

Israeli rabbis ban marriage for Jewish ‘untouchables’

350,000 immigrants classed as ‘without religion’

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Theme: [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Tel Aviv. Two immigrants from the former Soviet Union staged a very public wedding in the streets of central Tel Aviv this week to highlight the plight of hundreds of thousands of Jews barred from lawfully marrying in Israel.

Nico Tarosyan and Olga Samosvatov chose to tie the knot in a special ceremony on Tuesday — watched by family, friends and curious passers-by — after Orthodox rabbis had denied them the right to wed.

The rabbinate says that Mr Tarosyan cannot prove he is Jewish according to its strict standards and therefore should not marry Ms Samosvatov, who is considered a proper Jew.

Mr Tarosyan, aged 34, who moved to Israel from Moscow in 1995, called his treatment by the rabbis “humiliating”.

“In Russia we were hated because we were Jews and here in Israel we are discriminated against as Russians,” he said.

An underclass of Jews has emerged in Israel since the early 1990s, when more than one million immigrants began pouring into Israel following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Many were entitled to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return, which requires only that they have a single Jewish grandparent. But the authorities — keen to bolster the number of Jews in Israel’s demographic battle with the Palestinians — also allowed some to arrive with little documentation or faked papers.

This set the new immigrants on a collision course with Israel’s Orthodox rabbis, who regard themselves as guarding the Jewish people’s ethnic and religious purity, said Ofer Kornfeld, the chairman of Havaya, an organisation that officiates at unrecognised weddings like the one conducted in Tel Aviv this week.

“Civil marriages are not possible in Israel,” he said. “So the rabbis get to decide who can marry and who cannot.”

Israel has passed control of all matters relating to personal status — births, marriages and divorces, and deaths — to rabbis belonging to the strictest stream of Judaism, Orthodoxy.

Havaya, said Mr Kornfeld, offered unrecognised, secular and non-Orthodox Jews the chance

to marry in a ceremony that retained Jewish rituals while tailor-making the event to their own convictions.

Official figures show that as many as 350,000 Jews are classified by the rabbinate as having “no religion”, and are therefore unable to marry in Israel. Their only option is to wed abroad — the marriage is then recognised on their return.

These immigrants face major hurdles in seeking to prove their Jewishness to the rabbis’ satisfaction. They must produce evidence that they have a Jewish mother or grandmother in a procedure that can be upsetting to those affected, said Mr Kornfeld.

“Many don’t even try because they know it’s a difficult and humiliating process that can take months or even years to complete and there is no guarantee of success.”

For a man, the rabbis demand that he prove he is circumcised and produce a birth certificate stating that his mother was a Jew, a proof many immigrants from the former Soviet Union have difficulty providing.

“It may help if you can prove that your mother spoke Yiddish or, if she is dead, supply a photo of her gravestone with a Magen [Star of] David,” said Mr Kornfeld.

Mr Tarosyan, a computer engineer, said that, although he failed to impress the rabbis, both his parents were considered Jews in Russia. In Moscow, he said, neighbours had daubed anti-Semitic graffiti on the family’s door.

Ms Samosvatov, 29, who immigrated from Ukraine with her mother when she was 15, said although the couple considered this week’s wedding in Tel Aviv to be the true ceremony, they were saving to travel to Prague later in the year to conduct a recognised wedding.

Mr Kornfeld said they would be following in the path of a growing number of Israelis. “About 6,000 couples wed abroad each year, often in eastern Europe. That’s about a fifth of all marriages.”

It is not only Jews classified as without a religion who are forced to leave the country, he said. Many recognised but secular Jews, who do not wish to submit to an Orthodox ceremony, tie the knot abroad, as do those marrying across religious divisions.

Israel’s Muslim, Christian and Druze citizens — comprising nearly a fifth of the population — have their own separate religious authorities who are given exclusive oversight of weddings.

Demands to reform the law have been growing for more than a decade, but every parliamentary bill on civil marriage has been defeated, usually following stiff resistance from the religious parties.

However, a new bill, approved by a ministerial committee last month, seems more likely to become law. It allows for a limited form of civil marriage that applies only to couples where both lack a religious status. Mr Tarosyan and Ms Samosvatov would not qualify as the rabbis consider one of them a Jew.

The religious parties were forced to agree to the Civil Marriage Bill as a condition for

entering the government of Benjamin Netanyahu in the spring. The compromise was needed because civil marriage was the key platform of another coalition partner, the far-right Yisreal Beiteinu party of Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister, who is now facing corruption charges. The party draws heavy support from the Russian-speaking population.

The liberal Haaretz newspaper welcomed the bill as a “first crack in the religious monopoly” on marriage, but other observers have doubts.

Avirama Golan, writing in the same paper, warned that the law would apply only to a tiny number of couples and would in practice entrench the power of the rabbis, who before approving a wedding would still force couples to submit to lengthy and humiliating investigations to ensure that neither was a Jew.

She added that such couples would be forced into a ghetto, giving “birth to their shunned children who will marry among themselves and be registered separately in the communal records”.

The rabbis’ agreement to the reform, analysts point out, was possible because the bill maintains barriers preventing assimilation between the majority designated as real Jews and those the rabbis consider “without religion”.

Mr Kornfeld said the rabbis’ grip on marriage has continued even though nearly 70 per cent of Israeli Jews defined themselves as secular. Even among the religious, some regard themselves as belonging to the more moderate Reform and Conservative streams of Judaism.

Conversion to Orthodoxy is tightly restricted by the rabbinate, with only a few hundred people approved each year. Those converting are forced to adopt a strictly observant lifestyle for themselves and their children.

A general lack of sympathy for the problems of recent Russian immigrants was reflected in a survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute this week. It found that half of all Israelis polled believed that only those born in Israel could be a “true Israeli”. Conversely, only 28 per cent of Russian-speaking immigrants in their 30s saw their future in Israel.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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