diaspora lobby can be when it wants to mobilize American Jewish support.

I, like the vast majority of American and Diaspora Jews, would love to see Israel adopt a pluralistic view of Judaism so that Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis would have equal legal standing with Orthodox rabbis to preside at marriages, divorces, burials, and conversions. There is something sadly ironic that the only place on earth where a Jew cannot be married with a rabbi of choice is the State of Israel.

But it is crucial for American Jews to understand that the overwhelming number of Israelis do not share this perspective. The notion does not interest them. For most Israelis, simply living "ba-Aretz" (in the Land of Israel) is all the Jewish identity or Jewish "observance" they need.

Even the most secular of Israelis feel that their entire existence is immersed in Jewishness. Hebrew is their native language; Jewish holidays are celebrated nationally; the Israeli flag is patterned on the tallit; the IDF is a Jewish army; and the soil they walk upon is the very soil that gave the birth of the Jewish people and links them to their Jewish ancestors. While there are those in Israel who are seriously concerned that Israelis take their Jewishness for granted, have self-identities as "Israelis" rather than as "Jews," and know far too little about their Jewish heritage, most Israelis feel they are more Jewish than Diaspora Jews even if they rarely engage in Jewish observance.

The typical Israeli response to American styles of Jewish pluralism, then, is to dismiss it out of hand. The Israeli attitude is: "I don't want to be Orthodox; but if I ever were to be 'religious,' I would be Orthodox because Orthodoxy is the only authentic expression of Judaism."

Israelis may resent the fact that the ultra-Orthodox do not serve in the Israeli army, are often supported by the State, and have taken more than their share of the national education dollar (weakening Israel's public school system); but when it comes to matters of religious observance, Israelis by and large do not get worked up over the fact that the ultra Orthodox are in sole control of marriage, divorce, burial, conversion, and the Jewish holy places in Israel.

That is why most Israelis are oblivious to the general struggle for Jewish pluralism in their country or to specific issues such as women's fight for rights at the Western Wall. This is also why the enormous uproar within American Jewry over the Rotem Conversion Bill has not been duplicated in Israel. Conservative Rabbi Josh Hammerman, writing his blog from Israel, bemoans that he has seen "disturbingly little coverage on this matter in the Hebrew media here."

For American Jewish leaders, their real problem is with the Israeli people, not with the ultra-Orthodox establishment.

I once asked Orthodox Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the chief rabbi of Efrat (formerly the rabbi of Lincoln Square synagogue in Manhattan), whether he wanted Israel to be "a Torah state." Riskin's reply articulates the quintessential Jewish answer: "I would love nothing more than for Israel to be a Torah state; but only when the overwhelming majority of Israelis would like it to be."

One could easily apply Shlomo Riskin's answer to those who are working fervently to implement Jewish pluralism in Israel: "There would be nothing better than for Israel to be a pluralistic state; but only when the overwhelming majority of Israelis would like it to be."

The challenge facing the Reform and Conservative movements is to create pluralistic models of Jewish life in Israel that will, one day, be so attractive to Israelis that the implementation of Jewish pluralism becomes the will of the Israeli people. There are Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders who believe they are well on the way towards this goal and are correct in saying that passage of the Rotem Conversion Bill would be a bump in the road.

But the reality is that the Orthodox control of family law touches on a very small slice of Israeli life. Most American Jews who visit Israel rarely confront a problem as a result of Orthodox control of marriage and conversion. Non-Orthodox Jews travel throughout Israel and never feel like second class citizens. I have yet to hear an American Jew return from Israel and complain about their not being able to practice Judaism. They often attend Reform or *Masorti* (Conservative) synagogues with their friends and have a lovely time.

That is why American Jews can indeed be mobilized to protest a perceived attempt by the Orthodox establishment in Israel to delegitimize them; it is much more difficult to arouse their passions over threats to Jewish pluralism in Israel. This may explain the exaggerated way in which the Rotem Conversion Bill was portrayed as an assault on non-Orthodox American Jewry.

But as wonderful as it would be for Jewish pluralism to flourish in Israel, it is irresponsible for anyone to imply that Israel might, or should, receive less support from American Jewry because of the Rotem Conversion Bill.