

Legal int'l adoptions to begin next month

By ESTHER HECHT

Childless Israelis are on the verge of being able to adopt children from other countries legally, as two recent developments have brought closer the fulfillment of their desire to become parents.

Knesset Law Committee chairman Shaul Yahalom announced last week that the law on international adoptions, passed 18 months ago, will go into effect next month.

Technically, the law – which allows for such adoptions through recognized, nonprofit agencies – went into effect on May 2, but the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry and the Justice Ministry had not yet prepared the regulations necessary for it to be implemented. Those regulations were finally presented on December 8, and the committee is now winding up its consideration of them.

In addition, the Knesset last week passed an amendment to the Adoption Law, allowing Israelis to adopt a child from abroad who is of another religion. (In local adoptions, the adoptive parents and the child must be of the same religion.)

The amendment is necessary in cases in which the country of origin allows the child to be brought here without a court order and the formal adoption takes place here, explained Prof. Eliezer Jaffe of the Hebrew University's Baerwald School of Social Work, who was a prime mover of the new law.

The amendment effectively separates adoption and conversion

and allows adoptions to proceed while the conversion issue is still being thrashed out, Jaffe said.

The new law has been awaited so eagerly because no more than 70- 80 healthy infants are available locally for adoption each year, and the wait for a baby is more than six years. The regulations under consideration relate to how international adoption agencies are accredited, the maximum fees they may charge, and how they may advertise their services.

The committee authorized the agencies to charge NIS 35,000, in addition to expenses they incur abroad. Israelis who have adopted children abroad in the past, often in circumstances that were fraught with uncertainty and fear, have had to pay as much as \$30,000.

Yahalom called on women's groups to set up nonprofit agencies to handle international adoptions. Na'amat has the most experience in the field, Jaffe said. It set up a nonprofit agency, Aleh, to handle adoptions in Romania soon after the law was passed and located more than two dozen babies. But a change in government there led to a freeze of foreign adoptions, and proceedings begun through Aleh were stalled until Health Minister Yehoshua Matza intervened while recently visiting Romania.

Two main issues not yet dealt with in the final meeting of the law committee concern professional requirements of the adoption agencies and the demand that each agency post a NIS 500,000 bond.