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**3 Years On, Woman Returns to Rabbinic Court Over Controversial Conversion Case**

*Despite being raised as Jewish her whole life, Israel-born Sarit Azoulay was not allowed to register for marriage after her mother's conversion was rejected. Three years on, she's appealing the decision in the Rabbinical High Court.*

**Yair Ettinger Nov 22, 2015**

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An Israeli woman told by a rabbinic court in 2012 that they did not recognize her as Jewish, despite her being raised as a Jew her whole life, has filed an appeal three years later in a bid to ensure her daughter avoids suffering the same fate.

Sarit Azoulay was born in Israel to Jewish parents. She was raised as Jewish, served in the army and studied at university. At 28, when she decided to get married, the state’s rabbinical court informed her, out of the blue, that it did not recognize her as Jewish and stopped her from registering for marriage.

The rabbinic court judges based their ruling on investigations – seemingly in contravention of regulations – into the bride’s mother, deeming that her conversion to Judaism in 1983, sponsored by a former Ashkenazi chief rabbi, was no longer valid.

In a process that apparently went against internal rabbinic court directives, High Court of Justice rulings as well as conversion law, the court determined that the woman was not Jewish and neither was her daughter, born after the conversion.

The ruling with regard to the bride, Sarit Azoulay, was handed down by the Jerusalem Rabbinic Court in 2012. The Rabbinical High Court heard the appeal last week, which was trigged by a chance meeting. .

Dr. Susan Weiss is heading the appeal, together with attorneys Nitzan Caspi Shilony and Alona Toledano. Weiss, the executive director of the Center for Women’s Justice, came to the case by accident: Azoulay heard her talking on her cell phone, in the clothing store in Jerusalem where Azoulay works, about the case of an invalidated conversion that Weiss had gotten reversed. Azoulay told Weiss her story and became her client.

Azoulay’s mother converted in 1983 in the semi-official Orthodox court (special conversion courts had not been established at the time) that operated under Rabbi Shlomo Goren’s authority. She married, and a year later gave birth to Sarit. When Sarit was a toddler and her younger brother still a baby, her parents divorced in an Orthodox court in Israel, as Jews.

Azoulay’s fiancé’s mother, who is also a convert, presented her conversion certificate to the court as required, like Sarit’s mother, three months before the wedding date. The court accepted the Judaism of the groom, whose mother was converted by former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, but sent Sarit to the regional rabbinic court for clarification of her Jewish status.

The rabbi who heard her case was Rabbi Chaim Yehuda Rabinovitch (who has since retired, partly due to a 2013 corruption case that was investigated by the police), who ruled that her case had to be discussed by a bench of three rabbinic court judges.

The hearing took place two weeks later. Sarit brought in two witnesses who knew the family. “The judges heard the witnesses and then began to ask about me, who I am, what we do on Shabbat,” she recalls. “Then the judge asked me to call my mother, in the middle of the workday. He asked her what the Torah portion was for that week, and of course she didn’t know. He then asked if she observed Shabbat and niddah,” says Sarit, referring to Jewish laws governing aspects of behavior during menstruation. The court minutes do not mention the phone call. Then, two weeks later, the mother herself was summoned to the court and questioned by the three judges about her lifestyle.

After that hearing, the judges declined to recognize Sarit as Jewish. The ruling, signed by rabbis Rabinovitch, Masoud Elhadad and Yaakov Eliezerov, arrived in the mail two weeks before the wedding date, Sarit added.

The couple then turned to Rabbi David Stav of the liberal-leaning Orthodox Tzohar organization. He registered them for marriage, as he is authorized to do. The marriage is now recognized by the state but earlier this year, when Sarit gave birth to a daughter, she decided to appeal the 2012 ruling because of its possible impact on her child.

Invalidation of conversions is a controversial practice occasionally invoked when the rabbinic courts come across converts – such as in marriage or divorce proceedings – and question them as to whether they are religiously observant.

A few years ago, the Rabbinical High Court invalidated thousands of conversions carried out by special conversion courts, sparking a political crisis. The ruling was eventually reversed out of fear that the High Court of Justice would intervene.

Weiss says the conduct of the religious courts is such that “no convert can sleep peacefully in Israel.” Any convert who must appear in rabbinic court could find himself or herself “interrogated about their lifestyle, and sometimes the conversion can be declared invalid. Now we see added to this circle the children of converts who were born and raised completely Jewish,” she adds.

Sarit Azoulay, who needed her mother’s cooperation to appeal her case and to reopen the conversion file, said her mother was initially reluctant to do so.

“Since the [2012] hearings in the rabbinic court, it’s been taboo for her. She lives in Jerusalem near the rabbinic court and has avoided walking by it since then. She is hurt. She is a Jew who chose Judaism and they put a knife in her heart. But I very much wanted to reverse this ruling ... When I brought my baby girl into the world, I told myself it was not fair to bring her into a world where someone doubts her Judaism.”