

Israeli high court approves new routes for converting to Orthodox Judaism

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

Orthodox Jewish lawmakers have vowed to pass a law nullifying an Israeli Supreme Court decision recognizing all Orthodox conversions—not only those performed by the state-sponsored Chief Rabbinate—as legally valid.

The Israeli high court's recent ruling compels the state to accept as Jewish all converts who have undergone Orthodox conversions inside and outside Israel. It is a defeat for the Orthodox rabbinate, which until now has enjoyed sole authority over Jewish institutions in Israel.

The rabbinate's ultra-strict conversion criteria have made it difficult or impossible for most of the country's 350,000 non-Jewish immigrants of Jewish ancestry, as well as foreigners living in Israel, to convert to Judaism.

Bezalel Smotrich, an Orthodox parliamentarian, said the high court is exceeding its authority.

"The High Court is getting involved in sensitive policy matters and doesn't give lawmakers any choice other than to fix the distortion created in legislation," Smotrich said. "We will submit to the Knesset a bill giving recognition only to state-ordained conversions immediately at the start of the summer session."

Israel's chief Sephardic rabbi, Yitzhak Yosef, cohead of the rabbinate, called the court's ruling a "scandal."

"It is unthinkable that the private conversion industry, which is unsupervised by any state body, will be recognized as official," Yosef said.

However, others lauded the ruling.

Dov Lipman, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi and former parliamentarian, wrote on Facebook: "This is great news for the Jewish people and our state. We are no longer violating the Torah prohibition of tormenting converts."

Seth Farber, a rabbi whose organization, ITIM, recently established an alternative Orthodox conversion court and was a petitioner in the suit, is confident the ruling will stand.

“I don’t believe there is the political will in this coalition to overturn the ruling,” Farber said, noting that 350,000 Israelis with Jewish ancestry cannot get married in Israel because, although they identify as Jewish, the rabbinate does not recognize them as such. There is no civil marriage in Israel.

“We turned to the high court because we had no alternative,” Farber said. —Religion News Service

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