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Rabbis for Religious Freedom & Equality in Israel



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

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May 2, 2016

Dear Friends

The Israel Democracy Institute has published a paper by Dr. Netanel Fisher

[\[link\]](#) that lays out the current problem of conversion in Israel.

Obviously, part of the importance of the issue lies in the fact that being Jewish gives access to fundamental rights in Israel. As Dr. Fisher says, immigrants who are not Jewish "suffer infringement of basic rights and face difficulties in integrating fully into Israeli society."

He lists 5 reasons that Israeli society does not pay adequate attention to conversion, given the importance of being Jewish to functioning as a full member of society:

1. Lack of interest and a high drop-out rate from [conversion] classes.

RECOMMENDED LINKS

- [\[Click for:\]](#) *The Halakhic Validity of Israel's Judicial System* by Ron S. Kleinman, *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, 18(1) (2015), pp. 227-259
- [\[Click for:\]](#) *Landmark conversions ruling is a victory for religious freedom in Israel* by Rabbi Uri Regev, JTA



The Challenge of Conversion in Israel

by Dr. Netanel Fisher, Israel Democracy Institute
Nation State Project

[Click HERE for full report](#)

Conversion in Israel is a major topic of public debate in Israeli society, but very little is actually known about it: How many people convert each year? How many converts are men and how many are women? What percentage were born abroad and how many are native Israelis? Why do so many people who start the conversion process fail to complete it? Does Israeli society and the religious establishment in Israel support conversion? And what is Israel's political leadership doing about this issue?



2. The religious establishment does not encourage conversion.
3. Israel's political leadership does not promote conversion.
4. Israel's centralized policy for managing conversion.
5. Israeli society is not mobilizing to promote conversion.

Dr. Fisher lists 9 solutions to the problem. At the root of the issue is the anti-democratic control wielded by the Chief Rabbinate.

In this edition also, Rabbi Uri Regev, President of Hiddush, explains the importance of the recent Supreme Court decision allowing Orthodox courts not controlled by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel to legally convert non-Jews to Judaism [\[link\]](#). We are seeing progress in opening the religious establishment in Israel to greater participation.

We've added additional articles, including a quotation from Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan's 1921 visionary essay promoting a halakhically based Jewish State [\[link\]](#). You'll also find a reference to read the entire essay in Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea*. For lovers of Israel, it's a fascinating intellectual achievement that challenges us even

Written by Dr. Netanel Fisher under the auspices of IDI's Nation State project, *The Challenge of Conversion in Israel* presents a comprehensive picture of the situation in Israel today. It reveals, for the first time, the full data about conversion in Israel and surveys the achievements and failures of the government's conversion policy during the last decade. It also presents a wide variety of recommendations for advancing conversion in Israel. These include: information campaigns, enlisting the government and Israeli society to take up the cause, better support and guidance throughout the conversion process, and the adoption of a welcoming approach to conversion by the Chief Rabbinate and the religious establishment.

An overview of the main challenges and recommendations for change described in this Hebrew volume can be found below.

The Challenge

The state of conversion to Judaism in Israel is unsatisfactory. Twenty years after the influx of one million Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU), the State of Israel does not recognize one third of the members of this immigrant community as Jews. Only 7% of the non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union have chosen to convert to Judaism. The remaining 93%—more than 300,000 people—suffer infringement of basic rights and face difficulties in integrating fully into Israeli society. Moreover, the rate of intermarriage in Israel is now approaching 10%—a figure that endangers social solidarity and the Jewish character of the state.

How Many Immigrants Convert?

Since 1995, approximately 23,000 immigrants from the FSU to Israel have converted to Judaism. This is only about 7% of all non-Jewish FSU immigrants in Israel, who numbered 333,000 in 2012. The annual rate of conversion among members of this community is approximately 1,800. This is less than 25% of the natural rate of growth of this community—which includes both immigration and reproduction. Thus,

today: Bar Ilan's genius in foreseeing the issues of integrating Judaism, specifically Jewish law and practice, within the State of the Jewish people through education.

Finally, from a different perspective, an article by Prof. Ron S. Kleinman regarding the use of civil law among 3 halakhic decisors (poskim) in Israel [\[link\]](#). Here we see a practical use of Bar Ilan's vision: how might ultra-Orthodox poskim utilize Israeli civil law and what is the interpenetration between the two systems?

The uproar in Israel over the Kotel, the Birkhat Cohanot, the Supreme Court decisions regarding public mikva'ot and recognizing Orthodox conversions performed in Israel is roiling the country. But we must focus on being effective. Only a small portion of Israelis care about the ultimate disposition of the Kotel agreement. But marriage and conversion affects millions, and Israelis care deeply about full inclusion within greater society of Israel. The Chief Rabbinate is losing its grip on Israeli cultural and religious institutions, and RRFEI helps to enable each of us to play a significant role in both examining the issues

the problem is growing with every passing year and the current system does not provide an adequate solution to the challenge at hand.

Why is the Number of Converts So Low?

1. LACK OF INTEREST & A HIGH DROPOUT RATE

The percentage of immigrants who are interested in converting to Judaism is relatively low (about 25%). Many members of the FSU immigrant community see the act of conversion as incompatible with their other self-identities (Jewish-Israeli-Russian). Other members, who might have been interested in conversion, choose not to convert because of the high level of religious observance required for conversion and because they are concerned the authorities will not recognize them as converts at the end of the process. As a result, over 50% of potential converts begin conversion studies but drop out prior to completing the program. The number of dropouts is thus higher than the number of people who complete the process and convert.

2. THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT DOES NOT ENCOURAGE CONVERSION

The conversion courts – The policy of Israel's rabbinical conversion courts does not encourage large-scale conversion. Some judges refuse to accept the lenient approach to conversion practiced in Jewish communities for centuries, and adhere to a policy of deterrence that rejects hundreds of candidates for conversion each year. In total, rabbinic courts reject nearly 50% of candidates from the FSU immigrant community at their first conversion hearing.

The Chief Rabbis – To date, Israel's Chief Rabbis have not actively promoted conversion and have opted to maintain the status quo instead. They have not publicly called for immigrants to convert, have not confronted rabbinical court judges who invalidate conversions, and have not committed themselves to ensuring that conversion certificates are irrevocable.

and ensuring an inclusive and democratic Jewish State.

Please send your comments and suggestion for moving forward to organizers@rrfei.org, and see our FB group at: [\[link\]](#)

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Resources

- [Western Wall compromise agreement](#)
- [Chief Rabbi Lau attacks Bennett over pluralism](#)
- [J-REC / AJC Mission to Israel](#)
- [Giyur K'halacha](#)
- [Acts of violence](#)
- [Kashrut regulations for hotels and event halls](#)
- [JFNA Israel Religious Expression Platform](#)

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3. ISRAEL'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP DOES NOT PROMOTE CONVERSION

Although Israel's political leaders—from the Prime Minister through cabinet ministers and members of Knesset—often make statements about the importance of conversion, they do not work consistently to implement those declarations and have not declared conversion to be a national priority.

4. ISRAEL'S CENTRALIZED POLICY FOR MANAGING CONVERSION

The State Conversion Authority within the Ministry of Religion does not encourage the involvement of new players in the field of conversion, even though such players would invigorate the system by increasing competition and boosting the number of converts. The Joint Institute for Jewish Studies has a monopoly on preparing candidates for conversion. This makes it difficult for other organizations to enter the field and establish new initiatives to recruit students, disseminate information, and prevent dropout.

5. ISRAELI SOCIETY IS NOT MOBILIZING TO PROMOTE CONVERSION

The general population of Israel is either apathetic toward conversion or focused on criticizing Israel's rabbinical court judges; this does not encourage potential converts to convert. The religious Zionist community, which should carry the banner of conversion, has an ambivalent attitude toward conversion. In addition, the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox community actively blocks attempts to facilitate conversion. Finally, the political representatives of the Russian community have thus far failed to raise the banner effectively on personal status issues. As a result, opposition to conversion in the religious community has not been met with a resolute religious and political response by the rest of Israeli society.

Views on organizing communal life in the Jewish homeland

by Rabbi Meir Bar Ilan, 1921

[This essay can be found online HERE](#)

...If we wish to continue our spiritual heritage and not create a new Judaism, we must make of our schools in our homeland places where more than language and vocations are taught; they must be real educational institutions in keeping with the nation's ideals and principles. Knowledge of talmudic law and all that this implies should play an important role in these studies. The Talmud and its literature must remain, to some degree, the heritage of the whole House of Israel and should not constitute a science and discipline only for those who are professional scholars of the Torah. Naturally, we also need experts who will devote their lives to the study of the Talmud – and these should be of the highest caliber. But the spirit of the Talmud and some knowledge of talmudic laws and literature should be part of the schooling of every educated Jew. It is customary among the gentiles that every schoolboy have some basic knowledge of physics and mathematics, and even though he may not utilize these studies in his lifework, these basic disciplines are regarded as indispensable. Our attitude to the knowledge of talmudic law should be comparable: Every schoolboy should be required to master certain sections of the Talmud and to imbibe its spirit, even though he may not make this field of study his life's work.



This demand, which many may regard as too extreme, requires us not to be satisfied with establishing the type of yeshivot and Hebrew schools now prevalent both in the Diaspora and in Israel. We must realize that our homeland will be, and should be, a progressive and enlightened country, and that cannot isolate ourselves. The Chinese people boasts of a culture that is older than any in Europe, and yet when one of its sons wants to become "cultured," he goes to Europe or to America. Therefore, if we want to be a modern people, we, too, must not allow that our entire education be reduced to those national or religious studies peculiar to us, so that when we need doctors, architects and

engineers, we shall have to import them from other countries or send our children abroad to study. Nor do we have the right to segregate the schools, so that “ours” will be devoted only to the Torah and Jewish subjects, and “theirs” (meaning the schools of those who do not accept our views) will teach general culture. If we do this, we will lower the standards of our schools and their pupils will achieve less than pupils in the secular schools. We must not permit this to happen not merely for economic but also for moral reasons. Life has taught us: “He who increases in wealth, increases his dignity.” If the secular schools are to produce the wealthy and enlightened class, whereas the pupils of our schools will be merely God-fearing scholars of the Torah, the influence of the secularists will predominate in everything. The same sad pattern that prevailed in the Diaspora will recur again: The yeshiva students are poor in material wealth and downtrodden in spirit, while the college students are successful and their influence, both direct and indirect, is every greater.

If it is our wholehearted desire that all our children know the Torah and follow its teachings, we must establish schools which combine both Jewish and secular studies. The Jewish studies should consist not only of literature and language; they must include the entire religious heritage, so that our children know more than just the Bible.

These views on how we should organize the communal life now coming into being in the homeland should be the yardstick for all who deal with the rebuilding of our country, for all those who really want to see the Hebrew nation revitalized on its land and in the spirit of its Torah.

Discuss this and other issues with fellow RRFEI members in the network's new Facebook group by clicking [HERE!](#)

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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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