

The (Anti) Conversion Bill



The Conversion Bill

The memorandum of the bill (which was later approved as a government bill) is an initiative by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri and the ultra-Orthodox parties. Its purpose is to prevent conversions in Israel which are not part of the conversion system controlled by the Chief Rabbinate. The bill was placed on the agenda of the Ministerial Committee on Legislation suddenly and at the last minute, and was discussed fleetingly. A public outcry arose following this decision, and a six-month period was given during which attempts could be made to reach an agreed-upon solution to conversions performed in Israel that would be recognized under the Law of Return. On the one hand, during this period legislation of the bill will not proceed, and on the other hand, the Supreme Court will not rule on the recognition of non-Orthodox conversion.

Here are answers to various frequently-asked questions concerning the Bill

→ Why now?

The Supreme Court is scheduled to rule soon regarding a petition which the Masorti Movement and the Reform Movement have been conducting for more than a decade, regarding the rights of converts from these movements who converted in Israel to receive Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. The Supreme Court of Justice has already recognized private Orthodox conversions, that is, those conversions held outside the Chief Rabbinate ("conversions of Rabbi Karelitz.") From a substantive legal point of view, these are similar cases - the court even noted this in one of the cases, and the expected ruling caused anxiety on the part of the Chief Rabbinate and Deri, Minister of the Interior. To block this ruling, they initiated legislation that would stop private conversions - those of Rabbi Karelitz, those of the "Giur K'Halacha" initiative (Orthodox conversion initiated by moderate Rabbis from the national religious stream) as well as those of the non-Orthodox movements.

→ Doesn't the proposed bill only regulate the existing status quo, which exists in any case?

No and no. To date, the issue of conversion is not regulated by legislation. There is no law granting the Chief Rabbinate exclusive authority regarding conversions. The proposed law would completely change the status quo and grant exclusive authority to the Chief Rabbinate. Beyond the fact that we do not think that the Chief Rabbinate's stronghold on our lives should be increased, the existing status quo sets civil and non-religious requirements for the purposes of the Law of Return and the Population Registry Law, that take into account the fact that the State of Israel is the nation-state of the entire Jewish people. Thus, for example, converts who were converted in Israel by the Masorti Movement and the Reform Movement, and who are Israeli citizens, have been able to register in the population registry for over a decade as Jews. In addition, the non-Orthodox movements were recognized as entitled to teach converts in Israel, and to complete the process abroad (a conversion known as "jump conversions"). This route was utilized by the Conservative and Reform movements in a limited manner. It enabled the converts to achieve recognition as Israeli citizens, under the Law of Return, upon their return to Israel. The law seeks to anchor the status of the Chief Rabbinate as the only and exclusive adjudicator in the field of conversion, thus dragging Israel backwards..

→ Wait a moment, isn't this a bill designed to prevent the mass conversion of infiltrators and job seekers?

No. This is a "spin" that the ultra-Orthodox parties and some of members of the "Jewish Home" faction are using to cover up the real purpose of the bill, which is to block the moderate conversions (conversions of the "Giur K'Halacha" initiative and the conversions of the non-Orthodox movements). The Masorti Movement and the Reform Movement both declared quite some time ago that they only convert residents of the country (both temporary residents and permanent residents). In addition, the court itself ruled that the conversion of a person in Israel that took place while he was not a legal resident is not recognized at all for purposes of recognition under the Law of Return. In addition, the Reform and Masorti movements are prepared to accept the state's regulation preventing abuse of the Law of Return.

The conversion courts of the Masorti Movement and the Reform Movement Court also deeply object to the use of the conversion process for gaining citizenship.

→ By the way, what is the situation today? Do you conduct conversions in Israel?

Certainly. The Conversion Court of the Masorti Movement (like the Reform Movement's Court) annually converts hundreds of people. Most of them are Israeli citizens - that is, conversion is conducted NOT for the sake of recognition by the Law of Return. These converts can register in the Population Registry as Jews, but may not marry in Israel, due to the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly on marriage and divorce..

→ What is currently happening with the new bill?

The parties, (the two non-Orthodox movements on the one hand, and the Israeli government on the other) agreed to try to reach agreements over a six-month period (by the end of 2017).