

Conversion To Judaism: Lies, Mistakes and Creating Jewish Identity

Notes By Patrick Aleph for OneShul.org

Why was the Torah given to us in the wilderness? Because just as the wilderness is accessible to anyone, so is the Torah accessible to anyone. *Tanchuma, V'yakhel*, No. 8

God says to us, "As I welcomed Jethro the Midianite in the wilderness of Sinai, so must you welcome anyone who comes to you to join your people." *Yalkot Shim'oni, Yitro*, No. 268

The Holy Blessed One does not favor any one person over another, but receives all; the gates are always open, and anyone who wishes to enter may do so. *Sh'mot Rabbah* 19:4

What the "experts" (rabbis, books, etc.) stress in conversion:

- Movement-based obligation → what "kind" of Jew I want to be and what that means practically and spiritually (i.e. kashrut, Shabbat, niddah, tzniut, etc.)
- Knowing "enough" to be Jewish → Judaism classes, continuous learning, etc.
- "Why" of conversion → usually for a spouse?
- Halachka (Jewish law). Issues around Israel (aliyah) and identity (LGBT, women, etc.)

Five common conversion "mistakes" we make:

- "It's about my connection to God" → Judaism outside of communal context/religion only
- "I don't fit in, so I can't be Jewish" → the myth of the perfect/ideal community
- "Everyone knows more than I do"
- "The perfect conversion" → worrying about bet din, mikvah, etc.
- "I don't agree with XYZ, so I can't be Jewish" → the myth of Jewish religious continuity

What you really need to do to convert to Judaism:

- Education with mentor (usually a rabbi), bet din, brit milah/hatafat dam brit, mikvah
 - Orthodox only recognizes Orthodox. All the liberal movements will accept each other's conversions provided there is mikvah and brit milah/hatafat.
 - Some Reform communities do not have bet din. May be an issue for some
 - Post-denominational conversions are rare as there are few leaders to perform them
- There is nothing in halachka that requires one pay for synagogue membership, take a certain amount of classes, or anything like that in order to "qualify" to convert. Anyone who says that is true is lying or misinformed.

The conversion texts no one talks about:

- In cases where the convert is romantically involved with a Jew, distinction needs to be made between someone who is asking to convert *to please his or her partner and someone who is asking to convert because it is he or she wants to do*, the relationship notwithstanding. In the second instance...we accept the convert (Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 44a). Even if someone requests conversion because of romantic involvement with a ...we must not repel the convert, but must welcome him or her openly and warmly (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 36a – not considered halachka).

- If after the tribunal's attempt at "dissuasion" the convert says: "Even so, I am not worthy," we accept the convert without further ado and immerse him or her partially in living waters (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:3). We then share with the convert several key concepts of Judaism, a few heavy ones and a few light ones, primarily about the oneness of God, the wrongness of idolatry, and the importance of charity to the poor (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:3 and *Yevamot* 47b). But we do not overwhelm the convert with too many teachings or burden him or her with too many lessons (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b).
- The tribunal of acceptance should be composed of three Jews learned in the laws of conversion (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 46b). If there were only two, the conversion is still valid (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b). After the fact, however, even a single witness is acceptable (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47a-Tosefot [yesh]).
- A convert cannot have their conversion revoked (Tur, *Yoreh De'ah*, No. 268, and Maimonides in *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Isurei Bi'ah* 13:17)
- Someone who comes to a Jewish community and declares: "I am a Jew"- they are believed (Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 3b).
- More text can be found in *Way of the Boundary Crosser* by Rabbi Gerson Winkler

The truth about conversion to Judaism:

- Pick the community first; not the movement, not the rabbi, not the class, etc.
- The bigger issues: parents, life partner, children
- It's not about you becoming Jewish. It's about the Jewish community adopting you. Unlike traditional adoption, you get to choose your family! By what criteria do you wish to be judged?
- It violates Jewish law to "out" a convert. But Jewish people often don't know this. They are not trying to make you feel bad. They are simply fascinated with you.
- Many born-Jews are more like converts than what we think of as "born Jews"

Further resources:

www.thejewishencounter.org - provides Israel trips and conversion classes. very convert and interfaith friendly

www.oneshul.org - online, independent Jewish community and synagogue

www.becomingjewish.org - tons of resources on conversion

If you are interested in converting to Judaism (or anything else), please email Patrick@punktorah.org and I will gladly answer any questions and assist you.

If you have enjoyed this class/information, please give a suggested \$5.00 donation to OneShul, the only independent, lay led chavurah online. Use Paypal at www.oneshul.org