

Dissuasion and Encouragement: Complementary Themes in the Conversion Process

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The Gemara (*Keritot* 9a) derives the necessary components of the conversion process from our collective experience at Sinai. The requirements of *brit milah* (for males), immersion in a mikvah, and bringing a *korban* (when there is a Beit HaMikdash) mirror the steps that the Jewish people took prior to receiving the Torah.¹ While the formal steps of the act of *geirut* emerge from the conversion that we underwent at Sinai, the prescribed attitude and orientation toward prospective converts finds precedent in the exchange between Naomi and Rut in Megillat Rut.

Discouraging the Prospective Convert

The Gemara (*Yevamot* 47a-b) records:

Our Rabbis taught: If a [prospective] convert comes to convert nowadays, we say to him/her: "Why do you desire to convert? Do you not know that Israel at the present time is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed

תנו רבנן גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה אומרים לו מה ראית שבאת להתגייר אי אתה יודע שישראל

¹ See Rambam (*Issurei Biah* 13:1-5). In a fascinating line, Meiri (*Beit Habechirah*, *Yevamot* 46a s.v. *U'ma sheamru*) implicitly wonders why every Jew is not required to undergo immersion, just as every male must receive a *brit milah*, as part of a personal acceptance of the Covenant.

R. Hershel Schachter (*Ginat Egoz* 35:5) poses the following questions, based on a comment of R. Yisrael Yehoshua of Kutna, *Yeshuot Yisrael* (*Choshen Mishpat* 3), that relate to the relationship between the conversion process and *ma'amad Har Sinai*. First, the Gemara (*Yevamot* 46a) establishes that *geirut* must take place in the presence of a beit din. If conversion is modeled after Sinai, why is there a necessity for a beit din, as there was no beit din overseeing the giving of the Torah? Second, at Har Sinai we received the Torah in the presence of the *Shechinah*. Why do we not require the *Shechinah* to be present in order to perform a conversion? The answer is that at Har Sinai, precisely because of the presence of the *Shechinah*, there was no need for a beit din. However, for *geirut* throughout the generations, the beit din serves as the representative of the *Shechinah* in accepting new members of the Jewish people. See R. Schachter's comments there for further development of this idea and some practical ramifications.

and overcome by afflictions?" If he/she replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," we accept him/her immediately,² and we inform him/her of some of the minor commandments and some of the major commandments ... And we inform him/her of the punishment for the [transgression of the] commandments. We say to him/her: "You should know that before you had come, if you had eaten forbidden fats, you would not have been punishable with karet (Divine excision), if you had profaned the Shabbat you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat forbidden fats, you would be punished with karet; were you to profane the Shabbat you would be punished with stoning." And just as we inform him/her of the punishment for [the transgression of] the commandments, so too do we inform him/her of the reward [granted for their fulfilment] ... and we inform him/her of some of the minor commandments and some of the major commandments - what is the reason? In order that if he/she desires to withdraw let him/her do so, for R. Chelbo said: Converts are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a sore ... "We should not persuade or dissuade excessively." R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? It is written (Rut 1:18), And when [Naomi] saw that [Rut] was determined to go with her, she left off speaking to her. She said "We are forbidden to leave the boundaries on Shabbat," Rut replied (Rut 1:16) "Where you go, I will go." [Naomi said] "We are forbidden to have secluded meetings between man and woman." [Rut replied] "Where you sleep, I will sleep." (Rut 1:16) [Naomi said] "We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments." [Rut responded] Your people shall be my people." (Rut 1:16). [Naomi said] "We are forbidden from idolatry." [Rut replied] "Your God is my God." (Rut 1:16). [Naomi said] "Four modes of death were entrusted to beth din." [Rut said] "Where you die, I will die." (Rut 1:17) [Naomi said: "Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the beth din." [Rut said] "And there will I be buried." (Rut 1:17). Immediately, "[Naomi] saw that [Rut] was determined to go with her."

בזמן הזה דוויים דחופים
 סחופים ומטורפין ויסורין באין
 עליהם. אם אומר יודע אני ואיני
 כדאי מקבלין אותו מיד.
 ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות
 קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות ...
 ומודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות,
 אומרים לו: הוי יודע, שעד שלא
 באת למדה זו, אכלת חלב אי
 אתה ענוש כרת, הללת שבת אי
 אתה ענוש סקילה, ועכשיו,
 אכלת חלב ענוש כרת, הללת
 שבת ענוש סקילה. וכשם
 שמודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות,
 כך מודיעין אותו מתן שכר ...
 ומודיעים אותו מקצת מצות
 קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות מאי
 טעמא דאי פריש נפרוש דאמר
 רבי חלבו קשים גרים לישראל
 כספחת ... ואין מרבים עליו ואין
 מדקדקים עליו. אמר רבי אלעזר
 מאי קראה דכתיב ותרא כי
 מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה
 ותחדל לדבר אליה. אמרה לה
 אסיר לן תחום שבת באשר
 תלכי אלך. אסיר לן יהוד באשר
 תליני אלין. מפקדינן שש מאות
 וי"ג מצות עמך עמי. אסיר לן
 עבודת כוכבים ואלהיך אלהי.
 ארבע מיתות נמסרו לב"ד
 באשר תמותי אמות. ב' קברים
 נמסרו לב"ד ושם אקבר. מיד
 ותרא כי מתאמצת היא וגו'.

On the one hand, the Gemara requires that we initially attempt to dissuade a prospective convert from becoming a coreligionist. We must make the prospective convert fully aware of both the intense persecution that is the lot of the Jew as well as the significant obligations and responsibilities of a Torah-observant Jew. The Midrash (*Rut Rabbah* 2:16) appears to go even

² Although the Gemara indicates that we would accept such a convert immediately, common practice is to require a course of study to ensure that the convert possesses the proper knowledge to conduct him or herself as an observant Jew. *Minchat Elazar* (4:63), in justifying the practice of teaching Torah to conversion candidates despite the Talmudic prohibition (*Chagiga* 13a and *Sanhedrin* 59a) of teaching Torah to a non-Jew, reasons that if a beit din were to convert someone without previously educating him in the proper observance of mitzvot (he specifically references proficiency in the siddur), the convert would, upon conversion, violate numerous prohibitions, and the beit din would have violated the prohibition of *lifnei iver*, misleading the uninformed.

further than the Gemara in mandating three attempts at dissuading a prospective convert, based on the three times that Naomi pleaded with Rut “*shovna*,” return:³

[The verse (Rut 1:12) states] “Return my daughters, go.” R. Shmuel b. Nachmeni said in the name of R. Yudan b. R. Chanina: In three places it says “return” (1:7, 1:11 and 1:12) corresponding to the three times we turn away the prospective convert. If he is willing to continue, we accept him.

שבנה בנותי לכנה ר' שמואל בר
נחמני בשם ר' יודן בר' חנינא
בשלש מקומות כתיב כאן שבנה
שבנה שבנה כנגד ג' פעמים
שדוחין את הגר ואם הטריח יותר
מכאן מקבלין אותו.

There are multiple rationales for attempting to dismiss a prospective convert. The Gemara presents R. Chelbo’s statement that converts are as difficult for the Jewish people as a “*sapachat*,” a form of *tzara’at*. The rishonim disagree as to whether R. Chelbo highlights a deficiency in the collective body of *geirim* and the need to weed out those whose conversion would be detrimental to the Jewish people, or whether he emphasizes the exalted status of the *ger* that may reflect negatively on Jews from birth.

Rashi (s.v. *D’amar*) suggests that according to R. Chelbo, converts tend to retain some practices of their upbringing and may negatively influence other Jews.⁴ Tosafot (*Yevamot* 47b and *Kiddushin* 70b-71a s.v. *Kashim*), however, present two distinct interpretations of R. Chelbo that stress the special status of a *ger*. First, acceptance of converts poses a particular challenge to other Jews since one who causes any anguish (*ona’ah*) to a *ger* violates multiple prohibitions.⁵ Alternatively, *geirim* tend to be especially knowledgeable and scrupulous about mitzvah performance, and this implicates those Jews from birth who are not as careful about their observance. *Beit Yosef* (*Yoreh Deah* 268 s.v. *U’kesheba*) quotes *Semag* (*Lo Ta’aseh* 116) as explaining that the attempts at dissuading the potential convert serve to prevent any subsequent claim on his part that had he known what he was getting himself into he would never have converted.⁶

Rambam (*Issurei Biah* 14:1) indicates that beyond (and prior to) the dissuasive conversation mandated by the Gemara, a *beit din* should independently investigate the motivation and sincerity of a prospective convert.

How do we accept righteous converts? When a non-Jew comes to convert, and we investigate him and do not find any

כיצד מקבלין גירי הצדק כשיבוא אחד
להתגייר מן העכו"ם ויבדקו אחריו ולא

³ Although this formulation does not appear in *Shulchan Aruch* or the classic authorities, *Rokeach* (110) does rule that we should not accept converts until we have discouraged them three times. For further analysis of this matter see R. Yona Reiss, *B’inyan Kabbalat Geirim*, in *Zeved Tov* (pp. 459-460).

⁴ See Rambam (*Issurei Biah* 13:18), who appears to understand this line in a similar vein. Meiri (*Yevamot* 109b s.v. *L’olam*) writes that R. Chelbo’s concern is that one who converts for ulterior motives may tend, once the original impetus is gone, to become less careful in his observance and serve as a negative influence on other Jews. While Rashi and Rambam’s concern may arguably extend even to sincere converts, Meiri’s presentation is clearly limited to those that convert for ulterior motives. Bach (*Yoreh Deah* 268:4), however, assumes this understanding in Rashi and Rambam as well. See also Rashi (*Niddah* 13b s.v. *K’sapachat*) who quotes and rejects an interpretation that converts may not be sufficiently knowledgeable in their mitzvah observance and may thus create an unfair burden for the rest of the Jewish people, as the notion of *arvut* creates collective responsibility for the deviant actions of all members of the Jewish people. Rashi ultimately rejects this interpretation not because of the premise, but because he believes that *geirim* are not included in *arvut*. See also the citation of this position in Tosafot (*Yevamot* 47b and *Kiddushin* 70b s.v. *Kashim*).

⁵ See *Bava Metzia* 59b.

⁶ See R. Moshe Klein, *Mishnat HaGer* (Part II Chapter 6 p. 264) for an analysis of *Semag*’s intention.

ulterior motives,⁷ we say to him “Why do you want to convert? ...”

ימצאו עילה, אומרים לו מה ראית שבאת להתגייר וכו'.

The general approach of contemporary poskim, reflected most famously in *Achiezer* (3:26-28), is to convert individuals whose initial motivation may have been for ulterior motives when the *beit din* can ultimately discern sincerity and commitment independent of the initial motivation. This is consistent, on some level, with the approach of *Tosafot* (*Yevamot* 24b s.v. *Lo* and 109b s.v. *Ra'ah*) to the actions of Hillel Hazakein. The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 31a) records that Hillel Hazakein was approached by a prospective convert who insisted on converting with the precondition that he become a *kohen gadol*, a clear impossibility, and by a prospective convert who insisted on learning the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Despite the apparent lack of sincerity on the part of these conversion candidates, Hillel proceeded to convert them. *Tosafot* explain that Hillel was confident that ultimately these individuals would possess the requisite sincerity.

Encouraging the Prospective Convert

Notwithstanding all of the above, the *Gemara* equally cautions against being overly dismissive or discouraging of the interested convert; *ein marbin alav*—we should not scare the sincere convert away. The very next line in *Rut Rabbah* reflects this balance.

*R. Yitzchak said: A stranger shall not sleep outside (Iyov 31:32)*⁸—a person should always push away with his left hand and bring close with his right hand.

אמר ר' יצחק בחוץ לא ילין גר (איוב לא:לב) לעולם יהא אדם דוחה בשמאל ומקרב בימין.

Although Naomi repeatedly attempted to discourage Rut from converting, she embraced Rut's decision once she realized the depth of Rut's commitment. The *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (99b) records that the *Avot* were punished for not allowing Timna to convert despite her sincere intentions.⁹ Timna came from royal stock but wanted to embrace the faith of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. However, the *Avot* pushed her away, and Timna subsequently became a concubine of Elifaz the son of Esav and gave birth to Amalek (*Bereishit* 36:12), which Chazal view as a punishment for not facilitating the conversion of a sincere potential convert.

Bach (*Yoreh Deah* 268:5) views the detailed instructions of the above quoted *Gemara* in *Yevamot* as striking the appropriate balance between discouraging the insincere convert and encouraging the sincere one. The *Gemara* requires that we initially apprise the interested party about a sample of complex mitzvot (*chamurot*) as well as a sample of simple mitzvot (*kalot*). We hope that upon hearing about the complexity of Jewish observance, evidenced by the selection of *mitzvot chamurot*, and the punishment for noncompliance, the insincere convert will abandon his quest. At the same time, we

⁷ See also Meiri (*Yevamot* 47a s.v. *Kevar*). *Shu"t Beit Yitzchak* (*Yoreh Deah* 2:100:4) notes that Rambam's language implies that a *beit din* should not rely solely on the representation of the prospective convert about his motivation but should reach its own independent conclusion.

⁸ The commentaries on the *Medrash* note that the homiletic interpretation of the *passuk* in *Iyov* is that one should not totally push away a prospective convert, forcing him out onto the street.

⁹ *Tosafot* (*Yevamot* 109b s.v. *Ra'ah*) note that the *Gemara's* negative comment about those who accept *geirim* applies only to those who convert them immediately upon request or despite clear external motivation.

inform the prospective convert of some *mitzvot kalot* and of the reward for proper observance. This is due to the opposite concern: if the prospective convert is sincerely motivated and we fail to inform him that there are also easier elements of observance and immense reward for proper observance, we will unjustifiably discourage him from what would be an appropriate conversion. We also inform him of the ultimate reward in *Olam Haba* in order to prevent him from becoming distressed by the theological dilemma of *tzadik v'ra lo*—the suffering of the righteous in this world.¹⁰

Shu"t R' Eliyahu Gutmacher (Yoreh Deah 87) suggests that if a *beit din* has doubts about the sincerity of a potential convert but has no credible evidence of lack of sincerity, the orientation of the *beit din* should be to accept rather than reject the convert. In his calculation, the consequences of rejecting a genuinely sincere convert, as the *Avot* did with Timna, are more severe than of accepting a candidate who appears sincere to the *beit din* but may be masking ulterior motivations. He argues that the *Avot* presumably had at least speculative grounds for rejecting Timna but were nonetheless punished for doing so. If, however, a *beit din* were to accept a convert who, unbeknown to them, had ulterior motivations that he deliberately withheld from the *beit din*, the conversion would still be valid *post facto* (*Yevamot* 24b)¹¹ (assuming that the *ger* sincerely accepted the yoke of observance) and the *beit din* would not be liable for any wrongdoing.¹²

According to some authorities, facilitating the conversion of a sincere, committed convert may be included either in the imperative of *ahavat hager*, loving the convert,¹³ or subsumed more generally under the *mitzvah* of *ahavat Hashem*. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 137b) rules that one who circumcises a convert recites a *berachah* that includes the phrase “*asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu lamul et hageirim* etc.” Tosafot Harosh implicitly asks¹⁴ what *mitzvah* is there to

¹⁰ See, however, Meiri (*Yevamot* 47a s.v. *Kevar*) who writes that the reason for informing the prospective convert about *mitzvot kalot* is that idolatrous religions do not generally have precepts that govern the minutia of daily life. Upon discovering that Judaism involves such details, the prospective convert may choose to reconsider. Meiri understands that our representation about the ultimate reward in *Olam Haba* is similarly intended to dissuade the convert. The emphasis is supposed to be that only the truly righteous will merit such reward. See also *Iyun Yaakov* on the *Ein Yaakov*, quoted in the *hagahot v'hearot* on the Machon Yerushalayim Tur (268:20), who cites a Tanchuma on *Parshat Re'eh* that presents Dovid HaMelech as expressing to Hakadosh Baruch Hu that he is more worried about proper performance of *mitzvot kalot* than of *mitzvot chamurot*, given the dictum (*Avot* 2:1) *hevei zahir b'mitzvah kalah k'vachamurah*—be as careful with an easy *mitzvah* as with a difficult *mitzvah*. The hope is that information about easy *mitzvot* may also serve to discourage a potential convert.

¹¹ The conclusion of the Gemara there is that even though we should not convert individuals who convert for ulterior motives, their conversions are valid *post facto* (so long as the requisite commitment to beliefs and practices was in place).

¹² For further analysis of this position see *Mishnat Hager* (Part II Chapter 3). One could, however, argue, based on the presentation of R. Schachter cited in footnote 1 above, that under certain circumstances, the deliberate withholding of critical information from a *beit din* when that information may have changed the *beit din's* ultimate decision to convert a person could call into question the validity of the conversion. See a *teshuvah* of R. Asher Weiss on this topic in *Kovetz Darchei Hora'ah* 12 (Yerushalayim, Sivan 5770 pp. 70-72) that recommended redoing the conversion in the particular case that he was asked about.

¹³ See *Devarim* 10:19 *ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים*—And you shall love the convert for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. The more conventional understanding of this passuk assumes that it only applies subsequent to a conversion. *Mishnat Hager* (Part II Chapter 11 footnote 70) quotes *acharonim* that note that this is the simple understanding of the Rambam (*Hilchot Deiot* 6:4).

¹⁴ *Shu"t D'var Avraham* (2:25:1) was asked how we recite a *berachah* on the *milah* of a convert if there is no obligation to circumcise converts. He responds that while there is no obligation to seek out converts to circumcise

circumcise a convert that would justify the text of this *berachah*.¹⁵ He answers את נצטוינו לאהוב את הגרים ואי אפשר להיות גר בלא מילה. “For we are commanded to love converts and it is impossible to be a [male] convert without *milah*.” This response implies that the act of accepting *geirim* is included in the mitzvah of *ahavat hager*.¹⁶

R. Yehuda Gershuni (*Kol Tzofayich* pp. 503-505, cited in R. Gedalia Dov Schwartz, *Loving the Convert: Converts to Judaism and our Relationship with Them*, Chicago 2010) quotes the Tashbeitz in *Zohar HaRakia* (28), who asks why R. Shlomo ibn Gevirol did not count the mitzvah of accepting *geirim* in his list of mitzvot. R. Gershuni and R. Yerucham Fishel Perlow (commentary to *Sefer Hamitzvot of Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon* end of *Aseh* 19) suggest that this is included in the mitzvah of *ahavat Hashem*. This is evidenced in *Sifrei (Va’etchanan Piska 32)*:

You shall love God your Lord, project love of Him onto other people as your father Avraham [did], as it states (Bereishit 12:5) “And the souls that they made in Charan.” If the whole world attempted to create one small mosquito and give it life, they would not be able. [How then did Avraham “make” people?] Rather, this teaches that Avraham Avinu converted them and took them under the wings of the Shechinah.

ואהבת את ה' אלהיך, אהבהו על הבריות כאברהם אביך כענין שנאמר (בראשית יב:ה) ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן, והלא אם מתכנסים כל באי העולם לבראות יתוש אחד ולהכניס בו נשמה אינם יכולים אלא מלמד שהיה אברהם אבינו מגיירם ומכניסם תחת כנפי השכינה.

The Rambam quotes this *Sifrei* in his *Sefer Hamitzvot (Aseh 3)* and explains that just as Avraham Avinu, out of his love of Hashem, inspired others to join his faith. so too should we love Hashem in such a way that inspires others to take an interest in our faith.¹⁷

Unique Circumstances

While a *beit din* must strike an appropriate balance between discouraging and encouraging a prospective convert, there are situations in which the general orientation to push away may be minimized or dispensed with entirely. In 1864, as the American Civil War was raging, Rabbi

(*mitzvah chiyuvit*), if a situation presents itself in which a sincere convert is in need of a *milah* one fulfills a mitzvah in performing the conversion (*mitzvah kiyumit*). By way of analogy, while there is no mitzvah to seek out animals to slaughter, if one does slaughter an animal in order to eat its meat, he fulfills the mitzvah of *shechitah*.

¹⁵ The text in our Gemara indicates that there are two separate berachot recited upon the *milah* of a *ger*: the generic “*al hamilah*” as well as the unique “*lamul et hagerim* etc.”. Rambam (*Milah* 3:4) only records the second berachah. *Kesef Mishneh* notes that Rambam follows the text of the Gemara as recorded in Rif and explains that according to Rambam this berachah is not a *birchat hamitzvah*, as the *ger* is not yet Jewish until he completes his immersion in a mikvah, but rather a *birchat hashevach*, a berachah extolling the uniqueness of the mitzvah of *brit milah* in general and the status of *dam brit*, the blood of the *brit*. This approach is in distinction to that of the Rosh, who clearly views this berachah as a *birchat hamitzvah*.

¹⁶ This is the position of R”i AlBartziloni cited in the commentary of R. Yerucham Fishel Perlow on the *Sefer Hamitzvot of Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon* (end of *Aseh* 19).

¹⁷ It is worth noting an interesting comment of Ibn Ezra (Devarim 31:12). Included in the Torah’s list of attendees at the Hakhel gathering is *hager asher b’kirbecha*—the stranger in your midst. Ibn Ezra writes, “*ulay yityahad*”—perhaps he will become Jewish. Ibn Ezra clearly understood that the *ger* referenced here is not a *ger zedek*, an actual convert, but rather a *ger toshav*, a non-Jewish resident of the land of Israel, and that there is a communal interest in having such a person convert. See *Pardes Yosef HaChadash* on this passuk for further source material about this matter. See also the statement of R. Eliezer in the Gemara (Pesachim 87b).

Bernard Illowy (1814-1875), a student of the Chasam Sofer who served as the rabbi of New Orleans, Louisiana, issued an edict prohibiting local *mohalim* from circumcising children born to a union of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. He reasoned that these conversions were not being performed for the sake of *geirut*, as the mothers had no intention of converting themselves or even raising the children as Jews (and neither did the nonobservant Jewish fathers), and any *berachah* recited on such a *milah* would be a *berachah levatalah*—a blessing recited in vain.¹⁸ Performing a *milah* on these children would give the incorrect impression that these children were halachically Jewish. In response to R. Illowy's proclamation, two of the local *mohalim* pledged to follow his directive; a third mohel refused and R. Illowy publicly denounced him.¹⁹

R. Illowy's actions, which he wrote had the endorsement of R. Samson Rafael Hirsch of Frankfurt, spawned a debate in the Jewish newspapers of the time, both in the United States and in Germany, as to whether his halachic position and banning of the noncompliant mohel were justified, and as to whether a subsequent *milah* performed by the noncompliant mohel would be valid *post facto*. The treatment in the *Der Israelit*, the weekly organ of Agudath Israel in Germany, led to an exchange of letters between two German halachic authorities of the time, R. Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and R. Ezriel Hildesheimer. As part of their discussion, R. Kalischer, in disagreeing with R. Illowy, cites the pasuk in Ezra (9:2) that refers to *zera kodesh*, "holy seed." R. Kalischer claims that *zera kodesh* is a reference to the progeny of the unions between Jewish men and non-Jewish women that were rampant in the time of Ezra and Nechemia. These children, while not halachically Jewish, have some higher status than full non-Jews and therefore, argues R. Kalischer, it is appropriate to do what we can to provide them, when possible, with a proper conversion. R. Hildesheimer argues that *zera kodesh* refers not to the progeny of these unions but to the Jewish seed itself of the husbands.²⁰ Thus there is no evidence to the notion of treating these children differently than any other non-Jew.²¹

What emerges from R. Kalischer's argument is the possibility of a different orientation toward conversion candidates with Jewish blood or identity who are not halachically Jewish. He suggests that the general orientation to push off conversion candidates may not apply to the same extent to an individual who has a Jewish father. There may be grounds to distinguish between the formal pushing away reflected in the Gemara's specific directives, that should still be followed, and the less rigorous defined process of investigation of motives. Contemporary

¹⁸ Regarding performing *milah* on non-Jews generally see Rema (*Yoreh Deah* 263:5), *Taz* (263:3), and *Shach* (263:8).

¹⁹ These accounts are included in a collection of R. Illowy's writings published by his son and entitled *Sefer Milchamot Elokim: The Controversial Letters and the Casuistic Decisions of Rabbi Bernard Illowy PhD* (Berlin 1914), pp. 188-202. That volume reprinted some articles written by R. Illowy and others that appeared in the *Jewish Messenger* of New York and the German *Der Israelit*. See the introduction for biographical information about R. Illowy, some of which is reproduced at <http://www.jewish-history.com/Illowy/biography.html>. R. Illowy was also responsible for bringing to the attention of the halachic world the question of the kashrut of the Muscovy Duck.

²⁰ R. Reiss (*ibid.* p. 465) observes that the commentary of *Metzudat David* on the passuk in Ezra supports R. Hildesheimer's interpretation. See further evidence of this in R. Mordechai Alter, *Kager Kaezrach* (Yerushalayim 2013), pp. 391-397.

²¹ *Shu"t R. Ezriel* 229-232, especially 229:19 and 230:18.

batei din tend to be sympathetic to this approach, at least in certain circumstances in which a halachically non-Jewish individual is raised with a Jewish identity.²²

This is presumably the case to an even larger degree regarding an individual who was raised as Jewish and is observant of halacha only to find out at some later point that he or she is not halachically Jewish. The primary reasons for pushing away *geirim*—the concerns for ulterior motives or for not understanding the gravity of accountability involved—would not apply in such a situation. In a brief previously unpublished letter reprinted in the journal *Moriah* (Tamuz 5765 p. 57 and recently republished in *Iggerot Moshe* Vol. 9 *Even Haezer* 14), R. Moshe Feinstein responded to an inquiry from Brazil regarding the daughter of a non-Jewish woman (and a Jewish father) who was raised Jewish, attended Jewish schools, and was observant of halacha, and only discovered that she was not halachically Jewish upon becoming engaged to marry a Jew. The question posed was whether the beit din should be wary of converting such a person. R. Moshe answered that the beit din should not hesitate to convert her. Even though one might have argued that such a conversion should be deemed a conversion for ulterior motives (i.e. to be able to marry the man that she was engaged to), that is not the case, as the whole reason that she was interested in marrying a Jewish man was because of her Jewish upbringing. R. Moshe suggests that this was precisely the criticism of the *Avot's* handling of Timna. They viewed Timna's interest in conversion as being motivated by her interest in marrying a member of the families of the *Avot*, and they therefore rejected her. While it was true that she was interested in marrying into the family, her primary motivation was altruistic, and her interest in marrying into the family was only because those were the people who shared her belief system.

The Medrash Tanchuma (*Lech Lecha* 6) relates:

R. Shimon b. Lakish said: The convert is more precious to Hashem than the people who stood at Har Sinai. Why? Because if those multitudes had not seen the sounds, the torches, the lightning, the trembling mountains and the shofar blasts, they would not have accepted the yoke of heaven. This [convert] did not see any of those [signs] and he came to complete himself before Hashem and accepted upon himself the yoke of heaven. Is there someone more precious than that?

אמר ליה ר"ש בן לקיש חביב הגר לפני הקב"ה מן אותן אוכלוסין שעמדו על הר סיני, למה שכל אותן אוכלוסין אלולי שראו הקולות והלפידים וברקים וההרים רועשים וקול שופרות לא קבלו עליהם מלכות שמים, וזה לא ראה אחד מכולם ובא ומשלים עצמו להקב"ה וקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים יש חביב מזה.

Notwithstanding the initial attempts that we must make to discourage a prospective convert, Chazal laud the sacrifices and commitment demonstrated by the sincere convert. The personal *kabbalat HaTorah* of the *ger tzedek* outshines the collective *kabbalat HaTorah* of *maamad Har Sinai*. May our batei din continue to enjoy *siyata dishmaya* in properly facilitating the conversion process of *geirei tzedek*.

²² See R. Asher Weiss (ibid. pp. 82-83), who recommends minimizing the pushing away of intermarried spouses that express an interest in conversion, assuming that the eventual convert and spouse will embrace an observant lifestyle. See R. Reiss (ibid. pp. 464-5) for further source material about this matter.