



Saving the State's Jewishness

Giyur KaHalacha provides a conversion alternative aimed at future demographics



The conversion story

The remnants of Soviet Jewry have returned – yet only Giyur KaHalacha appears concerned about their Jewish future

ADRIAN GOPLIAC'S 'Christian' grandmother had a picture of the Temple Mount on her wall in Moldova. (Courtesy)

• JEREMY SHARON

Adrian Gopliac was born in the Moldovan city of Chishliia in 1990, shortly before the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Growing up, his only connection to Judaism was the knowledge that his mother's father was a Jew.

His paternal grandmother insisted she was Christian, despite the fact that the bedtime prayers she taught him were somewhat abstract, and she and her husband had a picture of the Temple Mount hanging on a wall of their home.

In 1996, Gopliac's Jewish grandfather, Ben-Tzion, gathered the family together and announced he wanted to move to Israel under the Law of Return, which gave his family the right to Israeli citizenship. A year later Gopliac and his parents made aliya along with his mother's three brothers and one sister and their children, yet his grandparents

remained in Moldova, ultimately unable to deal with the upheaval of moving to a new country.

Once in Israel, the Gopliacs began to adapt to local culture by having family meals on Jewish holidays, although they didn't go to synagogue or "perform religious ceremonies at home," Gopliac said.

"You're part of the people, but there is something that you feel inside that says, okay, we came to Israel as Jews – but how is that expressed?" He felt "that there was something that had to be inside me, in my soul."

He was drawn to synagogues "but never went inside one," he said.

"I really wanted to go in, but there was something pushing me out – my lack of understanding. I had Jewish roots, but I wanted to know what this means, but no one told me."

AFTER 12TH grade, Gopliac joined the Yemin Orde pre-military academy – designed for immigrant youth to develop leadership

skills and foster their Jewish identity – for a year of preparatory training.

"It was there that I learned about Jewish history and the inheritance of the Jewish people, and I began to understand who I am," Gopliac said.

"We learned about the exiles of the Jewish people, and I understood how my situation and my status were created."

He was accepted into an elite IDF combat unit and joined the IDF's conversion course, Nativ. He began putting on tefillin, praying three times a day and observing Shabbat and other commandments. He did not want to rush the process, but studied as much as possible, spending Shabbatot with an Israeli family appointed to accompany him through the process. He also made his parents' kitchen kosher.

Excited to be finally given a July 2013 date for his conversion hearing before a rabbinical court, Gopliac realized that it was to be held in the week of (what

would have been) his bar-mitzva Torah portion, *Va'era*, Chapter 6 of the Book of Exodus. He would be restoring his link to Judaism, broken by history, on a very significant date. Even more significant because of the text of Exodus 6, 7: "I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a God to you, and you will know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."

"I knew I would finally be able to repair the chain that had been interrupted," he said. "I was the last generation. If I didn't continue it, the chain would be broken completely; all the generations after me would have been lost."

Gopliac noted that although he is not prone to nervousness – during his military service he had rarely, if ever experienced such an emotion – when faced with the court he became very anxious. The rabbinical judges did not put him at his ease.

"I stammered, I felt uncomfortable. They asked me questions that I knew the answers to, but I stammered, because I was so excited by the situation; words escaped me because of the importance of the occasion."

TO HIS disappointment, "the rabbinical judges looked at me and spoke to me as if I didn't belong."

The hearing concluded and Gopliac left the room while rabbinical judges discussed the case. When they asked him back in, they told him that he would pass "next time." He returned to the Yemin Orde academy, this time to teach, but was upset about what had happened.

"I was very angry and felt very insulted," he said. "On what basis were they not approving me? They didn't know about me, they hadn't asked me about who I was or what my story was, and they decided not to recognize me as a descendant of the Jewish people despite all my studies and efforts, and continued to see me as an outsider."

The rejection was "a trauma and an open wound." In the following months, Gopliac "gave up" on conversion, and even on his Jewish practices, feeling that, no matter what, he wouldn't be accepted.

"I had done more than I was asked to, or was expected from me, and it was like I had run into a brick wall. After everything, they were still telling me I didn't belong."

He had embarked upon the conversion course to "fix" something, not to pass a test or some kind of high-school diploma.

"I had joined the army, I was willing to give my life for this country, but they failed me like it was a school test. What they did was to prevent me from reaching who I was in truth, and prevented me from fixing what I wanted fixed."

At that time, his "Christian" grandmother died and her brother revealed that the family was in fact Jewish and, like thousands of other Jews from the

Moldova region had been afraid to acknowledge their Jewishness due to the history of pogroms in the region even before the Holocaust.

A FRIEND of Gopliac's had a connection to Elazar Stern – a former IDF general and MK – who worked to help integrate immigrants from the FSU and became the driving force behind a push for conversion reforms in the last Knesset. Stern put Gopliac in touch with Giyur KaHalacha, an independent Orthodox court for conversion set up in 2015 by several notable rabbis from the moderate camp of the national-religious community. The young man met with the organization and found its members sympathetic and understanding. He gradually became observant once more.

A date was set for a conversion hearing with the Giyur KaHalacha rabbinical court just over two years after his first conversion hearing, once again on the week of his bar mitzva. At the start of the hearing, one of the rabbis asked for forgiveness for what Gopliac had been through, and the young man, who had been "afraid the same thing would happen all over again," was moved to tears.

"All these feelings of not belonging in the past had come up again. But I felt the rabbis in the court were embracing me, as opposed to the previous time when I felt I had been pushed away. The rabbi smiled at me, looked me in the eyes, asked me about my family, my personal background and the whole process that



had led me up to that point.

"I told them I wanted the fundamental aspects of Judaism to be expressed in my life and in my home, and that I wanted my children to live in accordance with our Jewish heritage. It was very emotional, tears began to fall on my cheeks. Everyone in the room was moved; even the stenographer began to cry.

"I felt like the rabbis were listening to me, they were embracing me and accepting me, they understood why I was there, and were saying I belonged."

Gopliac's conversion was approved by the rabbis of Giyur KaHalacha. At the end of the hearing, one of >>

WHILE IN an elite IDF combat unit, Gopliac (left) joined the IDF's conversion course, Nativ. (Courtesy)

RABBI FARBER poses at ITIM. (Marc Israel Sellem)





RABBI SETH Farber officiates at the wedding of Russian Israelis. (Courtesy)

the rabbis, who also serves as a communal leader of a synagogue in Ra'anana, invited David (as he now wants to be called) to celebrate his bar mitzva in synagogue that week, an invitation he gladly accepted.

RABBIS IN the national-religious movement have, since the mass immigration from the FSU in the early 1990s, sought ways to deal with the heavy price the Communist regime and history exacted on the Jewish identity of the approximately two million who remained within its borders after the Holocaust and the end of World War II.

Roughly 20 percent of the one million people who made aliya were not Jewish according to Jewish law, since they were not born to a (recognized) Jewish mother. This group of Israeli citizens has given rabbis and sociologists cause for concern.

"The threat is that the Jewish collective in this country will not have a shared vision for the future of Jewish peoplehood, because they can't even agree that we're one people," said Rabbi Seth Farber, another of the founders of Giyur KaHalacha.

"Such a split threatens our capacity to be a functional, democratic Jewish state."

"We don't want to give up on any Jew and on any brother who came from the USSR," said Rabbi David Stav, one of the founders of Giyur KaHalacha. "We want them with us, we want them to be a[n official] part of the Jewish people... We have enough divisions among us already, without adding another one."

He went on to say that "Israeli citizens from the FSU who aren't Jewish according to Jewish law might not feel disenfranchised today, but if the attachment of their descendants to Jewish

peoplehood and identity disappears, then they may very well feel alienated from a state that is based on Jewish nationhood and identity."

Giyur KaHalacha was set up because rabbis like Stav and Farber felt that in the two-and-a-half decades since the mass immigration began, too little has been done.

According to research presented to the Immigration and Absorption Ministry, there are approximately 300,000 immigrants from the FSU, or their children, who are not considered Jewish according to Jewish law.

Of those, some 100,000 are under the age of 18, and it is believed that up to 60,000 are minors according to Jewish law – girls under 12 and boys under 13. This fact is crucial, since although adult converts are required to accept upon themselves the biblical commandments, conversion of minors is much simpler. They are not obligated to adhere to religious laws and commandments, and therefore converting minors does not require the girl or boy in question to accept the commandments on themselves.

The Giyur KaHalacha program is therefore aimed largely – but not exclusively – at encouraging the conversion of minors in the halachically non-Jewish segment of the immigrant population.

PROF. ZE'EV Khanin, the chief scientist of the Immigration and Absorption Ministry and senior lecturer in political studies at Bar-Ilan University, has conducted extensive research into the demographics of the immigrant community from the FSU, its ethno-cultural characteristics and its national self-identity.

According to Khanin, immigrants and their children who are not registered in Israel as Jewish nevertheless see themselves predominantly as Jewish in

an ethnic and national sense, albeit not in a religious one.

"Jewish identity in the FSU, and to some degree in the post-Soviet states, unlike in the Western world and Israel, was perceived in ethnic, not religious, cultural or other terms," Khanin wrote in 2014.

"So those not registered as Jewish according to Halacha see themselves as Jewish in an ethnic, national sense rather than a religious sense."

He explained that in the 1990s it would have been comparatively easy to convert halachic non-Jews as a way of binding them to their new state, but that today "the train is leaving the station."

"People realize they can be good Israelis with a couple of problems regarding their Jewish status that don't prevent them from receiving almost all rights, except perhaps for marriage and burial," Khanin said.

"The issue is now less of a problem for the immigrants from the former Soviet Union and the CIS than it is for the State of Israel itself."

THE MAJORITY of Israeli society doesn't particularly care whether people from the immigrant community convert or not, he said.

"For most Israelis, they see that this community pays taxes and goes to the army, so they are not too bothered about their religious status."

In order for the idea of a conversion to appeal to the Russian-speaking immigrant community, he said, common ground must be found.

"The message must be that [just] a small step is required to join the Jewish collective, instead of imposing a process based on an understanding of Jewishness as a religion, especially if it is informed by a stringent Orthodox perspective.

"It has to be a perspective of Jewishness that is national, in one sense, but also acceptable to all streams of Judaism, on the other; an attitude that sees halachically non-Jewish Russian-speaking immigrants as having an ethnic Jewish identity, just requiring a small fix."

Khanin estimates that 20 to 30% of halachically non-Jewish immigrants would consider conversion, were this to be the prevailing attitude. "In order to convince people to have their children convert, there would be a need to show that such a step would make the lives of their children easier and that they would feel less uncomfortable at certain stages of their lives."

He said he thought that more than half the parents from the community would not oppose having their children converted, if this were broadcast.

SO FAR, 115 people have converted through Giyur KaHalacha, both minors and adults, with another 40 expected to convert next month, and Farber said it is hoped they will reach 500 conversions for the 12-month period following the establishment of the conversion system.

"Success for us would be to reach between 2,000 and 3,000 conversions a year," he said.

"What Giyur KaHalacha is trying to do is take those who identify as Jews, who made aliya as Jews or whose parents did, and offer them and their children the opportunity to be part of the halachic collective as well as part of the national collective."

Giyur KaHalacha has a three-part plan to gain broad acceptance and legitimacy for the new conversion courts. First, by ensuring legitimacy within Israeli society and especially the national-religious community, which is most concerned about the issue.

The next battle is to get the conversions recognized by the Interior Ministry and to have converts through Giyur KaHalacha registered as Jewish by the ministry. Reform and Conservative conversions are already recognized as such by the ministry, so Farber says this may not be so difficult.

Finally, the conversions need recognition by a rabbinat for the purposes of marriage. This will most likely not come willingly, but legal battles on this issue will wait until a greater mass of converts has been created.

At the moment there is a serious divide in the national-religious community on Giyur KaHalacha. The more liberal wing of the sector is largely on board, but several leading mainstream leaders, such as Rabbi Haim Druckman, have criticized the new system for breaking away from the Chief Rabbinate and damaging its central authority, although they have not said Giyur KaHalacha's conversions are not valid.

THE CONSERVATIVE camp of the national-religious community has taken a more stringent opinion against the conversions themselves.

The chief rabbi of Petah Tikva, Micha Halevy, for example, has argued that a key leniency relied on by Giyur KaHalacha for converting minors is not widely accepted by senior arbiters of Jewish law.

The leniency in question is that Giyur KaHalacha permits the conversion of minors even if their parents are either not halachically Jewish or are Jewish but remain secular.

The rabbis of Giyur KaHalacha say this is based on rulings of the revered late leader of Orthodox American Jewry Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who ruled that it is always meritorious to join the Jewish people, and therefore conversion of all minors would be possible. Without this leniency, it would be extremely difficult to convert minors from the immigrant community, since the vast majority of adults in the sector are not interested in becoming religious.

The Chief Rabbinate currently does not allow conversion of minors in such a situation, but Giyur KaHalacha does, although the rabbis serving on its conversion court favor sending such children to state religious schools.

Halevy and others argue that if a child is converted, but his family remains non-religious, the child will be raised in an environment where even the fundamentals of Jewish religious practice, such as kashrut and Shabbat observance, will be ignored.

The rabbis of Giyur KaHalacha, however, point to more lenient understandings of the requirement for a convert to accept the commandments, and argue that the Israeli school system, even in the non-religious sector, can provide a sufficient educational grounding in the concepts of Jewish peoplehood, Bible studies, and Jewish religious practice, such as Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

Farber said that the parents of minors who are being converted are also required to make a declaration committing to providing their children with a Jewish education, and that the rabbis of Giyur KaHalacha prefer that the children converting study within the state religious education system, although do not require this.

"What we're addressing is a great challenge of modernity for the Jewish people," said Farber. How do we affirm people's membership in entire communities within the Jewish collective while maintaining the integrity of Jewish law?

"Our answer is not to say Halacha is better than their Jewish identity, but to say that Halacha can work with and respect their Jewish identity, that Halacha doesn't deny their Jewish identity, but respects it."

There is, however, skepticism from within the community about the extent to which even the lenient approach of Giyur KaHalacha can be effective.

Boris Schindler is an adviser to the National Forum for Jewish Identity and inter-cultural dialogue between Russian speakers and non-Russian speakers. This is an umbrella organization of some 30 different groups that work for Jewish re-



RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN (center) serves on a Giyur KaHalacha beit din flanked by Rabbi Yehuda Gilad (left) and Rabbi Benny Holzman. (Courtesy)

Breaking new ground in the conversion field

Giyur KaHalacha was established in August 2015 by a group of moderate national-religious rabbis with the ultimate goal of preventing intermarriage in Israel by increasing the rate of conversion among immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and their children, who are not Jewish according to Jewish law.

Rabbi David Stav, chairman of the Tzohar rabbinical association, and Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, municipal chief rabbi of Efrat, were two of the leading figures behind the establishment of the new conversion system, along with halachic scholar Rabbi Haim Amsalem; Rabbi Yaakov Medan, co-dean of the prestigious Har Etzion Yeshiva in Alon Shvut; Rabbi Re'em Hachohen, chief municipal rabbi of Otniel and dean of the Otniel Yeshiva, and the backing of the ITIM organization, run by Rabbi Seth Farber.

The highly respected arbiter of Jewish law and dean of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Ma'aleh Adumim, Rabbi Nachum Rabinowitz serves as the president of the Giyur KaHalacha conversion courts and to a large degree gives the new system its halachic legitimacy.

For several years, Stav was the primary rabbinical backer behind legislation to reform the state-conversion process. Although the last government did eventually approve watered-down measures for easing the central authority of the Chief Rabbinate over the conversion process in 2014, the decision was never implemented due to foot-dragging by the Chief Rabbinate and a group of senior national-religious rabbis opposed to the process.

The decision was subsequently annulled by the current government following pressure from the haredi political parties and the chief rabbinate.

Thus, Giyur KaHalacha was established in the aftermath of the decision to abolish the previously approved government reforms. —J.S.

newal among Russian speaking Israelis.

"For many immigrants from the FSU, being Jewish was a national identity not necessarily related to religious practice," he said. "It was only once they got to Israel and encountered problems with the religious establishment that this was cast into doubt."

Schindler said that Giyur KaHalacha's approach in focusing on minors could be successful as long as there is no requirement for parents to become religious themselves.

"The community is very suspicious towards the religious establishment and is scared they will have to become religious. If their children can convert and the parents can stay secular and not have to become religious, a lot of people

might go for it," he explained.

Rabbi Gregory Kotler, a Reform rabbi working in the immigrant community, said he did not see people "lining up to convert" with Giyur KaHalacha.

"The trend in recent years shows that people aren't coming in large numbers, and when they come to look into conversion, there is a lot of work to convince them it's worthwhile," he said.

Kotler also said it would be unrealistic to ask parents to have their children change schools in order to join a state religious school, and said that problems could also occur if a child came home wanting to do different types of religious practices when their mother was not Jewish.

"What is critical is the need to explain

to possible converts that it is an important and worthwhile process and that they won't be coerced into anything," said Kotler in reference to all forms of conversion.

Schindler also pointed to a separate obstacle, the very fact that the conversions of Giyur KaHalacha are not yet recognized by the Chief Rabbinate and by the state. He said that although the Russian-speaking immigrant community is suspicious and not well disposed to the religious establishment, paradoxically it respects the Chief Rabbinate's status as the state-recognized authority and the legitimacy that engenders, owing to its inheritance of social values and appreciation of authority during the authoritarian Communist regimes it lived under for so long.

IF THERE is no prospect that the conversions of their children will be formally recognized and that they will still not be able to marry in Israel, the immigrant community will see little value in Giyur KaHalacha's conversions, Schindler opined.

"In general, the Giyur KaHalacha project is welcome, as long as they approach their target audience in the correct manner, meaning without insulting stereotypes; can prove that they are not trying to make the families of the minors they want to convert religious; and if the conversions are at the end of the day deemed to be valid by the establishment and these children will be formally considered Jewish by the state," Schindler concluded.

"The majority of halachically non-Jewish immigrants from the first generation and those who were born in the former Soviet Union and CIS but grew up here, support the Jewish identity of the state," said Khanin.

"Fifty to 60% of them do not believe Israel should remove its Jewish characteristics and the majority of them would like to marry with some form of Jewish ceremony.

"What will happen in the second generation and thereafter is hard to foresee. But this community may develop its own identity, in which they could feel like different types of Jews, or not Jews at all.

"We can't say at the moment what will happen, but why should we wait for such a situation to arise?" Khanin asked. "Anyone who has a good solution is welcome to try and solve this problem."

Giyur KaHalacha has come up with a proposal for a solution. At present it is rejected outright by the Chief Rabbinate, the haredi world (which does not recognize the Chief Rabbinate's conversions either) and parts of the national religious community.

If it can gain greater legitimacy legally and socially, the neglect and prevarication that have characterized the state's attitude to the problem over the past quarter century could be remedied, at least in part. ■