

Conversion

June 8th

Knesset members have begun to discuss proposing new legislation pertaining to institutional conversion alternatives in Israel. On the matter, MK Aliza Lavie said, "The state conversion system suffers from a deep crisis of lack of trust from the public. The time has come to examine alternatives that will meet the proper and corresponding Jewish values, and the spirit of the time."

In addition, MK Elazar Stern said that "thousands are born each year to Jewish mothers and are not registered as Jews. It's a huge challenge, and we have to deal with it. Consequences of the conversion system leads to assimilation."

A religion and state Knesset committee, headed by MK Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid) and MK Elazar Stern (Yesh Atid), met June 8 for a special conversation dedicated to discussing the topic of conversion. Called "Jewish Unity: Governmental Conversion Alternatives," the subject was discussed in various Knesset committees and hosted Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky.

Although Israel has recently begun to invest more attention to the state conversion system, and despite the natural increase in recent years of groups who carry out conversion procedures, in practice, a considerable decline in the number of converts exists. The committees thus discussed the difficulties and obstacles facing converts brought about by various aspects of the conversion system.

In the meetings, Child Rights Committee discussed the conversion of minors. Head of Yeshivat Othniel Rabbi Hacoheh was present at the hearing. In addition, the discussion touched upon the halachic conversion of Dana's independent courts, calling on the Chief Rabbinate to embrace the courts independent of the proper network conversion.

In the State Control Committee, MK Karin Elharar (Yesh Atid) discussed the conversion failures the exceptions committee had unearthed, as well as those discussed at length in a report by the State Comptroller.

Elad Kaplan, head of the legal department ITIM Association, raised a major problem he and his team had encountered, saying, "Spouses of Israelis are rejected outright by the Commission, because they hold a work permit or temporary residency. Sometimes even if a valid visa has been completed, you still cannot get the certificate...Many communities see the State of Israel as the center of the Jewish people, but when they come here to convert, they find the gates closed by conversion. This hurts the values of Israel as a Jewish democratic state. This offense is damaging to many hundreds of converts."

Following the discussion, MK Aliza Lavie said, "The discussion raises again the ordeal that people who wish to be part of the Jewish people go through mentally. Years and years ago we heard the testimonies of people facing a goodwill and good faith conversion system, in which they waited for months and sometimes years, facing walls of bureaucracy and institutional insensitivity. We heard today how the exceptions committee found non-transparent, non-protocol, unappealable procedure, and the result is hopelessness and frustration. The evidence

reveals that there is no escape from changing the composition of the commission and applying full transparency. "

In a hearing the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality held on gender aspects of conversion, MK Lavie noted that although most converts are women (70 to 80 percent), there are no women in key positions in the conversion process. Thus, women in important decision-making position in their lives lack a peer female perspective and sensitivity to their needs. More discussion found that of the four mikvahs which can perform a conversion, three of them have damaged infrastructure.

MK Elazar Stern said, "Every day 13 to 14 babies are born in Israel, and are not registered as Jews. Cumulatively we are talking about thousands each year who are born to families where the mother is not registered as a Jew. This is a challenge we have to deal with. The behavior of the conversion system leads to assimilation. These are people who serve us, teach us in schools, work with us in the workplace.

All of our children marry them and we're bringing assimilation to the people. I never tried to interfere in matters of law and I am relying on the great rabbis who are here, like Rabbi Hacoen. We are talking about such a vast majority, for instance where the father or grandfather was Jewish. If you are talking about a world Jewish law, we have to depend on the boundaries of Orthodoxy."