



Background Regarding Past Interactions Between the Rabbinical Council of America and Rabbi Barry Freundel

Updated 10/20/14 – text added to the 4th paragraph, beginning with the words “but not the findings.”

Conversion

Rabbi Barry Freundel served as chair of the RCA’s Geirus Protocol and Standards (GPS) conversion system from 2006 until he was replaced in 2013 by Rabbi Yona Reiss.

In 2007, the RCA established the current GPS network of recognized regional tribunals. Implementing the “ishur” standards in a nationally institutionalized system, the goal of GPS was “to ensure uniform standards to guide rabbis and converts alike, as well as to provide assurance regarding the validity of all conversions conforming to these standards.” While Rabbi Freundel was actively involved in the development and implementation of the GPS, he was only one of a group of serious and respected rabbis with extensive experience in the conversion process. Since its establishment, the GPS has been under the direction of a professional, and it has been guided by senior members of the RCA, the Beth Din of America and officials of all recognized regional tribunals.

Freundel was head of the Washington, DC beit din for conversions and was responsible for many conversions. It was in this capacity that allegations of impropriety have surfaced. On October 19, 2014, the RCA and Beth Din of America concluded as a matter of Jewish law that conversions performed by Rabbi Freundel prior to his arrest on October 14, 2014 remain halachically valid and prior converts are Jewish in all respects.

In 2012, the RCA was made aware of concerns, not of a sexual nature, regarding Rabbi Freundel’s behavior as a converting rabbi. Some conversion candidates expressed that they felt coerced to perform clerical work for him in his home office (there is no office at the synagogue) and to contribute financially to the running of the beit din. Furthermore, it was discovered that he was a co-signer on a checking account with a conversion candidate. This was investigated by a delegation of a rabbi and a lay leader that was sent to Washington, DC to confront Rabbi Freundel. He made assurances that these behaviors would discontinue. A committee of rabbis and lay leaders determined that while Rabbi Freundel’s actions were inappropriate (and were a violation of his position) they did not rise to a level that required him to be suspended from the RCA or to be removed from his work with converts, as long as they did not continue. While the RCA did not report these findings to the leadership of his congregation, Rabbi Freundel himself did inform his synagogue leadership of these meetings but not the findings. The RCA did not report these findings to the leadership of the congregation because it believed at the time that while these behaviors needed to stop, they related to Rabbi Freundel’s efforts in conversion (and not his congregational duties).

The RCA has never been made aware of the “practice immersions” that have recently been reported. Such allegations would have engendered a more severe response.

Train Ride

After contacting the Vaad of Washington in June or July 2013, a caller who insisted on anonymity contacted the president of the RCA in August 2013 with allegations that Rabbi Freundel took a train ride to Chicago in a sleeper car with a woman who was not his wife. Claiming that he worked for the railroad and was not permitted to share this information on penalty of losing his job, the caller was unwilling to provide substantiating documentation or proof that could be used to confront Rabbi Freundel.

There being no supporting evidence or information for these critical and serious allegations, there was no fair way that the RCA could act on them. The RCA leadership, therefore, concluded that it could not proceed to its Vaad Hatzedek, or take any other significant action, given that there was no opportunity for due process.

A member of the Washington Vaad was asked to confront Rabbi Freundel about the allegations, and he denied them, offering a plausible explanation in response. These allegations were not shared with the leadership of his congregation because while they were considered serious, they were unsubstantiated innuendo.

Other Information

- In an emergency meeting on Wednesday, October 15, 2014, the day before Shmini Atzeret, the RCA Executive Committee voted unanimously to suspend Rabbi Freundel from all positions of leadership in the RCA, from RCA membership and, together with the Beth Din of America, from all activities related to conversion.
- On Sunday, October 19, 2014, the RCA, together with the Beth Din of America, announced, “Based upon a review of the charges contained in the court documents that have been released to date (including the criminal complaint, search and arrest warrants, and accompanying affidavits) and applicable Jewish law with respect to the status of prior conversions, the Beth Din of America has concluded as a matter of Jewish law that conversions performed by Rabbi Freundel prior to October 14, 2014 remain halachically valid, and prior converts are to be considered Jewish in all respects.”
- The RCA also announced on October 19, 2014 that:
 - The RCA and the Beth Din of America have agreed that every Beit Din assembled under their Geirus Protocol and Standards (GPS) will appoint a woman (or group of women) to serve as ombudsman to receive any concerns of female candidates to conversion. The name of this person will be provided to all conversion candidates at the beginning of the conversion process. Prospective converts will be assured that their standing in the conversion process will not be compromised by communicating with the ombudsman, and that any such communications will remain confidential to the extent possible.
 - The RCA will appoint a commission composed of rabbis, lay leaders and mental health professionals (including men and women) to review the

current GPS conversion process and suggest safeguards against possible abuses. This commission will report its findings to the RCA Executive Committee by January 31, 2015.

- RCA leadership is in close contact with Keshet Israel leadership and expects to continue a dialogue regarding this matter.
- Rabbi Mark Dratch, MSW, Executive Vice President of the RCA, is available to speak confidentially with any concerned party. Rabbi Dratch can be reached at mdratch@rabbis.org or 212-807-9000.
- In July 2004, the RCA established the Vaad Hatzedek policy and procedures regarding allegations of impropriety against an RCA member (<http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=100551>). The RCA will post information about these procedures, with an easy link to communicating with the proper persons, on the home page of its website.