

## **EITAN HAS TO PROVE HE'S JEWISH. AND FRANCIS....**

**I**srael is a wonderful country, world famous for high-tech innovation, development, medicine, science, etc. etc. Only there's one thing that is still left over from the Middle Ages (or the Dark Ages before that)! That is the office of the Chief Rabbinate. These ancient and obscure clerics derive their authority from Ottoman Turkish law which left all matters of personal status—legitimacy, marriage, divorce, burial, etc.—in the hands of the religious (=ethnic) authority of the group to which the subject belonged. That is, to the office of the Patriarch of the Armenians, the Copts, Greek (and other) Orthodox, to clerics of the Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims etc. And to the Chief Rabbi of the Jews.

Difficult as it is to believe, the authority to determine legitimacy as a Jew, (which means conversion) and marriage and divorce for Jews in Israel is still exclusively in the hands of the Rabbis. There is no civil marriage and no civil divorce for Jews, and therefore, by the way, no possibility of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. At least the old monopoly on burial has been shattered, as several kibbutzim have opened cemeteries for burial of those who don't want to end their mortal existence in the hands of the rabbis. But not conversion, nor marriage, nor divorce.

So here is young Eitan, our friend, almost our son, Paula's neighbor from Ocala, Florida, a splendid, learned and energetic young fellow, living close to us in Ein Karem and just finishing the Guides' Course. He was not born a Jew but had been part of the community in Ocala for years, a student of, and later primary care-giver to, the late Rabbi of the congregation there. When he was planning the move to Israel and it came time to convert, he went to an orthodox Rabbi in Tampa for the process (which cost him a bundle), rather than staying in the community at home, believing that an Orthodox conversion would be acceptable in Israel while a Reform or Conservative conversion would not be, and he could settle here and marry, etc. without problems.

The settling part was easy enough; he was accepted as a Jew for Aliyah and for citizenship by the Jewish Agency and the Israel government. And now he is has found a bride and they are about to get married (*mazal tov!*) and have just found the big NYET.

The rabbinical court does not accept his conversion. Only Orthodox rabbis whose names appear on a certain list ("I've got a little list...") are acceptable for them. The rabbi who converted him, although

they didn't doubt his orthodoxy, was not on the list, partly because he was 91 years old at the time and never came to Israel to register (which is one of the requirements for getting on the list) and can't come now because he's dead.

The rabbis here are not interested in what the State of Israel did about his Aliyah. Only about his being Jewish. There is exactly one rabbi in all of Florida whose conversion the court recognizes, and he wasn't it. So despite the fact that Eitan had to show up there 3 times, accompanied by a rabbinical pleader/attorney (who did not come for free), wearing *tsitsit* (fringes) under his shirt, and showing them how he knew how to put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) and live an orthodox lifestyle, etc.—all kinds of requirements which 98% of the Jews in Israel (me included) would fail—their answer was no. He cannot get married, period. And he, earnest fellow, is really angry about that.

Eitan and his bride have found a Conservative Rabbi to marry them, which is fun but not "kosher", and they will have to go to Cyprus at some stage to get married civilly there, because international law requires one country to accept the marriages of another.

One wonders what sins we as a people have committed to be punished by a dreadful, obscurantist, medieval authority like the Israel Chief Rabbinate.

## **Meanwhile, Francis has a different problem with the Rabbis**

**W**e've known Francis for a bunch of years, ever since he came to Ein Karem as a volunteer at the Church of the Visitation. He is an Englishman of charm, wit and learning, about my age, Roman Catholic by birth, and education, and an Israeli by circumstance.

Francis has been in Israel for more than 30 years, most of them on a number of kibbutzim. He married an Israeli (Jewish) lady—the marriage was done overseas—has Israeli (Jewish) kids, speaks a fluent Hebrew, as well as Arabic, French, Italian and several other languages, and is our neighbor and friend.

Now Francis and his ex-wife, long separated, feel that they need to get a proper divorce, which they never did. Guess what the trouble is. The rabbis don't believe Francis could possibly have been in Israel for so many years, speak such good Hebrew, have a Jewish ex-wife and Jewish kids, and not himself have become a Jew!

Why do they care? Because although everyone agrees that the marriage was valid (because performed overseas) and therefore requires a proper divorce, they do not agree as to how to do the divorce. As a Jew his divorce is obviously in the hands of the Rabbis and he needs to give her a *get*: a bill of divorce accompanied by a really strange medieval

ceremony. But as a non-Jew, he can apply to the Family Court, a civil authority, which has the power to divorce couples of different religions.

Francis has supplied letters of reference from various church authorities, including the Abbot of the Monastery of Latrun, to the effect of his Christian identification, but the rabbis still don't believe him. This matter will work itself out sooner or later, I suppose, but it is a bit much.

**SO HERE WE ARE, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, IN A SITUATION SO BIZARRE THAT IT COULD ONLY HAPPEN IN CUCKOO ISRAEL: EITAN HAS TO PROVE HE'S A JEW AND FRANCIS HAS TO PROVE HE'S A GOY!**

