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Israel's Chief Rabbinate 'Cements Monopoly Over Conversions' After Deal With European Orthodox Rabbis

Chief Rabbinate to stop sending Israeli rabbis to perform conversions in Europe. In return, European Orthodox rabbis won't recognize conversions performed in Israel in private courts that Rabbinate doesn't recognize



President Reuven Rivlin meets with the Conference of European Rabbis, Jerusalem, November 20, 2018. Credit: Mark Neiman GPO

- Bill to lift sanctions on Israeli rabbis who perform weddings outside Rabbinate defeated
- Confirmed: Israeli Chief Rabbinate does keep a secret list of approved rabbis from abroad
- Israelis may be fed up with Orthodox establishment, but few are joining Reform and Conservative congregations





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In a move that could affect thousands of European converts to Judaism, Israel's Chief Rabbinate has agreed to stop sending Israeli rabbis to perform conversions in Europe.

Instead, the Chief Rabbinate will recognize the Conference of European Rabbis, an Orthodox umbrella group, as the sole authority over Jewish conversion in Europe.

In return, European Orthodox rabbis will not recognize conversions performed each year in Israel in private courts that the Chief Rabbinate does not recognize.

The deal, whose existence was exposed in an article published Monday by Israel Hayom, led to howls of protest by advocates for a less restrictive conversion policy in Israel.

With the deal, the Chief Rabbinate is "attempting both to cement its monopoly over conversion in Israel, and to expand its influence in Europe," Seth Farber, director of the Itim group in Israel, wrote in a letter to the Israel attorney general asking him to block the deal.

Israel sees about 4,000 conversions annually that are recognized by the haredi Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, according to a report on conversions in the Jewish state commissioned last year by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Itim represents converts to Judaism who are not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate.

The agreement between the European group and the Chief Rabbinate follows a period of uncertainty regarding the Chief Rabbinate's recognition of conversions performed abroad, said the European group's president, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt. In recent years, institutions of the Chief Rabbinate have not recognized some Orthodox conversions performed abroad by prominent Orthodox rabbis.

Under the new agreement, "Israeli rabbis will no longer set up a rabbinical court for conversions in a European country, independently to that community's existing Jewish community," Goldschmidt said.

Goldschmidt argued that the deal means that the "Rabbinate's influence in Europe will diminish." He also said that "few converts will be affected" by the agreement, which he said is not designed to change reality on the ground but to "formalize jurisdictions."

In addition to unaffiliated Orthodox conversion authorities, Israel also has Reform and Masorti, or Conservative, programs. But those programs' converts "rarely seek to have their conversion recognized by the Rabbinate," which does not recognize them, according to the report commissioned by Netanyahu.

