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## Conversion – Time to go beyond the rhetoric

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The leader of the Tzohar rabbinical organization, Rabbi David Stav, and his colleagues threw a shock grenade into the volatile religion/state arena this week, announcing their new independent conversion rabbinic courts.

Reversing the common maxim, they decided: If you can't join them, beat them. After pursuing a highly polished and well-funded campaign for Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Stav and his allies evidently reached the conclusion that there is no alternative to fighting against Israel's rigid, fundamentalist rabbinic establishment from outside.

The initiative has much merit, and its initiators deserve public praise. They're now openly joining wide circles in Israel and the Diaspora who know that nothing good can come of the Chief Rabbinate, and that this corrupt and increasingly ultra-Orthodox establishment causes harm to the State of Israel and to Judaism as a whole. It's a pity that they did not heed the pleas of many in the previous round, which can be summed up in one such public appeal to Tzohar (made by Rabbi Prof. Nadav

Shnerb): “The Rabbinate should not be repaired. It should be shut down.”

The partial solution they’re proposing, albeit an audacious one, is fraught with problems and question marks. The fortunate mass immigration from the former Soviet Union brought a million immigrants to Israel. Due to the high rate of intermarriage in the FSU, some 350,000 immigrants and their offspring are not considered halachically Jewish.

In the last 20 years, during which a network of “special conversion rabbinic courts” operated, only some 25,000 immigrants converted! The number of conversions did not even approach this population’s natural growth rate (estimated at 5,000 annually).

The rebels are correct that the Chief Rabbinate is rigid and alienating, but none of them (with the possible exception of Rabbi Haim Amsalem) are willing to publicly declare that they will forgo the requirement of “fulfillment of mitzvot” as a prerequisite for conversion.

Actually, they imply the opposite.

It is striking that this seemingly liberalizing revolt is light years away from the progressive rulings of past luminaries, such as the first chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Benzion Uziel.

When he was asked whether it is permissible to convert children born to intermarried couples, if it is clear that they won’t be leading observant lives, he ruled, “We do not demand that he observe the mitzvot, and it is not necessary for the rabbinic court to know that he will observe them... the condition of observance of mitzvot does not preclude the conversion, even at the stage of admittance (l’hatchila).”

Rabbi D. Z. Hoffmann, a late-19th-century Neo-Orthodox leader who headed the rabbinic seminary in Berlin, also permitted converting a child of a non-Jewish mother who wanted to marry a Jewess, “that is non-observant, and desecrates the Sabbath;” ruling that “preferably he should be informed of the mitzvot that he would surely be willing to accept, namely [against] idol worship, incest and bloodshed; the mitzva of charitable giving,

respect for one's parents, loving one's fellows, and the like. Following that, he will state generally [stam] that he accepts the mitzvot of the Jews, but in any case, none of this should preclude his conversion."

Clearly, these decisors and their likes encountered much opposition, but the question is whether any among today's rebels has the courage and farsightedness to understand that without adopting a similar stance and opening wide the gates to conversion, there is no future for large-scale Orthodox conversion in Israel. Moreover, the organizers clearly refuse to internalize that the essence of conversion is admittance into the Jewish people, and admittance into the Jewish faith is secondary – a consequence of entering the people.

The religious dimension and observance, which was self-evident in an era when religious lifestyle characterized the predominant majority of Jews, can no longer be taken for granted. Openness and halachic daring are essential for defining the parameters for conversion in the present era, especially in the State of Israel.

The organizers of the initiative have made grand statements, declaring that they "have taken responsibility for Israeli society and the immigrants from the former Soviet Union." In effect, the mandate they have undertaken is much narrower. For the time being, it involves converting minor children of immigrant families, especially those that the Chief Rabbinate refuses to convert because their non-Jewish mothers are not converting.

Unfortunately, by conditioning conversion upon the enrollment of these children in religious schools, it is unlikely that their good intentions will be met with long lines of candidates.

Rabbi Stav made no secret of this vision when he was running for chief rabbi, as he stated, "The main solution I see is converting the 6,000 children of FSU immigrants in grades 1 through 6, who are willing to commit to continue their studies in high school yeshivas and ulpanot [parallel religious institutions for girls]."

The approach of the new rabbinic courts that expects religious education and observance of families that clearly do not intend

to turn “religious” is hypocritical and, if surrendered to, will generate undesirable emotional, social and educational tension due to the wide gap between the environment of the religious schools and the children’s homes. The degree to which halachic observance should serve as a threshold for conversion is an important and interesting topic for debate, but it turns absurd and outrageous when only Orthodox conversion is fully recognized by the State of Israel. In North America, where religious freedom reigns, the overwhelming majority of converts choose to go through Reform or Conservative rabbinic courts. Hiddush’s polling has repeatedly revealed that 60 percent or more of the Jewish Israeli public support equal recognition for non-Orthodox conversions.

It is therefore only full state recognition of all conversions performed by all major streams of Judaism that will truly open the gates of conversion to the population of immigrants from the FSU.

There is great irony in Rabbi Stav’s threat that if the Chief Rabbinate does not recognize the conversions of the new rabbinic courts, they will turn to the Supreme Court for redress. Only a few years ago, Stav sharply attacked the Supreme Court for ordering the registration of Reform and Conservative converts as Jews, saying it was not a matter for the court to decide based upon legal standards. It’s unlikely the Supreme Court will walk into the trap of halachic debate and order the Chief Rabbinate to recognize the validity of conversions they refuse to accept.

What is likely to happen is that the new independent rabbinic courts will find that their converts are in exactly the same position as Reform and Conservative converts, denied the right to legally marry in Israel.

The conclusion is obvious: The revolt announced by this select group of Zionist Orthodox rabbis is an important step in the direction of breaking the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate.

However, its practical impact is going to be minimal. The only true and necessary solution for the historic challenge of conversion should be significantly more far-reaching: constitutional protection of religious freedom, doing away with

the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over marriage and conversion in Israel, and granting equal status to conversions performed by all major Jewish denominations.

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