

The Zionist Arm of the Conservative Movement

MERCAZ USA



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Dear Friends:

Several weeks ago, as the Knesset was in the waning days of its summer session, MK David Rotem, a leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party tried to pull a legislative “fast one” by calling without warning for a vote on his controversial Conversion Bill in the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee which he heads as chairman. Due in part to the intentional absence of the Likud MKs, Rotem secured a 5-to-4 majority vote for the bill with the backing of his ultra-Orthodox allies and put it on track to be presented to the entire Knesset, hoping for the backing of the Netanyahu coalition.

What stopped the Knesset from passing the controversial bill, which would have formally put conversion under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate for the first time, in contrast to marriage and divorce which have been under the Chief Rabbinate since 1948? It was largely the intense lobbying of Diaspora leaders from the Conservative and Reform Movements, plus those from the Jewish federation system, who succeeded in forcing Prime Minister Netanyahu to stop the momentum behind the proposed legislation and pull the bill from a final vote before the start of the Knesset’s summer recess.

Now, as in 1997, when during his first term, Netanyahu convened the Neeman Commission to try to hammer out a compromise, albeit unsuccessful, on conversion, the Prime Minister has once again called for a committee of leaders from across the board to try to work out a compromise. This time Netanyahu has entrusted the committee’s direction to Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency.

Since assuming the post, Natan Sharansky has steadfastly championed the need to take into consideration the positions of non-Orthodox Jewry in resolving the controversy around the matter of conversion. He is adamant both about meeting the needs of all who would wish to convert, including the hundreds of thousands of FSU immigrants to Israel who are not halachically Jewish, as well as preventing the alienation of non-Orthodox Jews from the Jewish state.

Certainly the support of, and accountability to, the Jewish Agency Board of Governors have played a large part in making Sharansky such a powerful advocate of an approach to conversion consistent with our own. It is still far too early to know what the outcome of this process will be, but there can be no doubt that our strong presence in the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency - together with our Reform colleagues and our respective allies - Kadima, Labor and Meretz - will have an important influence on what transpires.

Your continued membership in MERCAZ USA helps guarantee our strength and influence in the WZO and Jewish Agency. We made significant strides at the recent Zionist Congress to forge a coalition for religious pluralism. With your ongoing support, we can insure that this strength can be brought to bear to beat back the Rotem bill and finally craft a conversion framework in Israel that will embrace converts, not turn them away. Numbers matter in this world of political coalitions and competitive fundraising, and our membership figures really mean something. Go to <http://www.mercazusa.org/membership.html> to (re)join MERCAZ for the current membership year.

Wishing you a Happy, Healthy and Peaceful New Year!

Dr. Stephen S. Wolnek, President



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