

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living, South Dade  
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## Topic: Conversion and Adoption

**Key Idea** – No Jewish practice arouses the ambivalence, passion and even the pain of the subject of conversion. This is in no small measure due to the profound uncertainty among Jews of all denominations as to whether belonging to the Jewish people is “genetic” or cultural, a matter of blood or belief, heritage or lifestyle choice. On what basis can/should non-Jews be accepted as Jews? Jewish texts provide ample evidence that converts have become part of mainstream Jewish history for 3,500 years, but exactly how and why is not clear. According to Jewish tradition some of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud were descended from converts: Rabbi Akiva’s father Yosef was a convert (*ger tzeddek*) (Sanhedrin 96; Maimonides) and Rabbi Meir was the descendent of converts (Gittin 56a). The Talmud (see below) sets down some specific procedures and criteria, but the interpretation of them is subject to considerable contemporary debate, and the conversion standards of one rabbi, or one Jewish movement may be disputed by others, leaving a convert and/or the family into which a convert has married, feeling rejected by Judaism as whole, and the “Jewishness” of their children open to question.

Much of the debate today over the validity of conversions emerges from arguments over legitimacy and authority between and within the Jewish movements. Who is a rabbi? Who has the right to interpret what the standard of “acceptance of the commandments” (*kabbalat ol mitzvot*) means for a convert? Who is a valid witness to a conversion? May someone who is not totally observant be a witness demanding or certifying the willingness of a convert to keep the commandments? Is the *mikva* (ritual bath) or *mohel* (circumcisor) kosher? Other issues deal with the individual convert and his/motives for converting: under what circumstances should the Jewish community put out a welcome mat, and when (if ever) should it slam the door? To what standard of observance should a convert be held, and are there ever grounds for rescinding a conversion?

Finally, the question is raised as to how it possible for Jewish parents to adopt a non-Jewish child (especially an infant) who is not capable of knowingly—and willingly--accepting the obligations of conversion.

### ***Our discussion of the texts :***

**Text 1: Ruth 1 :14-19.** Ruth, a Moabite widow of a Jewish man, attaches herself to her mother-in-law and to the Jewish people. She will be the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestress of the redeemer from David’s house (*mashiach*). The Book of Ruth, in the Ketuvim section of the *TaNakh*, is read on Shavuot, when, by tradition, all Jews become “Jews by choice,” choosing to accept the Torah.

**Text 2: Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 47a.** The rabbinic conversion procedure sets down specific core elements of orthodox conversion followed to this day. They include ritually “pushing away” (discouraging) the potential convert, acceptance of the binding nature of the *mitzvot* and of the penalties for failing to observe them, and ritual immersion in a *mikva*.

**Text 3: *Sifrei*, Numbers.** The reason for selecting certain specific rituals as benchmarks for conversion.

**Text 4: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 135a** – The academies of Hillel and Shammai disagree as to whether circumcision is required for a male who is already circumcised.

**Text 5: CCAR Committee on Conversion.** For over a hundred years the Reform movement has regarded circumcision and ritual immersion as unnecessary for conversion. Nevertheless, the contemporary Reform movement recommends that rabbis acquaint converts with the history and rationale of this rituals, and offer them the option of observing them. Reform conversion requires an oral and written statement of acceptance of the Jewish faith and the intention of living according to its *mitzvot*, which is witnessed by a rabbi and two other members of the congregation.

**Text 6: Jonathan Sacks, Conversion.** The twofold nature of conversion and the significance of commitment to halakhic observance.

**Text 7: The Unfinished Outreach Vision.** A new Reform position that encourages approaching non-Jewish spouses to become Jewish.

**Text 8: Lawrence Epstein, Autonomy Replaces Conversion in the Face of Persecution and Legal Restrictions.** Opposition to conversion began during the Middle Ages, radically changing Jewish self-understanding because of persecution and forced communal insularity.

**Suppl. text: Daniel Gordis, What, Not Who, Is a Jew?** Conversion issues in Israel.

<http://danielgordis.org/2011/03/01/what-not-who-is-a-jew/>

*Lev Paschov, an Israeli soldier who immigrated to Israel under the Law of Return from the Former Soviet Union, was killed while on active duty in Southern Lebanon in 1993, and buried twice. He was first interred in a regular Israeli military cemetery, but after it was discovered that his mother was not Jewish, his body was exhumed, and Paschov was buried a second time, in a cemetery for non-Jews.*

For many Israelis, the macabre end of Paschov's brief life journey was deeply disturbing. How was it possible that someone could be welcomed to Israel under the Law of Return, serve the Jewish state's army, and die defending his adopted homeland, and still not be considered Jewish enough to be buried alongside his comrades?

But Jewish law is clear, traditionalists responded. Jews are either those who are born of a Jewish mother, or those who have converted to Judaism in a halakhically valid fashion. Yet others wondered: Had Jewish national sovereignty rendered classic halakhic standards insufficient? What, in our increasingly conflicted and nuanced world of identity formation, should being a Jew mean? What should joining the Jewish people require? Those questions, more than anything, are at the heart of the now relentless debate surrounding conversion, a debate that often threatens to tear the Jewish people asunder.

This vehement, often nasty, debate is not new. Even the talmudic sources are divided. A well known baraita (Yevamot 47a) says that converts should at first be turned away: "Our rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte? Do you not know that Israel at the present time is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?' If he replies, 'I know and yet I am unworthy,' he is accepted immediately ...." After he is accepted, he is instructed in some of the commandments, but his acceptance comes first.

But another source (Bekhorot 30b) insists that a convert who rejects a single iota of Jewish law may not be accepted. These sources can be made to agree, but doing so clouds the question that their apparent contradiction raises. Is being a Jew fundamentally about the observance of every detail of Jewish law (as Bekhorot implies), or does converting mean joining a covenantal community that sees itself as marginal, a community in which commandments are central, but perhaps not the defining characteristic (as in Yevamot)?

Today's liberal Jewish communities, in which rigorous observance of the ritual commandments is no longer part of the fabric of daily Jewish life, insist that a genuine desire to join the Jewish people and share in its fate ought to be a sufficient standard for conversion. Many Orthodox communities, alarmed by what they see as the dilution of Jewish content in liberal Judaism, in general, and liberal conversions, in particular, have responded by adhering ever more rigidly to classic conversion standards. Valid conversions must be accompanied by a genuine commitment to observe the commandments — “for the sake of heaven” (Geirim 1:3) — they insist, and conversions that lack that are simply null and void.

Although pronouncements of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and some leading Orthodox authorities seek to convey the impression that Orthodox standards for conversion are monolithic and always have been, the truth is much more complex. There has long been disagreement, even within Orthodox circles, about what constitutes “for the sake of heaven.” Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann (1843-1921), for example, ruled that a gentile man could be converted, even though he would not be observant, because his Jewish partner was already pregnant. (Melamed L'ho'il, Yoreh De'ah 83) That the prospective convert wanted to be Jewish, though he could have stayed with her regardless, was sufficient for the conversion to be considered “for the sake of heaven.” Hoffmann introduced moral considerations, as well. If the man abandoned this woman because the court declined to convert him, she would still have a child, and without a husband, she would become a social pariah.

But Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986), America's greatest halakhic authority, railed against such conversions and the Orthodox rabbis who performed them. “What value are they bringing to the Jewish people by accepting converts like these? For it is obviously not good for either God or the Jewish people that converts like these should be mixed into the Jewish people.” (Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh De'ah 157)

Feinstein's certainty about what is good for God and the Jewish people evades most of us. Ours is an era of unprecedented complexity in the formation of identity. What we need now is a conversation with each other — about what Jewishness is at its very essence and about how the changing face of world Jewry should and should not be reflected in conversion policy. We may not necessarily agree, but we will, one hopes, protect the unity, and therefore the survival, of the very people to which committed prospective converts still seek to dedicate their lives.

**Text 9: Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 11a.** Adopting a non-Jewish child.

**Text 10: Michael Gold, Adoption as a Jewish Option.** Why adoption is at the heart of the “Who is a Jew?” question.