

Israel Conversion Bill: An Open Letter to Benjamin Netanyahu



July 11, 2010 / 29 Tamuz 5770
Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
3 Kaplan St. Hakiryia, Jerusalem 91950, Israel

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu:

We were dismayed to learn this afternoon of the decision by MK David Rotem to put forward a version of the Conversion Law to be presented to the Law, Constitution and Justice Committee tomorrow morning. MK Rotem's actions are contrary to the assurances we received in meetings with him and with others over the last several months. We write on behalf of the many Diaspora organizations listed below.

We have been involved in regular and constructive conversations with various ministers and members of Knesset on this issue. Working together with the many Diaspora organizations and with representatives of the Jewish Federations of North America, we were encouraged by your request to Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky to resolve this matter by finding a formula acceptable to all parties.

For this reason, we are deeply disappointed to hear that the bill will now be presented in a new and even more problematic format. These new developments have transpired without any input from Mr. Sharansky or Diaspora communities. All of the discussions, understandings and efforts in which we have been engaged appear to have disappeared overnight.

From the very beginning, Reform and Conservative leaders in Israel and the Diaspora have shared our concerns on the impact of this bill on the conversion process. Those portions of the bill that give responsibility for the process of conversion to the Chief Rabbinate constitute a dramatic change in the status quo, are an affront to millions of Jews in Israel and the Diaspora, and are dangerous on every level to the principles of Klal Yisrael.

In addition, we strongly oppose those portions of the bill that would preclude conferring Citizenship Status on anyone who did not qualify for such status on a prior visit. This provision is not in keeping with the spirit and letter of a law meant to encourage the growth of our community and welcoming with open arms those that wish to join and support our people and our land. The concerns noted above are shared by a powerful majority of Jews world-wide. We know that you are aware of the sensitivities that exist on this matter and that you appreciate the significant damage that passage of such a bill could cause to ties between Israel and Diaspora Jewry, at precisely the time when we are all working so hard to strengthen these ties and to deal with other concerns – such as Israel's security and the nuclear threat from Iran – that properly require our full attention. We ask for your assistance in delaying any consideration of this bill and in resolving this issue in a way that is acceptable to all of the religious streams.

The time for action is now and we call on you to act decisively to prevent the introduction of this bill.

Sincerely,



Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie
President, Union for Reform Judaism



Rabbi Julie Schonfeld
Executive Vice President, Rabbinical Assembly

We are joined in this request by the following organizations:

Central Conference of American Rabbis
Union for Reform Judaism
Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism
World Union for Progressive Judaism
ARZA (Association of Reform Zionists of America)

Arzeinu
ARZA Canada
Rabbinical Assembly
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
Masorti Israel

Masorti Olami
Mercaz USA
Mercaz Olam
Masorti Foundation