

RCA Conversion Network: A Timely Solution

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We are all too familiar with the stories. Someone who for his entire life considered himself Jewish is suddenly told by a Rabbinical court that his Jewish identity is suspect. A woman adopted and converted as a child is informed that the conversion does not meet halachic standards. Beyond the personal, conversion to Judaism has in recent years been a painful and persistent issue confronting the Jewish world at large. It has pitted Jew against Jew, threatened to weaken Israel-Diaspora relations, caused synagogue and communal strife, and, most importantly, has brought undeserved anguish upon sincere converts and their offspring.

But a significant development, announced last week by the Rabbinical Council of America and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, has the potential to diminish the severity of these problems in several important respects, while still maintaining reasonable halachic conversion standards. In the process these two rabbinic entities have created a model for reasoned cooperation, rather than rancor, in Jewish life.

I am referring to the announcement establishing a North American network of standing regional rabbinical courts for conversion, under the auspices of the Rabbinical Council of America, with the blessing, and endorsement, of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

The network accomplishes multiple goals. First and foremost it ensures that its converts will be assured that their status as Jews will not be questioned in the future, whether in Israel or in other major mainstream Orthodox communities. In addition it introduces long overdue standardization and comprehensive record-keeping into the conversion process. The courts follow clearly understood policies and practices. Candidates for conversion will know what to expect and what will be expected of them.

There is a reason that RCA rabbis have in overwhelming numbers welcomed the network. It enables them to work in close cooperation with their peers, free of undue pressures, but still allows them to cultivate personal mentoring relationships with the candidates they sponsor. The network has procedures in place to deal with special circumstances including adoption, conversion motivated by marriage, already-married couples or families with non-Jewish spouses and children. Following conversion, integration of the converts will be

facilitated in numerous ways, including standardized documentation, comprehensive databases, information-sharing, and follow-up.

There are some voices who argue that the network violates local rabbinic independence. Or that it substitutes a bureaucracy for what has been a close rabbinic-lay relationship. It has even been said that the new standards impose unreasonable hardships on converts or that the network is proof of weakness by the Modern Orthodox rabbinate.

Such fears, and conclusions, are misplaced.

Every candidate will have the benefit of his or her own rabbinic sponsor as mentor throughout the process. Each court will be made up of qualified local rabbis, many of whom have previously been supervising conversions, but will now through the new network, be formally recognized. What is different is that they will now be acting in partnership with each other and with rabbinic authorities around the Jewish world, and will moreover be able to function with some local flexibility in implementation.

In any case an individual rabbi can still elect to do conversions outside of the national network. Such conversions will not automatically come with the endorsement of the RCA. But that is nothing new. The RCA has not previously given blanket endorsements to the conversions of its members.

As to the standards themselves, I believe that even a cursory review will demonstrate that they echo the consensus of halachic requirements for conversion. No more and no less. True there have been a few rabbinic dissenters in the past as in the present, advocating different halachic conversion criteria. But the overwhelming rabbinic perspective has required, as does the network, genuine commitment to Shabbat, Yomtov, Kashrut, sustained Jewish education of children, and certain fundamental affirmations of faith and practice. Claims by some outspoken critics that these are extraneous or recent stringencies are incorrect. Worse yet, such critics are publicly undermining a long overdue and eminently reasonable solution that would facilitate the acceptance of such converts into the Jewish people and faith. What reasonable alternative do they propose that will assure converts wide-ranging acceptance for themselves and their children?

As guardians of tradition in a time of societal change, Orthodox rabbis are by nature and training surely cautious when it comes to innovations. Yet the overwhelming majority of RCA rabbis and many outside of it have enthusiastically welcomed the creation of a new network, consisting of new as well as established rabbinical courts, new working relationships, utilizing new technologies and new global partnerships.

Why? Because they know that what we have before us is a timely opportunity to foster constructive change that will bring resolution to a festering communal challenge as well as peace of mind to converts and their families. It will hopefully benefit the Jewish people in a manner that is fully in accord with what is both rooted in antiquity and timeless, namely, our sacred Torah and the dynamism of Jewish law.

I certainly hope that these developments will be embraced by the Jewish community with the enthusiasm we feel, and the support that our singular people, and its precious converts, deserve.