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“The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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Editorial

May 16, 2016

Dear Friends,

We know anthropologically that theoretically any culture will develop an indigenous religious expression over time. The analyses of both American and Israeli civil religion are based on the idea that any culture will create myths, symbols and rituals that determine a national narrative and give meaning to a nation's existence.

The same inevitably will be true for the Jewish religion in Israel over time.

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate sits atop the official Jewish religious structure in Israel, attempting to squelch religious expressions it determines to be not to its liking, or contrary to the "status quo." And yet, Israeli society pushes against the cap on the volcano. Grassroots efforts creating

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Response to: 'The Challenge of Conversion in Israel' by Dr. Netanel Fisher

By Rabbi Chuck Davidson

I read with great interest [RRFEI's coverage \(May 2, 2016\) of Dr. Netanel Fisher's paper on conversion in Israel.](#)

As a conversion advocate and activist, and he who originally envisioned [Giyur Ke-Halakha](#), Israel's network of independent Orthodox conversion courts, I'd like to offer a few observations.



First and foremost, Dr. Fisher's analysis of the challenges is quite accurate. His recommendations for addressing the challenges are also sound in theory. That said, the gap between theory and practice is wide, making many, if not most, of his recommendations of limited value given the realities of the situation, as I shall explain below.

Further, a number of important points relating to Israel's conversion conundrum are not raised as they do not fall into

authentic Jewish expressions have always been part of Israeli life.

Two weeks ago, May 2, we published [Dr. Netanel Fisher's approach to the problem of official state conversion in Israel](#). On January 18th we published [Rabbi Chuck Davidson's booklet of lenient traditional *piskei din* allowing conversion for those who accept the commandments and their punishment whether or not s/he observes the mitzvot](#). Both of these newsletters can be found on our website at [RRFEI.org](#).

In today's edition, Rabbi Davidson argues that the simple binary classification of non-Jew or Jew in Israel does not work. People ignore it and find other solutions to the problem of Jewish identity because the official solution is not relevant to their lives. Another classification exists that Rabbi Davidson considers unique: the non-halakhic Jew, an unconverted person living an entirely Jewish life, religiously and culturally, but not Orthodox and therefore unacceptable to the Chief Rabbinate under current circumstances. Rabbi Davidson suggests an interesting and innovative solution to the problem.

the scope of the paper.

And with one point I sharply disagree. Perhaps with this point we shall begin.

Dr. Fisher refers to the approximately 400,000 members of the cohort he addresses as "non-Jews". It is with this very point that the current conundrum begins. In fact, Israel's rabbinic establishment views personal status as a clear dichotomy: Jew or non-Jew, with nothing in between. As such, the conversion process for a person born to a Jewish father, and who was, in fact, raised with no identity other than Jewish, faces a conversion process identical to that of a visitor from China who knows nothing of Judaism.

But in fact, [a study](#) published in 2014 revealed that at least the second generation of this group is virtually indistinguishable from the rest of their Israeli cohorts, from a cultural, sociological, and national perspective, and even in terms of their basic religious beliefs and practices. While Jews, as a result of nearly 2,000 years of exile, are accustomed to viewing assimilation as a threat to Jewish continuity since a minority generally assimilates into the majority, the reality in Israel, where Jews are the majority, is quite the opposite. As a result, the second generation has already fully assimilated into Jewish Israeli society, with no conversion whatsoever. It is therefore inaccurate, in my opinion, to refer to members of this group as non-Jews. They are, in fact, Jews from every perspective other than Halakha. A more accurate term might be "non-Halakhically Jewish Jews".

Public perceptions of about certain sectors of Israel society and whether they "contribute" more or less to the success of the country, show that soldiers are perceived most positively, significantly more than any other group. The two groups whose children tend not to serve in the military, Muslim-Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox, are perceived as contributing least to the success of the country. Interestingly, the Druze were perceived in a relatively positive light. Other interesting finding include: Diaspora Jews are more positively perceived than Israelis who choose to live abroad; and the majority of Israelis appreciate the contribution of Ethiopian immigrants.

This issue of halakhic status exists in our U.S. families as well. Please visit our [FB group \[link\]](#), or reply to us at: organizers@rrfei.org with your anecdotes, opinions, disagreements, agreements or solutions. I look forward to hearing from you.

B'yedidut,

Mark

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- [JFNA Israel Religious Expression Platform](#)
- [JPPI report: Jewish & Democratic](#)

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Not yet a member?

"This is because Israelis care most about those who share the burden of living in the state," according to JPPI President Avinoam Bar Yosef.

The question might then be asked, why should Israeli society care whether or not these non-Halakhically-Jewish Jews convert?

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How education became an Israeli political tool

By Akiva Eldar

SUMMARY: *Education Minister Naftali Bennett and his colleagues from other Orthodox parties know that teaching their ideology to school children will benefit themselves politically in the long run.*

The holiday of Passover is also known as the Festival of Freedom. The traditional Seder dinner sanctifies and glorifies the Jews' exodus from Egypt as an escape from bondage into liberation. It's a religious holiday with a positive universal message. You could say that the Passover Hagaddah text is an ancient edition of the story of the Holocaust and the revival of Jewish statehood, with the addition of miracles God did for our ancestors.

The practical lessons that Israeli children — ultra-Orthodox, national-religious and secular — receive from the Israeli education system are as follows: The Jewish people has been the victim of persecution since time immemorial; the land of Israel was given to the people of Israel along with the Torah; there's a god, and he chose us out of all the nations. It's not customary to spoil such religious rites and national myths that pass down from generation to generation with "heretical speculation" — like the total absence of the exodus from Egypt — a major regional event — from Egyptian writings from the Pharaonic era. In addition, dozens of archaeological missions from all over the world have searched in vain for the presence of a multitude of people at Kadesh-Barnea, the place where, according to the biblical

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story, the people of Israel encamped on their way from Egypt to the land of Canaan. The problem is that these myths, the likes of which are common in all religions, have been translated in recent years into a political platform and have become a kind of legal deed of ownership.

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Former ultra-Orthodox sue over poor education

By Daphne Rousseau

SUMMARY: *Erstwhile members of strictly religious communities seek damages from state that funded sytem they claim is inadequate.*

AFP — They were already in their 20s the first time they ever heard about dinosaurs or even tried their hands at maths and English.

Now a group of young Israelis who left the closed world of ultra-Orthodox Judaism are demanding answers from the state which funded their strictly religious education in Jewish seminaries, known as yeshivas.

Despite years of studying, all they were exposed to was religious texts and their interpretation, leaving them clueless about the basics of the national curriculum.

"I once heard them talk about the theory of evolution, very furtively, in the yeshiva when someone said certain people think they are descended from the apes," said 26-year-old Yaakov Fink, a former religious scholar.

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Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel

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