

# Conversion

The Bible nowhere explicitly talks about conversion, only about taking care of, and not oppressing the stranger, the *Ger*. Much later, the term was divided into the *Ger Toshav*, the strangers who entered the community and choose to give up paganism. They were given equal civil rights so long as they adhered to the Seven Noachide commandments. And, on the other hand, the *Ger Tsedek* or *Emet*, the righteous or true convert who then took on all the obligations of Jewish religious laws.

The most celebrated case of someone joining the community is that of Ruth, whose declaration "your God is my God" enabled her to become the great grandmother of King David. Throughout the period of the Kings, a conversion ceremony is not mentioned. And this does not seem to have been an issue with King Solomon and his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Did Ruth, a Moabitess, convert? And if so, how?

The Second Book of Kings (Chapter 17) refers to settlers brought by the Assyrian conquerors of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE to replace the exiled inhabitants. The new arrivals appealed to the Assyrian king for help because they felt threatened by plagues of wild animals and wanted the protection of local gods. He asked the Judean authorities to send priests to instruct them. The Samaritans, as they became known, then adopted Judaism and were known as 'Lion Converts' because they adopted the local religion out of fear. The Talmud debates the validity of their conversion as it does those who converted in the wake of Purim (*Esther* 8.17) or forced by successive Maccabee rulers (*Yevamot* 24b).

It was Ezra (Ezra Chapter 9) returning from Babylon who for the first time, records a ban on marrying those from a different religion. And, under the impact of Greece on the Jewish world, the issue of conversion out of conviction suddenly came to the fore.

The Talmud contains conflicting views on conversion. Some rabbis were opposed to conversion except in the case of genuinely spiritual circumstances. Others were more welcoming. The classic case was Hillel. When a man appeared before him (Shabbat 31a) and asked to be converted if Hillel could teach him Judaism standing on one leg, Hillel converted him on the spot and then encapsulated Judaism with the phrase "What is hateful to you, don't do to your neighbor." Of course, he told him to come back and study more. But he was still far more open to the idea of conversion than most others.

Throughout the early Talmudic period a great deal of Jewish proselytizing went on both in the Roman Empire and the Persian. When Saul of Tarsus began to spread his gospel as a less demanding version of Judaism, he went, according to his own testimony, to synagogues first to contact those non-Jews who gathered there. They were attracted by the ideas of Judaism but wary of some of the constraints. Several notable rabbis of the Talmud were either descendants of converts or converts themselves. Judaism did not require conversion. It required of all non-Jews that they obey the basic ethics of

the Seven *Noachide* Commands (*Bava Kama* 38b. *Sanhedrin* 56a). There were pious non-Jews amongst the nations who contributed to the welfare and survival of the world (*Chulin* 92a) and non-Jews could achieve an afterlife as well as Jews. But it expected converts to be genuinely committed to the Jewish way of life.

This explains the formulation the Talmud (*Yevamot* 46a) gives for prospective converts. "When someone comes and wants to covert nowadays, we say 'why do you want to convert? Don't you realize that nowadays Israel is weak, oppressed, harassed, and degraded, and constantly suffers? If he answers 'Yes I know and I am not worthy,' then we accept him immediately. We teach him some of the major commandments, some of the minor ones, the laws of charity and the punishments for disobedience and the rewards...then we circumcise him and take him to the Mikva and he becomes a Jew in every respect."

Jewish attitudes towards conversion changed dramatically when Byzantian Christianity imposed harsh restrictions on Jews and made converting to Judaism a capital offense, both for any Jew or non-Jew involved. In 1222 for example a deacon of Oxford was burnt at the stake for converting and marrying a Jewess (*History of the Jews in England. Cecil Roth p.41*) And in the seventh century, Islam imposed similar constraints. Jews not only desisted but also actively discouraged it for fear of reprisals. The issue of conversion throughout the Medieval period and indeed until the eighteenth century was practically dormant.

It was the enlightenment that dramatically changed the issue. As more Jews were allowed to enter non-Jewish societies as tolerated minorities, they aspired to be accepted by the non-Jewish world. Children of Orthodox Jews like Moses Mendelssohn of Berlin and Samson Gideon of London left Judaism in pursuit of normalization. And at the same time, as many Jews became wealthier, non-Jews sought to marry into families such as the Rothschilds. Some converted for social and pecuniary gain rather than religious conviction. Pressure increased for nominal conversion for social reasons or to please a traditional family. As a result, some Jewish authorities turned blind eyes to conversions of convenience.

At the same time, traditional authorities grew suspicious and restrictive. Conversion became an issue of denomination. Reform communities becoming more lenient and Orthodox ones harsher. Even if the Talmud accepts the idea that doing something for the wrong motive might lead to doing it for the right one. Nevertheless, Orthodoxy took the view that unless a convert was unequivocally committed to living a Torah life the conversion would not be recognized.

Exceptions began to emerge in Israel. The first Sephardi Chief Rabbi *Ben-Zion Uziel* (1880-1953) coming from a much more tolerant Sephardi society looked benevolently on conversion because he thought that otherwise, the Jewish partner might leave Judaism altogether. The passionately Zionist Chief Rabbi *Shlomo Goren* (1917-1994), who spent most of his working life as an Army Chaplain, and had to deal with a very secular world, argued that Israel should treat conversions differently to the Diaspora. They ought to welcome converts both for religious and social reasons because merely living in a

Jewish State would give the converts more Jewish awareness and identity in Israel than in the Diaspora.

Rabbi Goren had to contend with pressure from outside Israel because it soon became clear that a lot of would-be converts who had been rejected in the Diaspora by Orthodox rabbis could fly to Israel, get a quickie conversion (in some cases by paying money) and then claim back home they were bona fide. He introduced a clause to many of his conversions to the effect that it was conditional on remaining in Israel. Many rabbis argued that you couldn't convert on condition. Besides Jewish Law insisted that a convert who went back to his old ways still had religious obligations on matters such as divorce.

Over the years many new immigrants to Israel from Jewish communities around the world who had not been adhering to a strictly Rabbinic form of Judaism had to fight for their recognition as Jews. Despite an initial struggle, most were able to rectify their status through tolerant rabbinate. It used to be the case that conversions in Israel were easier to come by than those from Orthodox Rabbis in the Diaspora. Most State Rabbinic authorities in Israel had local jurisdictions. It was possible to discover which ones would be more accommodating. And, sadly, both in Israel and the USA, there were too many conversions for payment.

Over the years, the character of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has changed. More Charedi rabbis have displaced the more modern Zionist rabbis of previous generations. As a result, many conversions carried out by rabbis from more moderate wings of Orthodoxy have had their conversions challenged. And the Chief Rabbinate no longer recognizes the conversions of many Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora because the Rabbinate believes they are too lenient.

Outside Israel, the London Beth Din was known to be the strictest and most uncompromising of all orthodox authorities. Yet genuine converts to Orthodoxy were indeed accepted regularly by them (although they did make it tough and had a culture of delay). In some respects, one can sympathize. A conversion is an act of religious commitment and many cases of Israeli converts (or Britons getting an Israeli certificate) have not resulted in religious observance often because the Jewish partner did not care. And yet I have met people rejected by the London Beth Din who have become very committed and religious Jews in every sense. And one Chief Rabbi of the UK refused to recognize a conversion recognized by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. Even being willing to go to the High Court to enforce the unenforceable.

<https://www.jpost.com/israel/unconverting-mrs-sagal-and-mrs-lightman>

There is a side issue here and that is the position of American Reform. It has cut the umbilical cord with tradition by recognizing Jewish identity if one has a Jewish father. Something unacceptable to the Conservative and Orthodox worlds. They argued that they were trying to stop assimilation and retain Jews rather than drive them away. The problem is that many of them will not be recognized as being Jewish. This will matter only if at some stage the children want to marry an Orthodox Jew. And even in the Diaspora, the problem is that in practice the lenience of American Reform, despite its still significant presence, has not stopped the serious drift away from

Judaism. So that the argument that easy conversion keeps Jews in the faith, just does not work as a general rule.

In the end, it all depends on which community one wishes to belong to under the general umbrella of Judaism. In which case one has no option but to accept their standards.

In the USA, for example, the Syrian community simply refuses to accept any conversion on principle. Some *Hasidim* are far more accessible to converts and most of them stay very much within the Orthodox world. Although many *Hassidic* dynasties such as *Satmar* are exclusive, even they do welcome converts who wish to fully accept their ways of life.

Having given, I hope is an objective overview, I come to my dilemma. In principle I heartily welcome converts. I have met converts from across the spectrum, Charedi, Lithuanian, Chassidic, and modern Orthodox who are amongst the most learned, devoted, and pious men and women I have ever encountered and who are not only an asset to Judaism but an example for us all of what is best.

Sadly, over my sixty years in the Rabbinate on various continents, I have encountered far more of the opposite. I mean converts who played a game to achieve their agendas and having gone through the process (sometimes the strictest of standards) have simply rejected Jewish practice and loyalty.

I started in the rabbinate trying to be as accommodating and supportive as possible precisely because I wanted to keep Jews within the people in rather than out. I railed against rigid authorities. Yet, as I look back, I see that so many of those I did try to help, usually betrayed my hopes. Sometimes because their Jewish partners themselves did not care and sometimes because when their marriages failed, they abandoned not only their Jewish partners but Judaism altogether.

Over time I have declined to get involved in conversions altogether and have passed the buck to other rabbis. Even so, I always advise families where marriage out or a questionable conversion has taken place, not to cut their ties. One never knows what will work out, what not. Keeping in contact can often bring people back into the fold.

I still believe in wanting to keep as many Jews as possible within the fold, even if they are not as committed as I would like. Like many ethical and religious conundrums, I have no easy answer. I remain caught between the demands and requirements of a Judaism I love and adhere to and on the other hand the pain of individuals who make other choices that often work for them. I do not have an answer.

But I want to end this by saying that I have just got off a zoom with a family of converts in Israel who has just sat shiva for their father, whom I have known and admired for many years. A more impressive family, totally committed to Israel and Judaism it would be hard to find anywhere. Certainly

better than most born Jews I know.

---