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Advocate of Strict Conversions in Sexual Scandal

By Josh Nathan-Kazis December 23, 2009



A

key proponent of the successful campaign for stricter conversions in Israel and around the world has resigned from a senior post, and has not denied rumors of a conversion scandal of his own.

Rabbi Leib Tropper, a founder of the hard-line conversion group Eternal Jewish Family (EJF), announced that he had stepped down as its leader when allegations surfaced in news outlets that he had engaged in sexual misconduct with a woman while guiding her conversion. Tropper was among those responsible for major policy changes by the Israeli rabbinate that sparked a worldwide tightening of conversion regulations.

In a statement issued December 23 to the Forward, Tropper's representatives said he "wishes to express his regret for the turmoil caused by his departure... and for what has appeared to be conduct not within our significant laws of modesty."

"He was a big player in trying to make the conversion standards more extreme," said Mark Angel, the modern Orthodox rabbi who founded the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, which opposed Tropper's reforms.

Now, in an ironic twist, the rabbi whose organization questioned the legitimacy of conversions performed by others has had his own conversions called into question. On December 21, the Rabbinical Council of America, the mostly Modern Orthodox rabbinic association, issued a statement in response to the scandal. “What we have heard, if true, violates the fundamental elements of all that Judaism holds sacred,” the statement read. EJM has been involved in conversions since its founding, in 2005.

The allegations of sexual misconduct against Tropper, reported first on the Web site FailedMessiah.com, cite leaked, unauthenticated audio and video recordings in which Tropper apparently discusses orchestrating sexual encounters between an unidentified woman undergoing a conversion and other men. These allegations were also reported in the New York Post.

The revelations may have undermined Tropper’s hard-line stance. “He was the ultimate delegitimizing,” said Rabbi Seth Farber, who directs ITIM, an information and advocacy center for Jewish life in Israel. “He claimed he had all the solutions, he had all of the ultra-Orthodox leadership, and anything that wasn’t under his rule wasn’t legitimate at all.”

Tropper is known for particularly strict positions on who can perform and receive conversions. According to a blog post by Rabbi Gil Student, a Modern Orthodox rabbi, Tropper told him that he follows the authorities who believe that rabbis who think the world is more than 6000 years old

should not be allowed to preside over conversions. And Jewcy.com reported that in 2006, Tropper reversed a conversion he had overseen after learning that the woman wore pants and not dresses, which is considered immodest in ultra-Orthodox circles.

Officials from EIJ could not be reached for comment.

Tropper has worked to extend his rigid outlook on conversions to rabbinical courts around the world. According to sources contacted by the Forward, he is among those responsible for a major shift in conversion policy that occurred in 2007, when moves by the Israeli rabbinate caused the RCA to introduce new, stricter conversion standards.

One source who is familiar with the matter and asked not to be identified called Tropper a “power broker.” According to Farber, Tropper’s charisma and funding allowed him to garner support from major figures in the ultra-Orthodox world. Farber said that Tropper and an Israeli ally, Rabbi Nachum Eisenstein, had the ear of Shlomo Amar, Israel’s Sephardic chief rabbi, in 2005 and 2006, years in which Amar effected policy changes that overturned the status quo of Orthodox conversion in the United States.

“Amar was very impressed with the rabbis whom [Tropper and Eisenstein] surrounded themselves with,” Farber said. Amar attended conferences in the United States, organized by EIJ. “He became very, very suspicious of the Modern Orthodox rabbinate in the United States. And that,

from a historical perspective, was a disaster,” Farber said.

In 2006, Amar determined that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel would not consider conversions performed by the RCA to be legitimate. The potential implications of the decision were drastic, as the rabbinate in Israel controls such vital areas as marriage, divorce and eligibility for immigration. In response, the RCA restructured the process by which it approved conversions, limiting the ability of individual rabbis to convene religious courts in favor of a more centralized system. Conversions are now performed only by a small number of RCA rabbis.

Meanwhile, in the United States, EJF worked to coordinate and centralize the religious courts that adhered to its stricter standards.

“Until now, every single beis din [religious court] was, to a large extent, independent. There was no interfacing, there were no standards, there was no discussion,” said Yehoshua Wender, who sits on the Bais Din of Houston and is the rabbi of Young Israel of Houston. Through EJF, Wender said that his religious court has been brought into contact with other similarly observant religious courts via annual conferences. EJF lists 19 religious courts in the United States and around the world that it says adhere to its “universally accepted standards” of conversion.

FailedMessiah.com also reported that Tropper used his control over the unidentified woman’s conversion process as leverage to force her to engage in sexual activities. But Wender, who said

that the woman was to have been converted at his beit din, said that Tropper would have had no say over whether the woman's conversion would have been accepted.

Contact Josh Nathan-Kazis at nathankazis@forward.com

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Author



Josh Nathan-Kazis

Josh Nathan-Kazis is a staff writer for the Forward. He covers charities and politics, and writes investigations and longform.

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