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"Who is a Jew" controversy rages in Israel

Rabbi begins compiling master worldwide list

By Martin Regg Cohn - Toronto Star Middle East Bureau

JERUSALEM - Rabbi Nachum Eisenstein thinks he'll soon be able to answer the perennial question, "Who is a Jew?" After years of debate about who belongs to the biblical Chosen People, Eisenstein has started choosing which Jews qualify for a new master list. The Committee for Jewish Lineage is compiling a computerized registry of the world's estimated 10 million Jews to ensure the "purity of the Jewish community."

Only genealogically genuine Jews need apply. According to Eisenstein, that means people whose Jewish roots can be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

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"We hope they will be proud of the fact that we want to give them, like, a membership card, that you're full-fledged members in the Jewish nation," Eisenstein said in an interview.

With \$1.4 million in seed money, the committee placed its first advertisements in local newspapers, inviting Jews to register themselves as the real thing. This month, the office has been "swamped" by inquiries from people anxious to verify their identity.

The issue of who is a Jew is one of the most controversial in Israel - and one that has split Jewish communities for decades.

The stakes are high in the Jewish state. Marriage prospects, access to burial plots, even the right to adopt newborns can be blocked for someone whose Jewishness is in question.

Now, a fresh controversy is raging in Israel, and among Jewish communities around the world, about the role of Reform and Conservative rabbis, as well as rabbis from Orthodox congregations.

Can converts to Judaism be recognized as bona fide Jews if a Reform or Conservative rabbi officiates?

Traditionally, Israel only recognized a conversion to Reform Judaism if it took place overseas - partly to avoid antagonizing influential Jewish communities in North America. If the conversion took place on Israeli soil, it would be deemed bogus.

That awkward compromise unravelled last year, when an Israeli court ruled against the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on religious matters and left it to the government to straighten out the patchwork system. The decision sent tremors through Israel's ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, upon whose support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government depends.

Government legislation introduced at their behest last year would have codified that uncomfortable compromise - recognizing only overseas conversions by the Conservative and Reform denominations, but banning them within Israel. That legal leap infuriated non-Orthodox Jews, who are by far the majority in North America and send large donations to Israel.

"There's no question that within the Reform community, there are some very strong feelings about what's going on," said Canada-Israel Committee executive director Robert Ritter. But he said the reaction was more restrained than in the United States, because Reform Jews make up only 15 per cent of the total, compared to 38 per cent in the U.S.

The Council of Jewish Federations in Canada, and the United Jewish Appeal, are both on record as opposing the pending legislation in Israel. While Conservative Jews are the largest single group across North America - about 45 per cent - they make up, along with Reform Jews, a minuscule percentage of the Israeli population, the majority of whom are secular.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, who are only 10 per cent of Israel's population, have an iron grip on the religious establishment, and are in no mood to yield their monopoly on matters affecting personal status. They remain adamant that only Orthodox conversions adhere to the strict tenets of halacha, or Jewish law.

In fact, Reform Jews have more flexible interpretations of Jewish traditions, such as ordination of women, and gay marriages. Conservative Jews are more conventional, but still not fully accepted by the Orthodox establishment.

Last year, Netanyahu sought to avoid a deeper schism by ordering a high-level committee to map out a compromise. The committee's long-delayed report is due at the end of this month. But it has been riven by clashes between the rival denominations, whose representatives have frequently refused to speak directly to one another.

Against that bitter political backdrop, Eisenstein's Jewish lineage committee is anxious to give its stamp of approval to Jews with the right family background. After years of researching Jewish genealogy, Eisenstein is confident he can weed out wannabe Jews, reducing the risks of intermarriage and the spectre of assimilation.

It's all quite kosher, the rabbi insists.

Applicants need only fill out questionnaires, which will be cross-referenced and vetted "in a kosher way which will satisfy the proper needs." The association won't reveal its verification techniques, for fear imposters will become wise to their ways and beat the system, but they are believed to rely on extensive lists of family names from synagogues and rabbinical courts.

Eisenstein insists the project will produce a "whitelist" that will ease the anguish of genuine Jews whose roots were once in doubt. Immigrants whose path to a Jewish marriage might have been blocked will now be able to clear their names.

"There's no blacklist, only a list of proud Jews," he explains. "We're talking about getting every single Jew in the world - 10 million people." But in Israel today, anyone who doesn't qualify for this so-called whitelist is effectively blacklisted. And the rabbi's rhetoric turns serious when the subject of rejects comes up.

People with questionable conversions, or with only a Jewish father (Orthodox Judaism is matrilinear) "won't be included in the list," he explains. "We will only accept conversions which meet proper halachic (Jewish legal) standards."

Eisenstein is especially alert for recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union who desperately want to qualify for the benefits of being Jewish in the Jewish state.

More than 100,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union are not considered Jewish by the Ultra-Orthodox. Yet their former government stamped "Jewish" as their nationality on identity documents, and they qualified to immigrate under Israel's Law of Return, which welcomes anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent.

Personal civil status is still controlled by the offices of the ultra-Orthodox chief rabbis, who disdain the competing Conservative and Reform strains of Judaism. They refuse to permit mixed marriages, forcing any couples of different faiths, or questionable Judaism, or merely secular mindsets, to fly to Cyprus to tie the knot. Foreign arrivals are a major preoccupation for Jews who fear their genealogy will be diluted. Israelis have been targeted by full-page newspaper advertisements this month screaming, "250,000 foreign workers want 'quicke' conversions. Do you agree?"

Preying on growing xenophobia about temporary workers who have swarmed to Israel in recent years, the ad threw off any pretensions to political correctness and bluntly warned: "If quick and easy conversions are made possible in Israel to all and sundry, we are in big trouble.

"Nothing will prevent 250,000 foreign workers from converting in order to stay in the country permanently. And they will be followed by hundreds of thousands more - Nigerians, Rumanians (sic), Thais, Arabs, etc. etc."

The ads are paid for by a new group, The Movement for the Unity of the People, whose slogan is, "One people, one conversion."

One of the group's organizers, Ben Gurion University geneticist Arye Zaritzky, dismissed any suggestion the advertisement could whip up prejudices against foreigners. As a secular Jew, he believes converts should be forced to adhere to Orthodox Judaism so that they will learn more about their faith.

"We shouldn't have three different conversion lists, we should be unified," he said in an interview. But efforts at unity have fallen flat. Last month, the director-general of the Chief Rabbinate rejected a meeting with Reform representatives unless they met six conditions, including:

- * "Only children born to Jewish mothers will be recognized as Jews.
- * "The marriage of a Jew to someone of another faith is not recognized."
- * No gay marriages, and no "baseless conversions" that do not include immersion in a ritual bath, and circumcision for men. The letter concluded that until then, ``the chief rabbis will not be able to meet with you on matters of Judaism, the foundation of which you scorn."