

OPINION

## Israel's never-ending, and very human, 'Who Is a Jew?' saga

Andrew Silow-Carroll February 20, 2022



Jared Armstrong, left, took part in a Birthright Israel trip in 2021. (Courtesy Jared Armstrong)

(JTA) — Jared Armstrong has an emotional story to tell, and he told it an oped I edited last week for our opinion section. Armstrong made headlines recently when the Israeli government refused his application for citizenship. Armstrong, a recent college graduate from Philadelphia, says he grew up Jewish, as did his mother. His grandmother, he said, embraced Judaism as an adult.

For all those reasons he was shocked when Israel's Foreign Ministry rejected his initial application for aliyah, but he agreed to undergo a conversion with his rabbi, Rabbi Michael Beals, of Wilmington, Delaware. He completed a nine-month conversion course under Beals, a Conservative rabbi, and the rituals that normally seal a conversion.

When he tried again to become a citizen under Israel's Law of Return, he was again turned down.

Armstrong suspects the government said no because they thought he only wanted to play basketball for a pro team in Haifa. Others note that his rabbi was Conservative, and that the Orthodox establishment that oversees most lifecycle and Jewish identity issues in Israel is adamantly dismissive of Judaism's non-Orthodox streams. Armstrong is also Black; who can say how his background played into the government's decision.

What was doubly painful about editing Armstrong's article was noting his surprise and disappointment about a process that a lot of Jews in Israel and the Diaspora already know can be painfully but necessarily intrusive — or discriminatory, depending on your point of view. Armstrong is not the first Diaspora Jew to have his Jewish identity challenged by Israel's Foreign Ministry. But sometimes it takes someone new to Jewish communal politics to make jaded veterans take notice. Close Israel-watchers know why Israel, and Jews, put up barriers to conversion and citizenship. It's about identity. It's about peoplehood. It is about theology. It is about politics.

But as Armstrong wrote, "This was my identity we're talking about here; my life they were doubting."

The "Who is a Jew" issues waxes and wanes as a communal priority; at the moment it appears to be waning. A coalition government in Israel that does not depend on the Orthodox religious parties to govern raised hopes among non-Orthodox Jews that the Orthodox grip on conversion and other identity issues might be eased. On the flipside, it may have eased Diaspora urgency about the issue.

But some action is afoot. Today — literally today — an Israeli ministerial committee will consider a bill that widens the possibilities for conversion *within* Israel. Currently, the system is exclusively under the control of the Chief Rabbinate. The bill would allow Israel's 150 municipal Orthodox rabbis to establish their own conversion protocols

and standards, breaking the rabbinate's monopoly on the process and ostensibly democratizing the process.

The bill is supported by those in Israel, Orthodox and otherwise, who want to ease the process for many of the 400,000 or so people, mostly from the former Soviet Union, who qualify as citizens under Israel's Law of Return but are not considered Jewish by the rabbinate under Jewish law, or halachah.

Tani Frank, director of the Center for Judaism and State Policy at the Shalom Hartman Institute, discussed the bill during a webinar Thursday. He said the current minister of religious affairs, Matan Kahana, "understands that there is a problem when you present yourself as a Jewish and democratic state and you don't allow different views of Judaism to be fulfilled through the conversion system."

The bill, which would increase autonomy for conversions among Orthodox rabbis, would not expand the possibilities for non-Orthodox conversions to be performed and recognized in Israel. In March 2021, the Israeli Supreme court ruled that Israel must grant citizenship to Jews who converted to Judaism in Israel under non-Orthodox auspices. The ruling did not, however, make them Jewish under halachah. That won't change.

Still, the liberal-leaning Hartman Institute, with feet in both Israel and the Diaspora, took a major part in shaping the new legislation. "We wanted to make sure that we are part of the legislative process, and we wanted to make sure it was safe being shaped in a manner that allows as many Jewish perspectives and views as possible and we wanted to make sure that liberal Judaism's values are being considered," said Frank.

There will be strong opposition to the bill, which touches both on political power and some heartfelt concerns about Jewish unity. Defenders of the current system say a single standard for conversion leaves no confusion in the minds of adherents about who is and who isn't a member of the tribe. Opponents say it consolidates religious

and political power in the hands of the few, and narrows the possibilities of belonging to the Jewish people.

Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of Israel's Religious Zionist Party, recently flew to Europe to meet with Orthodox leaders. He was trying to drum up opposition to proposed changes to Israel's religious status quo, from conversion to the agreement for non-Orthodox worship at the Western Wall. (Britain's Board of Deputies, a Jewish communal organization, called him a "disgrace" and told him to go home.)

The bill won't change anything for Jared Armstrong. It is meant mainly to help current citizens who are part of the Zionist enterprise become part of the Jewish people. But who knows: maybe allowing "as many Jewish perspectives and views as possible" will become a habit.