



# Conversions to Judaism in Israel

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

In Israel people are literally lining up to get permission to convert to Judaism. That is if one is to believe the *Jerusalem Post* (June 22, 2004). At that time – so it is maintained – there were “some 60,000 people interested in conversion who have not for any number of reasons come before the relevant authorities.” And most of them are unlikely to do so, according to Alex Grass, past chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency.

These are new immigrants who have come to Israel according to the Law of Return, but who are not halachically Jewish. Despite the fact that they have studied Judaism in order to convert, their conversion is often prevented, or the issuing of conversion certificates is delayed.

The obstacles come mainly from orthodox circles, where there is a fear of converting people too easily. Furthermore, there is tension between conversion on the halachic level, where a gentile becomes a Jew, and conversion on the civil-legal level, with the social rights and citizenship a convert receives in Israel.

Easily or not, conversions happen in Israel. The government encourages conversion of immigrants; public relations campaigns are organized and given financial support in order to increase the number of converts. All of this is natural in a Jewish state.

The Israeli government and the Jewish Agency “funneled some NIS 50 million to the various conversion bodies in 2005,” according to *Haaretz* (January 10, 2006). The article also stated that then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was of the opinion that it is in the nation’s interest to convert as many as possible.

How many conversions have there been in Israel in recent years?

The Jewish Life Information Center (ITIM), which presents itself as “an independent, not-profit organization, dedicated to making Jewish life accessible to all,” says on its web page that there are about “300,000 Israeli citizens living in Israel today who are not Jewish and also not members of other religions.” In recent years approximately 4,000 people have converted annually in the State’s courts, it is maintained.

Exact figures for the first three quarters of 2005 were presented to the Israeli cabinet on October 9, 2005 by Rabbi Haim Druckman, head

of the Conversion Administration created by the Prime Minister's Office. Druckman stated that "5,546 people had received conversion certificates during the first nine months of 2005, compared to just 3,599 during all of 2004" (*The Jewish Week*, New York, October 28, 2005).

According to information from ITIM, some 800 immigrants were converted by rabbinical courts in 2005, compared with 923 in 2003 and 852 in 2002 (*Haaretz*, January 10, 2006).

Military conversions should be added to these figures. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is actively pushing to convert non-Jewish soldiers by introducing special courses and programs during their army service. From 2001 through 2003, 1,100 male and female soldiers converted in the four-month course, according to the army's chief education officer in an interview in *Kol Ha'ir* (Jerusalem, September 30, 2004). The IDF mainly targets female soldiers with a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, and 70% of their converts are women. During the first nine months of 2004, 859 women and 255 men converted.

The IDF head of manpower, Major General Elazar Stern, says in *Haaretz* (November 23, 2005) that there are currently some 5,000 non-Jewish soldiers serving in the IDF, and he is convinced that 20 percent of immigrant soldiers will convert every year. Stern is described as the "father" of the immigrant soldier conversion project. His motivation for this project came when he heard that an education officer had ordered "600 New Testaments for non-Jewish soldiers who had asked to swear allegiance on them at their graduation ceremony instead of the Hebrew Bible."

If one adds the number of conversions in the civilian sector to the number of conversions in the IDF and the rabbinical courts, the total is at least 6,000-7,000 annually.

The Messianic movement in Israel is estimated by some of its leaders to number around 10,000 people today. I would like to state my reservations about this number; perhaps it is exaggerated. In any case, non-Jewish congregation members seem to be included in the number of Messianic believers. This increase in the Messianic movement comes mainly from the same 300,000 people described by ITIM as "people who are not Jewish and also not members of other religions."

Therefore, current claims that Russian immigrants' coming to faith in Jesus constitutes a threat to continued Jewish existence need to be called into question. The number of non-Jews in Israel who convert to Judaism each year seems to correspond to – or perhaps exceed – the total number of Messianic Jews in Israel today.

