

## An important request for action from ARZA President, Rabbi Bob Orkand

We have learned that the Knesset may vote as soon as Tuesday on legislation that would make important changes to the Law of Return, which sets forth who can claim Israeli citizenship. This particular legislation would target converts to Judaism.

The various arms of our Movement are asking that urgent messages of protest be sent to Michael Oren, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, and to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.



We cannot permit the ultra-Orthodox parties in Israel to push through legislation without regard to the millions of Diaspora Jews who are active, dedicated and devoted members of the Jewish people who identify themselves with non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

The bill sponsored by MK David Rotem of Yisrael Beitenu, deals with both the authority of the Chief Rabbinate and matters of Conversion. The Rotem Bill does three things:

1. It grants legal authority to the Chief Rabbinate for conversions. While until now there has been *de facto* recognition, this legislation gives legal recognition to the role of the Chief Rabbinate in this area. The result would be that it would become much more difficult for conversions to be performed by Reform, Conservative and more open-minded Orthodox rabbis.
2. It provides for the ability of local rabbis in Israel to establish conversion courts. This is a part of the bill of which we can support because it will potentially permit the establishment of more forward looking conversion courts. However, if the first part of the bill passes, the Chief Rabbinate may declare these courts null and void, which would obviate any reason for our support.
3. Section 3 of this bill is the most highly problematic. This section states that anyone that who entered Israel as a non-Jew and then converted to Judaism--either in Israel or the Diaspora--would not be eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return. This is precisely the case that is now before the Supreme Court, which asks that conversions in Israel by non-Orthodox rabbis be recognized and that citizenship rights be granted to our converts. This is an attempt to go around the Supreme Court. Further, the wording is so vague that it could mean that if such a person had visited Israel at any time, no matter when, that person's conversion would not be recognized for citizenship in the future. Thirdly this would be the first time that Israel is officially making a distinction between one who is born a Jew and a righteous convert, something that we find insulting.
4. In the last 48 hours, there have been negotiations between MK David Rotem, the sponsor of this legislation, and the ultra-Orthodox parties. The Israeli media reports that these negotiations might lead to adding provisions which would block Reform and Conservative conversions in Israel.

In response, Reform Movement leaders around the world are in contact with Israeli government officials in an effort to block this legislation.

**THEREFORE, ARZA URGES THAT THE FOLLOWING LETTER OR ITS EQUIVALENT BE SENT TO AMBASSADOR OREN AND PRIME MINISTER NETANYAHU**

The Honorable Benjamin Netanyahu  
Prime Minister of Israel  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Jerusalem, Israel

Dear Prime Minister Netanyahu,

We write to request your immediate intervention to prevent passage of the legislation being brought forward by MK David Rotem.

Passage of this bill in its present form, especially section 3, will have the effect of altering the Law of Return or, at the least, cause undue hardship to anyone in Israel who has come from Diaspora communities and seeks conversion in Israel.

While the Reform movement is supportive of efforts to create greater accessibility to conversion courts in Israel and have done all we can to aid in this effort, the overall impact of the Rotem Bill will set back these efforts. Should this bill be enacted, it will exacerbate a widening gap between Diaspora and Israel communities, which we are all working very hard to avoid.

Therefore, we believe it is imperative that you, Israel's leader, who cares so deeply about the well-being of our people, intervene and urge withdrawal of this bill.

The email for Prime Minister Netanyahu is:  
<mailto:Prime.Minister'sOffice@it.pmo.gov.il>

For Ambassador Oren's office:  
<mailto:info@washington.mfa.gov.il>

## **The Following was sent as a Press Release from the Reform Movement**

### **Reform Jewish Movement Calls on Knesset to Reject Conversion Legislation**

For 2,000 years, Judaism has treated Jews-by-choice the same as Jews-by-birth. We are taught "as soon as a convert emerges from the *mikvah* (ritual bath) she or he is Jewish for all purposes." (Talmud, Yevamot 47b)

For 62 years, since its founding, the State of Israel, through the “law of return,” has welcomed Jews from around the world as citizens in the world’s only Jewish state.

Today, legislation before the Knesset – a bill sponsored by MK David Rotem of *Yisrael Beitenu* that addresses both the authority of the Chief Rabbinate and matters of Conversion – threatens both of those sacred principles.

This legislation will certainly reopen one of the most divisive battles in the Jewish community. The proposed legislation will lead to a situation in which Jews-by-Choice would be treated differently and denied recognition as Jews under the Law of Return, in direct contradiction of Israeli Supreme Court rulings. Additionally, it will lead to the delegitimization of non-orthodox conversions performed outside of the State of Israel.

Our concern is neither partisan nor denominational, but emanates from true love of *Medinat Yisrael* and *Klal Yisrael* (the State and people of Israel). With the unity of the Jewish People foremost in our thoughts and prayers, we urge the Government and the Knesset to affirm core principles of that unity when enacting any legislation. We call upon Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to withstand the pressures of a small segment of the political spectrum and to do what is best for all the Jewish people everywhere.

The Reform Movement calls upon the State of Israel to treat all religious streams of Judaism fairly and equally, a cause that is far from realization. We call upon the Knesset to reject this partisan attack on the majority of American Jews. Finally, we call upon the Israeli people to join with us in an effort to help Israel live up to its promise as a Jewish and democratic State.