

# Background on the Rotem Conversion Bill

Sunday, July 12th, abruptly and with no warning, a committee vote was held on the bill sponsored by Member of the Knesset David Rotem that poses a dangerous threat to the rights of Conservative, Reform, and all non-Orthodox Jews, who comprise the overwhelming majority of world Jewry.

It has evoked the staunch, determined opposition of the vast majority of North American Jewry including the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Movements, the Federation system and individual organizations like the American Jewish Committee.

Leaders at the highest levels of Israeli politics including key Likud leaders such as the Prime Minister, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky, Minister Yuli Edelstein, and leaders of the Kadima and Labor parties strongly oppose moving the current legislation, believing it would have an enormously divisive impact on Israel–Diaspora relations at a very challenging time for Israel and the Jewish people.

For 2,000 years, Judaism has treated Jews-by-choice (converts) the same as Jews-by-birth. This treatment is rooted in the Talmudic teaching that "as soon as a convert emerges from the *mikvah* (ritual bath) she or he is Jewish for all purposes." (*Yevamot* 47b).

Since its founding 62 years ago, the State of Israel, through the Law of Return, has welcomed Jews from around the world as citizens in the world's only Jewish state.

This legislation would delegitimize all non-Orthodox conversions. It would also preclude conferring citizenship under the Law of Return to Jews who did not qualify for such status on a prior visit (ie. converts).

This bill poses a threat to the unity of the people of Israel and the State of Israel. All religious streams in Judaism must be treated fairly and equally to ensure Israel lives up to its promise as a Jewish and democratic state.

## Key Points

1. This is an issue of enormous importance to the character of Israel and to Diaspora Jewry in the US and around the world. No matter cuts more deeply to the heart of the Jewish religion than the issue of who is a Jew. Legislation now poised to move through the Knesset makes alarming changes in the status of Reform and Conservative conversions and affects all those interested in undergoing a conversion within the framework of the Reform and Masorti (Conservative) Movements in Israel and also anyone interested in converting overseas, if they ever visited Israel prior to their conversion.
2. Two additional changes have just been added to the bill:
  - a. The first would functionally change the Law of Return, disqualifying for the first time in Israel's history, converts by Reform and Conservative Rabbis under many circumstances.

- b. The second addition is to fully consolidate all authority in the hands of the increasingly hard-line Chief Rabbinate. In the complex Israeli political system, where religious pluralism is not acknowledged, the non-Orthodox movements have had to rely on the Supreme Court in order to secure their status. This bill will grant, for the first time, legal status to the Chief Rabbinate in the field of conversion, and will adversely affect the Court's ability to effectively enforce the recognition of non-Orthodox conversions, setting back a number of advances the Reform and Conservative Movements made in the past decade.

The proposed law, in an unprecedented attempt, threatens the rights of converts who converted outside of Israel and differentiates for the first time in Jewish history between the rights of Jews by birth and Jews by choice.

3. This move was a breach of good faith by the legislation's proponents. Over the past few months, Diaspora Jewish, Israeli Progressive and Conservative leaders and Israeli political leaders have been in intense discussions seeking to avoid a danger to Israeli and US relations posed by passage of a new conversion bill. MK Rotem and PM Netanyahu had assured us that they would not move ahead without working through their differences with the Diaspora communities. Clearly under pressure from the right wing and the religious parties, that agreement was breached and we were stunned by the abrupt move to push this through.