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Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (left) is a prime supporter of the bill

Conversion Controversy

A proposed bill to allow immigration only for 'legitimate' Jews has ruffled the Diaspora

By **SUMANA RAMANAN** in Jerusalem

KAREN Rolfe, 27, a New York psychologist, hopes to join her Jewish fiance, Aaron Bockstein, in Israel soon. But as Karen is not Jewish, she plans to convert at a synagogue in the US belonging to the conservative stream of Judaism—one Karen identifies with for its modernist approach to religion.

Anatoly Khaikov, 36, immigrated to Israel three years ago from St Petersburg, because his grandmother was Jewish. But that was not enough for him to be counted as a 'Jew' in Israel's population register. Anatoly wanted to convert and become a 'proper' Jew. But conversions in Israel are carried out only by the Orthodox rabbinate, which enjoins adherents to follow strictly the *halakha,* or Jewish law. This means, amongst other things, keeping kosher—dietary restrictions—and observing Saturday, the Sabbath, as a day of prayer and rest. Anatoly says he cannot change his secular lifestyle and has decided to convert at a synagogue abroad through the liberal Reform movement.

The founding principle of Israel, the Law of Return, allows anyone who is the child, grandchild or spouse of a Jew to immigrate, but also stipulates that to be officially recognised as a Jew the person's mother should be Jewish. But the same law allows immigration and Jewish registration to those who have converted to Judaism through a 'legitimate' authority, something that both Anatoly and Karen hope to make use of.

However, that may soon change. A bill is likely to passed soon in the Israeli Knesset that will define as 'legitimate' only conversions carried out in the Orthodox tradition, whether in Israel or abroad. It affects a large number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. "Almost a quarter of the 640,000 Soviet immigrants who have come to Israel since 1989 are not registered as Jews," says Motti Inbari, spokesperson for Israel B'Aliya, a new ethnic party supported by recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union that is part of the government.

But the bill has deeper implications. It has sent out a signal to the vast majority of Jews outside Israel, the Diaspora, who follow the more liberal reform and conservative movements that their brand of Judaism is suspect. Since more than half of the 8.5 million Diaspora Jews belong to this category—almost the same number of Jews in Israel, 4.5 million—it is not surprising that the proposed legislation has evoked a tremendous outcry. "The bill infringes on the freedom of religion of non-Orthodox streams and threatens the relationship between

Israel and the Diaspora," says a livid Einat Ramon, a rabbi from the conservative movement in Israel. "Diaspora Jews are increasingly feeling alienated from Israel," adds Rabbi Michael Boyden, a Reform rabbi of British origin and the chairman of the Israel Council of Progressive Rabbis. "If this bill passes, the rift will increase dramatically."

The clout of these two affected groups cannot be easily ignored. Soviet immigrants, with their high educational levels, have contributed immensely to music, sports and science in Israel and constitute an impressive vote-bank. Israel receives vital financial and political support from Diaspora Jews, especially those in the US, 75 per cent of who belong to the reform and conservative streams. According to one estimate, last year American Jews sent $700 million to Israel for charitable causes alone, besides the generous aid that the US government sanctions each year to Israel.

PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is acutely aware of the fallout of such a law, but also has to contend with coalition politics. The bill is being sponsored by a coalition member, Shas, an orthodox, religious party representing the interests of Mizrahi Jews (Jews from West Asian and North African countries) and strongly influenced by its charismatic spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. With 10 seats in the 120-member Knesset, Shas can exert pressure on Netanyahu, who is nevertheless hoping to avoid a confrontation with the Diaspora Jewry by reaching a compromise with Shas in which its bill will be replaced by a government-sponsored one referring only to conversions in Israel. The reworked bill will merely be a legal statement of what already exists on the ground.

"Conversions abroad are becoming a farce," says Shas' deputy health minister, Shlomo Ben-Izri. "In the US, you can pay $30 and get a certificate." Rabbi Ochana, who is in charge of conversions at the Chief Orthodox Rabbinate of Israel, fears that conversions will be used by foreign workers to get Israeli citizenship.

While the religious parties, including Shas, cornered 23 Knesset seats in last May's elections—the largest religious bloc in the history of the Israeli parliament—their political power is not new. In return for support on some laws, these religious parties have pushed through legislation that shift powers from the state to religion. Marriage, divorce and burial are already a monopoly of the Orthodox rabbinate.

Orthodox conversion in Israel involves a year of intensive study, says one Russian immigrant. Says she: "I'm not religious at all. But I faced discrimination because my ID card said 'Russian' against religion, not 'Jew'. Many landlords only rent out flats to Jews and employers give priority to Jews."

Soviet immigrants on a flight to Israel

Most of the Diaspora is strongly opposed to the bill before the Knesset. "At the end of the day it will make Jews weaker socially and politically," says Michael Burman from the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues in the UK. But the main opposition is coming from what some Jews call the "larger Israel" outside Israel—the Jews in the US. The population of Jews in the US is about 5.7 million, considerably more than Israel's 4.5 million, and account for 43.6 per cent of the world's population of Jews. And many US conservative and reform organisations have dispatched delegations to Jerusalem to protest against the bill.

"This bill contains nothing new," says Rabbi Ammiel Hersh, executive director of the New York-based Association of Reform Zionists in America. "In the '80s, there had been a similar attempt to give the Orthodoxy greater powers. But vigorous opposition from overseas ensured its defeat. It does not really concern us, since its applicability is expected to be limited only to conversions in Israel. But the bill is anti-democratic, inconsistent with Jewish tradition."

He emphasises the repercussion for the Jewish state as such: "We were ethnic groups that came together here from all over the world and yet we did it: we managed to influence American foreign policy on Israel. We managed to bring about the motivation to free Syrian Jews. We managed to help free 10,000 Russian immigrants. Why did we do all this? We did it based on the concept that all Jews are responsible for each other. If the Jewish state is now passing legislation that upsets that fundamental pillar of Jewish identity, it will, in the long term, affect the dynamics that gave rise to that political and financial support and cause damage to it." And so, as the debate rages on, it is far from clear whether the Israeli Right will pay heed. ■

With **Padma Rao-Sundarji** in New York and **Sanjay Suri** in London