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Dear Editor:

Mr. Kurt Rothschild is a great *ohev Yisroel* and a tireless worker for *klal Yisroel*. I wish to take issue with his position on conversion, expressed in the last issue of *Perspectives*, while in no way diminishing my respect for Mr. Rothschild himself.

Mr. Rothschild writes that a much greater effort should have been made by Israel's rabbinic leadership to encourage and befriend the new gentile immigrants from Russia so as to enable them to convert easily. He writes that some "conversion *Batei Din* have been frustrating and intimidating to newcomers, putting stumbling blocks in their path, rather than offering encouragement and welcome. Yet, when others have sought to be more accommodating – within the realm of halacha – they have been denounced".

Mr. Rothschild states that he "is not qualified to engage in halachic discussion". This is a praiseworthy admission, but then how does he know that the others who are "accommodating", have been so "within the realm of halacha". The halachic validity of their approach is precisely the point in the dispute.

Mr. Rothschild calls for respectful treatment of the opinions of Rabbis involved in the various "accommodating" special *Batei Din* for accelerated conversions. If so, should he not show equal respect for the opinions of those Rabbis in the "intimidating" *Batei Din*, who are also men of the highest integrity, devoted to Torah and halacha? Is it not possible that what one person calls "stumbling blocks" may very well be procedures mandated by the *Shulchan Aruch*?

Our Sages counsel us to overlook the faults of others, even the wrong they do to us, so that G-d will be similarly forgiving in examining our own failings. That compromising attitude, however, applies only to that which belongs to us such as our honour or our money. But we have no right to compromise our neighbour's property and we certainly have no right to compromise or distort that which belongs to G-d. Neither the greatest scholar nor the most ignorant boor has the right to abrogate or alter a word of the Torah.

Competent *Rabbanim* have told me that we have no right to change the *psak* of the *Shulchan Aruch* which states that "all matters pertaining to converts, whether it is *kabбалos hamitzvos*, *bris milah* and *tevila*, must be performed by day in the presence of three who are qualified to judge." The *Shulchan Aruch* concludes that even *post facto* the conversion is invalid if it lacks sincere *kabбалos hamitzvos* in front of three *dayyanim* by day [YD 268:3]. The *Shach* and the *Taz* explain this insistence on *kabбалos hamitzvos* with the principle that: "This is the essence of the matter (conversion) and its first step". Rabbi Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* writes "Concerning the question as to whether a convert who has not accepted the commandments is considered a convert, it is simple and clear that he is not a convert at all even *post facto* as stated in the *Shulchan Aruch*. I do not understand the reasoning of those Rabbis who err in regard to this. Even according to their opinion, what benefit do they bring to the Jewish people in their acceptance of such converts?" [YD 157].

A Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University, Rabbi Bleich, after surveying the issue in detail wrote that "The situation with regards to converts who have no intention of observing the precepts of Judaism is even graver. The preponderance of halachic opinion ranging

from Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinski to the late Chief Rabbi Herzog is that such conversions are null and void. It follows, of course, that the children of spurious converts can also not be recognized as Jews in the eyes of Halacha. The serious questions arising from such spurious conversions should prompt a cautious attitude on the part of those whose duty it is to deal with these problems on a day-to-day basis, for it is they who are charged with safe-guarding and preserving the identity of the Jewish people.” [Tradition, Spring 1971].

Given all this, we are disturbed to hear about wholesale conversions without the real acceptance of *mitzvos*. Rabbi Gedalya Axelrod, president of the Haifa Rabbinical Court stated that “*the overwhelming majority of those who converted to Judaism did not observe the mitzvot following their conversion.*” Thus, he said, their conversion was fraudulent and the rabbis who conducted such conversions were only fooling themselves [Jerusalem Post, June 14, 2002].

Rabbi Eliahu Ben-Dahan, director-general of the Rabbinical Courts stated that “You won't find any more acquiescent rabbis than those we have. We have rabbinical court judges who look for every loophole in order to accept a convert.” [Jerusalem Post, November 15, 2002].

The *Jerusalem Report* [January 29, 2001] states in the name of an orthodox reporter: “a Jew who doesn't observe the *mitzvot* remains a Jew. But the only way a gentile can become a Jew is by committing himself to full observance of Torah and *mitzvot*. Rabbi Druckman's court doesn't demand that of its converts. *Well over 90 percent of the converts I've investigated from his court have no intention of observing the mitzvot.*”

Would that the above information was false! But reliable people have told me that it is not so. Many cases of spurious and even fraudulent conversions have been documented, although this is under-reported by the media.

My own experience indicates that we have a severe problem. I was recently involved in a case where an orthodox rabbi (who would be well-known to Mr. Rothschild) converted the paramour of a Jewish man without any detailed investigation at all. The rabbi did the quickie conversion immediately after meeting the woman for the first time. The woman claimed that her mother had been converted in Europe and accepted as a convert by Israel. The “rabbi” and his “Beth Din” declared in the conversion document that the woman was observant. Yet a simple check with the family of the Jewish man, who was known to the Rabbi, would have indicated that she was far from observant (no Shabbos, no kashrus, etc.). The family conducted a detailed investigation of Israeli government records and found no documents for the woman; the rabbi conducted no such search. After this spurious conversion the woman continued with her non-observant lifestyle; there never was any intent to convert from the start. When I confronted the rabbi with the evidence, he claimed to have been misled, but refused to issue a document clarifying the circumstances of the conversion. Many such stories can, unfortunately, be told.

Many sincere people argue that at least there should be an Orthodox conversion or else the candidates will just go for non-Orthodox conversion procedures. The truth is that an invalid Orthodox conversion (that is, one that does not require a complete and sincere acceptance of Torah and *mitzvos*) is just as invalid as any Conservative or Reform conversion. In many ways it is worse since the signature of an Orthodox rabbi misleads people into thinking that the conversion is valid.

It is not the stamp of the “orthodox Rabbi” that makes the conversion valid but the extent to which he followed the Law of the Torah. It is a canard (quite common in the me-

dia and by politicians with their own agenda) to denounce a rabbi or a *Bais Din* as cruel and indifferent to human suffering when that rabbi correctly views himself, not as the author of Halacha, but merely as its spokesman and interpreter. The Torah is not ours to compromise just because we have a calculation that the results will be better and kinder. Our task is to do what the Torah demands of us to the best of our ability, and leave the outcome to G-d.

In this age of convenient conversions, there are still true proselytes who come to Judaism in the accepted halachic manner, and convert out of deep commitment to G-d and His Torah. These Jews are a source of joy and pride to us. We do no favour to the true proselytes, or to *Hashem Yisboroch*, by allowing conversions of a highly questionable nature.

“I am the one who drew Yisro nigh and did not come to repulse him. You also, when a person comes to be converted *and comes solely for the sake of heaven* draw him nigh and do not repulse him” [Yalkut Shimoni, Yisro, 268].

Jonathan S. Ostroff

Dear Editor:

The Pesach issue of *Perspectives* contained two articles on the controversial issue of conversions in Israel. In dealing with the very difficult problem of influencing converts to undertake a strictly halachic lifestyle, while living in a secular society, the writer of one of the articles expressed himself regrettably in a manner unbecoming one who is committed to Torah Ethics. But the tone and words which were used did not come as a total surprise.

The article is part of a pattern of denigrating and deligitimizing those members of the Orthodox community and their Rabbis who are not part of the “heimische” crowd and heaping disdain upon those who wear the kipa sruga.

In taking issue with this kind of attitude, it is improper to pass wholesale judgement and stigmatize entire segments of a community. Within all camps we find readily men and women of great humility, of exemplary *chesed*, of true *yirath Shamayim* and deep *ahavath Yisrael*. Regrettably, we also encounter people of arrogant self-righteousness who de-legitimize others and who express themselves with condescension and contempt toward those in the national religious ranks. Sadly, there are among them some leading spokesmen, educators and politicians as well as much of the press.

The articles which give rise to the present response center on three issues to which I wish to direct my remarks. These are: The conversion process in Israel for non-Jewish immigrants, the decision by Mafdal to join the current Sharon coalition, and support for non-Charedi Torah and *chesed* institutions.

First, the problem of *Giyur*. As one not qualified to engage in a Halachic discussion, I will not enter into statements that would lead to dispute and recrimination. But surely we should all acknowledge that for better or worse, Israel has brought to its shore one million Russians. This group, includes bona fide Jews, but also several hundred thousand non-Jews and non-halachic Jews. This *aliya* was initiated at the outset with the concurrence of the *charedi* community and its Rabbinic leadership, out of a desire to retrieve a large Jewish community that had practically disappeared during seventy years of Communist rule.

This immigration now poses a grave problem for Israel which is burdened with so many non-Jews, among whom show no interest to convert, no matter how easy and accommodating such conversions might be. A much greater effort should have been made by Israel's rabbinic leadership to encourage and befriend these immigrants. This was not done; nor was sufficient thought given to the "time bomb" this immigration constitutes. Some conversion Batei Din have been frustrating and intimidating to newcomers, putting stumbling blocks in their path, rather than offering encouragement and welcome.

Yet, when others have sought to be more accommodating – within the realm of Halacha - they have been denounced. The terminology used in describing the activities of Rabbi Druckman and Rabbi Avior as "fraudulent" is beneath contempt and is evidence of the writer's ignorance and viciousness. These *rabbanim* are learned men of the highest integrity, devoted to and practicing Torah and Halacha, and do not deserve the scandalous appellation with which the article's author refers to them. Their Giyur is recognized by the Chief Rabbinate.

The concept that instruction for and execution of *giyur* should take place in *chutz l'aaretz* before coming to Israel would appear to be quite logical. However, this approach has not worked out and is therefore not being pursued.

A second issue with which the aforementioned article deals relates to Mafdal having joined the present government. It is clear that within the broad spectrum of Orthodoxy, there are basic disagreements between the National Religious camp who believe in inclusive participation of the Orthodox camp in the affairs of the State and of the community, whenever possible, whereas much of the *charedi* community in large measure believe in isolation and segregation as a matter of principle.

Despite the latter approach taken by the *charedi* camp, Shas and Degel Hatorah have participated in Israeli governments when they were dominated by Labor and Meretz. It is somewhat hypocritical, therefore, to now attack so bitterly the National Religious Party for being in the present government.

Admittedly, sitting in a government with Shinui is an arduous and difficult undertaking requiring constant unrelenting defense of our basic religious concerns. Moreover, it imposes upon Mafdal the duty of serving as trustees of Torah life for the entire Orthodox community. Surely one must recognize that Orthodox interests are better served with a religious party in the government, to monitor and deal with anti-religious demands of secular elements in the government.

Finally, I cannot help but reflect with regret and sadness on the phenomenon of the varied community's approach to religious, educational and *chesed* institutions within Orthodoxy.

While many *Charedi Mosdot*, particularly those in *chutz l'aaretz* owe their origin to "Dati Leumi" founders, and who to this day receive much financial support from such sources, there is little reciprocity and often scarce *hakarot hatov*. Financial support from *charedi* philanthropists to *yeshivot hesder* to Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan of Yeshiva University and its *Kollelim*, to the Machon LeTorah or Midrasha Lebanot of Bar-Ilan University or even to Dati Leumi institutions dedicated to missions of *chesed* is sparse or non-existent.

Admittedly, donors have the prerogative to designate their priorities and it is a fact that *charedi* Torah and social welfare institutions have overwhelming needs. With the exception of some, most of their funding is raised from within the *charedi* camp. This does not

absolve *charedi* supporters from having more understanding of, and support for Dati Leumi institutions of Torah.

Perhaps, even more significant is the self-imposed isolation that manifests itself, *inter alia*, in non-involvement in Federation and sparse participation in the UJA which deprive the Torah community of the opportunity of exercising a beneficial influence around the “community table.” In taking such a position, many fail to recognize that their involvement with the broader Jewish community could reflect itself also in greater financial support for Torah education.

“Isolation” has merit when educating young children and protecting them from the deleterious influences of modern society and giving them opportunity of growing up in an exclusive Torah-focused disciplined environment. But one might hope that after many years of attendance at Yeshivot and Seminaries, mature men and women ought to be able to represent the Torah point of view intelligently and pleasantly in communal affairs in which other streams of Judaism have a majority of participants, without fear of being influenced negatively by dissident Jewish views. We are all part of the total Jewish community and have an obligation to support its endeavors for our well being and for our continuity.

The great Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk so beautifully expressed our need of brotherly love and harmony in his *sefer Noam Elimelech* when he recommended the following meditation, prior to daily *tefillah*: “Please, Hashem, protect us from prejudice of one to the other. May the jealousy of others not enter their heart and similarly, may our prejudice against others not affect us. On the contrary, give into our heart that we shall recognize the virtue of others and not their shortcomings and that each shall talk to our fellow man in an honest and pleasant manner.”

The writers of the two articles in the Pesach edition of *Perspectives* to whom I have referred, as well as so many others, would do well to reflect on Reb Elimelech’s words.

Kurt Rothschild