

MIDDLE EAST

Israel Puts Off Crisis Over Conversion Law

By ETHAN BRONNER JULY 23, 2010

JERUSALEM — A growing crisis between American Jews and the Israeli government over a proposed law on religious conversion was averted — or at least delayed — this week, with both sides agreeing to a six-month period of negotiation. But the depth of American anger and the byzantine complexity of Israeli politics suggest that a solution is a long way off.

Late Thursday night, the office of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement that Natan Sharansky, the head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, would lead a committee of the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements and that no conversion law would be submitted before January. Litigation in the Israeli Supreme Court on the same topic brought by the Reform and Conservative movements would be suspended for the same period.

The idea of delay came from Mr. Netanyahu, who said this week that the proposed law, which had passed a committee of Parliament, “could tear apart the Jewish people.” He had received tens of thousands of enraged e-mail messages from American Jews who had been urged to contact him by their rabbis.

“Please join me in writing an e-mail to Prime Minister Netanyahu to call a halt to this historic mistake,” wrote Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky of Congregation Anshe Chesed on the Upper West Side of New York last week, in a typical appeal. “Judaism and the Jewish people do not belong exclusively to the most reactionary among us!”

The bill that so angered American Jewish leaders was actually aimed at making conversion easier for the 300,000 Israelis among the 1 million who moved to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Those Israelis are not, by Orthodox rabbinic law, considered Jewish because they come from mixed parentage. The law would have tried to make conversion easier by granting conversion powers to local rabbis across the country, a group considered closer to their communities.

But after objections from the ultra-Orthodox, the bill formally placed authority for conversion in the hands of the chief rabbinate and declared Orthodox Jewish law to be the basis of conversion, making Americans fear that their more lenient conversion processes would be invalidated.

Many American Jews consider the Netanyahu government to be too hawkish, and the conversion controversy is seen by some analysts here and in the United States as a proxy for a broader set of disagreements, including settlement building and the Gaza blockade.

Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel, said in an interview that Mr. Netanyahu had told him that he needed American Jews on his side in his negotiations with President Obama over peace with the Palestinians, and that the controversy over the conversion bill was getting in the way.

Rabbi David Schuck of the Pelham Jewish Center in Westchester County, N.Y., said of the religious conversion bill, “It spits in the face of Diaspora Jews in particular, and if passed, it would be an acquiescence of the majority of Israeli Jews to a fundamentalist interpretation of Judaism.”

This was the only issue over the past six years on which he had asked congregants to take political action, he said.

David Rotem, the lawmaker behind the conversion bill, said in an interview that such views were based on a misreading of it.

“They need to check the facts before they speak,” he said of Reform and Conservative Jewish leaders. “They are acting like absolute idiots.”

The question of “who is a Jew?” is as old as the state of Israel. The more liberal forms of Jewish practice advocated by the Reform and Conservative movements, with which most American Jews are affiliated, have never taken root here. Israel has left liturgy in the hands of the Orthodox, with most Israeli Jews leading almost completely secular lives, seeking out rabbis only at birth, marriage and death.

The idea is that helping to build the Jewish state is their central means of expressing their ethnic identity. By contrast, Jews abroad seek one another out in synagogues, and have come up with ways to integrate spirituality with identity, forging rituals that respect tradition while adjusting to careers and life in a non-Jewish world.

The two approaches to Jewish identity have coexisted, and while there have been tensions, they have not sharply clashed.

But several developments of recent years have altered that. First, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking immigrants not considered Jewish has created an acute need in the eyes of Israeli leaders to find a way to integrate them in keeping with rabbinic tradition. Otherwise, they will not be able to marry, divorce or be buried here within Jewish tradition, and their children will feel deeply alienated. Mr. Rotem calls them “a ticking bomb.”

Second, the chief rabbinate, which for decades was in the hands of Orthodox Zionist parties, is now largely controlled by the non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox, who are both more liturgically rigid and less concerned with building Israel, integrating Russian speakers or keeping American Jews on board. This came about largely because the Zionist Orthodox movement had focused so heavily in recent years on settlement building in the West Bank and allowed control of religious issues to slip from its hands.

Finally, American Jews, who are mostly politically liberal — some 80 percent voted for President Obama — have felt their attachment to Israel strained during its military operations in Lebanon and Gaza and the recent attack on a Turkish flotilla seeking to break Israel’s Gaza blockade. And since the conversion bill is being sponsored by Yisrael Beiteinu, the nationalist and

mostly right-wing party of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, conditions were especially ripe for mistrust.

“There is increasing discomfort among American Jews with Israel,” commented Rabbi Donniel Hartman, president of Jerusalem’s Shalom Hartman Institute, which is devoted to exploring Jewish issues. “This issue is a place where they can express the displeasure that they might not be willing to state on the flotilla and other political matters.”

For that reason, some here, even among those sympathetic to the Reform and Conservative movements, like Rabbi Hartman, feel that the American reaction to the Rotem bill was overly aggressive.

“They overstated this one,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Reform and Conservative movements believed that Israel’s Supreme Court was looking favorably on their attempt to gain legitimacy for their conversions. A likely decision in their favor drove Israel’s Orthodox rabbinate to push back, by backing the legislation on conversions.

Mr. Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident who once led a Russian immigrant political party here and who will head the conversion compromise search, said by telephone that intensive contacts over the past week created increased understanding between the sides. He added that at a time when Israel’s legitimacy was increasingly under attack, the Jewish people needed unity and that the legitimacy of all strains needed to be acknowledged.

Most observers, however, see a looming confrontation. As David Horowitz, the editor of The Jerusalem Post, put it in his weekly column on Friday, “What we are facing is an explosive global crisis over Jewish identity — a huge, snowballing disaster that is ripping Israeli-Diaspora relations.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 24, 2010, on Page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Israel Tries to Defuse Crisis Over Conversions.