



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. A Question of Conversion
2. Yiddle Riddle
3. Public Domain



OHR SOMAYACH תנוח טאנענבאום קאלעדזש
TANENBAUM COLLEGE
5 September 1998
Issue #205
Parshas Ki Seitzei

A QUESTION OF CONVERSION

"ASK THE RABBI" receives many questions regarding conversion to Judaism. The following are some sample questions we have received:

Jim from Roberts, Washington <613@usa.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

If a Gentile feels compelled to Torah observance, is this inappropriate because he is not Jewish and without the leadership (or at least advice) of a local rabbi? Should this person be encouraged only to follow the Noachide laws, or to consider conversion?

Rick email@withheld wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

My name is Rick, and I'm 16 (very soon to be 17) years old. I have studied Judaism through books, the help of my Jewish neighbors and I manage to attend shul every so often. Soon, I'll be entering the Air Force. I have wanted to convert for three years, and want to get converted before I enter the service. I want my belief and religion to be official. I don't want to die (G-d forbid) in combat without having my spiritual belief official. What should I do, and how should I go about it? Shalom.

Christoph M. Kubiak <cmk17358@cca.munet.edu> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

Shalom Rebbe. What are the writings in the Torah or Midrashim concerning the treatment of converts from a rabbinical perspective and from the community's perspective? I know a guy who wants to convert, and I am curious what ceremonies or rules that apply to his conversion. Will he be a True

Jew and will his children? I don't know this kind of stuff so I want to help him find out. He has studied Torah for many years so he is sure that Hashem guides him this way for a good reason.

Mark Zuckerbraun <markz@msmailgw.idsnet.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I know that Orthodox conversions typically require about two years' time to be complete. I had heard that there were some Orthodox rabbis who have converted people in less than this time, sometimes in only ten days! Therefore, my question is, if such a conversion would normally be considered invalid, but three truly Orthodox rabbis ruled the conversion to be valid and signed the certificates, would that in and of itself be enough to allow the conversion to be considered valid by Am Yisrael?

John Ross, Kadena Air Base, U.S. <rossj@kic.or.jp> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I'm interested in becoming a ger (convert to Judaism). However, I'm in the US Air Force and so can't have a beard. Plus, my fiancée and I honestly do not know if we could be faithful to all the requirements. Are both of those requirements necessary before any Beit Din would recognize me as Torah observant (and thus eligible to become a ger)?

Nicole Blake from Woodbridge, Ontario <blake1@idirect.com> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to info@ohr.org.il. Or use our form at <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/ask.htm>. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

Ask The Rabbi is written by Rabbi Moshe Lazerus, Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, Rabbi Reuven Subar, Rabbi Avrohom

General Editor: **Rabbi Moshe Newman**

Lefkowitz, Rabbi Mordechai Becher and other Rabbis at Ohr Somayach Institutions / Tanenbaum College, Jerusalem, Israel.

Production Design: **Eli Ballon**

Ask The Rabbi • World Wide Web: Our address is <http://www.ohr.org.il>

is available from • Fax and Mail in Israel and US-MAIL in America. Send us a note requesting a subscription in Israel, or call 800-431-2272 in the US for details.

several sources: • E-Mail via InterNet. To subscribe, send the message "sub ask {your full name}" to listproc@virtual.co.il

☎ 22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

☐ info@ohr.org.il

☎ 38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

☎ 1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

☐ RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

☎ 613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

☎ 1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

☐ Somayach@MSN.com

I am a 17 yr. old African-American Christian girl. I recently started to read the Bible, and I've had deep thoughts of converting to the Jewish religion. Although I have a lot of friends that are Jewish, I've never shared my thoughts of converting with them, because I'm afraid that I won't be accepted by the Jewish community because I'm black. Can you please help me to make the right decision of converting, by telling me how I too can be a faithful believer in Judaism?

Name@Withheld from Florida wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I'm having a problem with my daughter-in-law who converted to Judaism and has a son, and now can't accept the fact she can't celebrate Xmas. What do you do?

Name@Withheld from UK wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

I am an English girl who would like to convert to Orthodox Judaism (I have already converted to Reform Judaism). I would be grateful if you could tell me the best way of going about this, and which authorities are halachically acceptable.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Each of the above individuals has already received a personal reply from "ASK-THE-RABBI." Each reply is different and attempts to address each person's specific situation. What follows is a general essay on conversion which answers some of the above questions. The following essay was not sent to the above individuals.

Before the giving of the Torah there was no strict legal definition of a Jew, because the law had not yet been given. This means that the people who came to Mt. Sinai were not Jews (in a legal sense) yet. In fact, the Revelation at Mt. Sinai can be viewed as a mass conversion to Judaism of millions of descendants of Abraham. In this sense, every Jew is descended from a convert; some go back to Sinai, and some later in history. The idea of conversion after Mt. Sinai is mentioned in the Torah itself and we are exhorted more than thirty times (!) not to oppress a convert. For instance, "And when a convert lives amongst you in your land do not oppress him. The convert shall be like one of your citizens and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt..." (*Leviticus 19:33-34*)

We derive our obligation to welcome a convert from one of the most famous converts in history, Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses. As the Midrash states: "I am the One who drew Yitro near and did not reject him. You also,

when a person comes to convert and does this for the sake of Heaven, draw him near and do not reject him."

What does the conversion process involve? It requires that the non-Jew go through a re-enactment of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. As Maimonides writes: "The Israelites entered into the covenant with three things; circumcision, immersion, and sacrifices. Circumcision was performed in Egypt, as it is written '*and all uncircumcised (males) shall not eat of it (the paschal lamb).*' Immersion (purification) was performed in the desert before the giving of the Torah, as it is written '*and you shall sanctify yourselves today and tomorrow.*' And at this time sacrifices were also brought... So too for all generations, a gentile who wishes to enter into the covenant, to find shelter under the wings of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) and to accept upon himself the yoke of Torah, requires circumcision, immersion and acceptance of a sacrifice (at the time of the Temple)."

There are three basic components to the contemporary conversion process: Circumcision (for males), immersion in a *mikveh* and as Maimonides mentions, the acceptance of the "yoke of Torah." This is just like the Jews at Sinai who unconditionally accepted all the commandment when they said "We will do and we will listen." All the above must be done in the presence of a *Beit Din* (Jewish court) because they are the representatives of Moses, the lawgiver.

If any one of the above three things is omitted, the conversion is invalid. A convert to Judaism must be prepared to accept all the commandments of the Torah without exception. If there is no acceptance of the commandments, even if three Orthodox Rabbis rule that the person is Jewish, he is *not* Jewish. Without acceptance of the Torah's commandments, the conversion would just be a sham.

Once a person sincerely converts to Judaism, they are 100% Jewish, and we are obligated to love, welcome and accept them into our people. When they recite the prayers, they refer to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs as "*our fathers*" and "*our mothers*." At the Passover Seder they say "G-d took *our fathers* out of Egypt." They are full-fledged members of the Community of Israel.

In general, we do not encourage someone to convert. There are two reasons for this:

First of all, we believe that when a gentile keeps the seven Noachide laws, he merits a portion in the World-to-Come, and therefore there is no imperative for him to become Jewish. If, like the Christians and Moslems, we believed that those of other religions are condemned to damnation, then we also would desire to convert people. However, we believe that a person can be completely righteous and merit the World-to-Come without conversion, by adhering to the basic moral laws revealed to Noach. Therefore we feel no compulsion to convert others, unless they show a desire to convert.

Secondly, since sincerity is one of the criteria for conversion, one way in which we can determine that the

candidate is sincere is by discouraging him from converting. If he persists and does so for the love of Judaism, then we accept him with open arms.

It's interesting to note that some of our most famous scholars were converts, or descendants of converts. Rabbi Akiva was the son of Yosef the *ger tzedek*, the righteous convert. The Talmud states that some of the greatest rabbis were descendants of Haman! The standard

Aramaic translation of the Torah that is printed in most Chumashim was written by a convert, Onkelos.

Sources:

- Yalkut Shimoni Yitro 268
- Mishneh Torah, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 13:1-4
- Tractate Sanhedrin 66b

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked: Which weekly Torah portion don't we read this year?

Answer: Parshat Vayelech. In the year 5757, Parshat Vayelech was read before Rosh Hashana (25 Elul 5757). The next reading of Parshat Vayelech is in 5759, just after Rosh Hashana (6 Tishri 5759). In 5758 it is not read at all.

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Comments, quibbles, and reactions
concerning previous "Ask-the-Rabbi" features*

Re: Sherlox (Ohrnet Balak):

I enjoyed (as always) the Sherlox Holmes section, and would like to tell you about an interesting alternative explanation (that I heard) for Rashi's comment that Bilaam's statement was self-indicting: Balak offered Bilaam honor (which is taken literally, instead of meaning money), and Bilaam replied that "Even if you offered me all your silver and gold..." The word "even" implies that Bilaam considered the money an even greater reward than honor. Thus Bilaam's statement could read: "Not only will I refuse to do this for honor, but even if you offered me all the gold, I still would not transgress Hashem's word..." placing money above honor, and giving a little insight into Bilaam's perspective. Thank you for the fascinating DTs! Keep them coming!

A. Ziskind, Cape Town SA <az@uctvms.uct.ac.za>

Re: Yiddle Riddle (OhrNet Beha'aloscha):

You asked a riddle regarding a person performing two identical acts, the first time it's a mitzvah and the second time it's a sin: Here's another answer: It's a mitzvah to circumcise an eight-day old baby, even on Shabbat. However, if a baby is nine days old or older, it is forbidden to circumcise him on Shabbat. So, if on Shabbat a person circumcises an eight-day old baby and then a nine-day old baby, the first one would be a mitzvah and the second one would be a sin. Looking forward to more riddles.

Ravi Shahr <ravis@writemail.com>