

Israel

## What's Behind New Conversion Standards?

Israeli Chief Rabbinate's new guidelines seen as part of larger pattern; new scrutiny of documentation proving Jewishness.

**Michele Chabin**  
Israel Correspondent

JERUSALEM

The Israeli Chief Rabbinate's recent decision to no longer automatically recognize conversions by Orthodox rabbis abroad appears to be part of a larger drive to impose stricter, more uniform standards on everything from conversion to marriage.

A wealth of anecdotal evidence suggests the Rabbinate has also recently raised the bar for recognizing the Jewishness of brides and grooms who were born Jewish, whether in Israel or abroad.

The result: Individuals who are unquestionably Jewish are being forced to scramble for documentation, sometimes just days before their weddings or their child's conversion.

"I had problems with the Rabbinate, even though I brought a lot of information about my mother, who is an eighth-generation Jerusalemite, and my grandfather, who is listed in the Encyclopedia of the Yishuv," Ronit Sagron, a New York-born Israeli, said of her recent encounter with the marriage registrar.

"I even brought them my mother's report card from Bet Sefer Evelina de Rothschild [an Orthodox girls' school] and other papers of my mother from the Mandate period, a family tree and photos," she related. "After a week of going to the Rabbinate every single day, my Orthodox rabbi cousin finally had to send a fax vouching for me!"

When Americans Aaron Greenberg and Jennifer Zeichner set their wedding date, they went to the rabbinate months ahead of time — only to be told to come back in three months due to an ongoing strike. When they returned, the couple, both born Jews, brought letters from their Orthodox rabbis in America and ketubot from their mother or maternal grandmother.

Two weeks before their wedding, the Rabbinate denied their request for permission to marry, citing insufficient documentation. "They didn't suggest any ways for us to rectify the situation," Aaron stressed.

Ultimately, Rabbi Seth Farber, who heads a group that helps Jews through the Rabbinate's process, "procured letters from other rabbis attesting to the fact that our rabbis are really Orthodox rabbis," related Greenberg. "This was a week before the wedding. All of our relatives were flying in."

The Rabbinate approved the Greenbergs' upcoming marriage the day before the wedding. Rabbi Farber, whose group, ITIM has helped hundreds of Israelis and foreigners persuade the Rabbinate to accept their documentation, said that several halachically Jewish couples have recently turned to ITIM after encountering "unprecedented difficulties."

Israeli law allows only religious marriages to be performed in Israel. So, for Jews marrying in Israel, rabbinic recognition is crucial.

The Rabbinate's longstanding reputation for daunting bureaucracy is one reason thousands of halachically Jewish Israelis opt for a civil ceremony in nearby Cyprus, or elsewhere. These marriages are recognized by the Interior Ministry, but not the Rabbinate.

But now, "Things are becoming more and more difficult," said a synagogue rabbi in Jerusalem who did not want his name published because he deals regularly with the Rabbinate.

Those familiar with the Rabbinate's procedures say that documents that were once sufficient proof of



In order to marry in Israel, Americans Jennifer Zeichner and Aaron Greenberg spent months dealing with the Chief Rabbinate, who questioned the authenticity of papers documenting their Jewishness. PHOTOS COURTESY THE GREENBERG FAMILY

a person's Jewishness, such as a grandparent's ketubah, yeshiva or day school records, or even a letter from the applicant's longtime rabbi are not necessarily accepted.

Rabbi Farber traces much of the difficulty to the massive Russian aliyah that began in the early 1990s, when 700,000 Jews and roughly 300,000 non-Jews immigrated to Israel. Many of the non-Jews were granted citizenship on the basis of secular immigration law, which accepts anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent. But traditional religious law, overseen by the rabbinate for purposes of marriage and other life-cycle functions, accepts as Jewish only those who are children of a Jewish mother or converts whose conversion has been performed by a recognized Orthodox rabbi.

The Soviet immigration wave has posed huge problems for the Rabbinate — particularly since religion was outlawed under Soviet rule and Jewish documents are often scarce. The Rabbinate consequently imposed a strict set of criteria for recognizing someone from the Soviet Union as Jewish.

Rabbi Farber speculated that recent personnel changes within the Rabbinate were partly responsible for the spread of these strict criteria to other countries.

"There are people, most notably Rabbi [Yigal] Krispel, who aren't familiar with many of the diaspora rabbis whose documents were accepted by his predecessor, Rabbi [Yitzhak] Ohana," Farber said. Rabbi Krispel, like Rabbi Ohana before him, is the official responsible for deciding which rabbis to accept for purposes of conversion and other matters.

Asher Cohen, a political scientist at Bar Ilan University, also sees other factors at play. "The entire Rabbinate is being increasingly influenced by the haredim," Cohen said of the ultra-traditional Orthodox religious-political establishment.

A source within the Rabbinate rejected the notion, put forth by some rabbis, that the stricter criteria were payback for the Rabbinical Council of America's (RCA) ousting of Rabbi Mordechai Tendler, after he was accused of sexual harassment and abuse.

"If that were true, the new standards would apply just to American rabbis," he said. "In fact, the stan-

## The Jewish Week

May 12, 2006

dards affect all rabbis in the diaspora." Fortunately for North Americans born Jewish, if they wish to marry in or immigrate to Israel, the Rabbinate continues to recognize letters written on the letterhead of Rabbinical Council of America, the mainstream, centrist American Orthodox rabbinic group, or its affiliate, the Beth Din of America, said Rabbi Farber.

This is in contrast to conversion authorizations (*ishurim*) issued by the Beth Din of America, he said. The rabbinate no longer automatically accepts these.

Rabbi Krispel confirmed: "When it comes to evidence of Jewishness, we accept letters from someone who is an acknowledged Orthodox rabbi, recognized by Orthodox rabbinical associations. This includes community rabbis."

He acknowledged, however, that congregational rabbis unknown to the Rabbinate could require further authentication.

But Rabbi Krispel said he felt compelled to employ stricter standards for recognizing conversions.

"When you're dealing with conversion, you're dealing with extremely complex halachic issues," he said. "Therefore, we want to make sure the rabbi involved in a conversion is also acknowledged in that field specifically."

Rabbi Krispel said it had become apparent to him that not everyone who performs a conversion was qualified to do so.

"Only dayanim" — Judaic law judges who serve on religious courts — are permitted to do this," he told The Jewish Week.

Rabbi Krispel said he had recently established a committee of three rabbis to determine the qualifications of any rabbi performing conversions. Anyone not on the approved list, "has to go through a background check and an examination process," he said.

In principle, this appears to disqualify the vast majority of American Orthodox rabbis from having their conversions recognized. In many recent cases, the rabbinate has recognized individuals converted by well-known American Orthodox rabbis only after long resistance and many hurdles.

"Just as the rabbi of this or that municipality in Israel is not permitted to be involved in conversion, so too in the diaspora," Rabbi Krispel confirmed.

Rabbi Basil Herring, executive vice president of the RCA, urged American Jews to take the Rabbinate's new guidelines in stride.

"This is part of a policy or effort on the part of the rabbinic leadership under Rabbi Amar to create standards," he said. "I don't know if they are going about it right, or how they are implementing the policy, but it is not an attack on Modern Orthodoxy or American Orthodoxy, and it does not represent the haredization of the rabbinate. We're not throwing thunderbolts at each other." ■



Israel's Chief Rabbinate seemed indifferent to upcoming marriage of Jennifer Zeichner and Aaron Greenberg, Greenberg says.