

Lessons Learned from Conversion

The receiving of the Torah, which we celebrate on Shavuot, serves as the model for the laws surrounding conversion to Judaism. Having been involved with the Manhattan Beth Din for Conversions for close to a decade, I have been privileged to watch hundreds of individuals engage in their own personal reception of the Torah, as they embrace a life of Torah and mitzvot in all its fullness. Along the way, I have been inspired many times over by the commitment and self-sacrifice displayed by these individuals. As all of us prepare to receive the Torah anew on Shavuot, I share some lessons learned from converts and their process that can serve as a source of inspiration to us all.

Knowledge is a Key to Commitment

Reviewing the Talmudic passages regarding conversion, one gets the impression that the conversion candidate needs to acquire very little Judaic knowledge before conversion. Yet, every beth din today insists on a rigorous educational process through which the candidate studies Jewish theology and practice in considerable



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detail. The end result, typically, is a convert who often knows more about Judaism than many of the people he or she sits with in shul on a regular basis.

Why the contemporary insistence on acquiring extensive knowledge, if the Talmud does not seem to require it? I think the answer lies in the recognition that the knowledge is not only an end in itself; it is a means to enable the candidate to deepen a sense of connection and commitment to Torah and the Orthodox community. While the beth din may not be obligated Talmudically to insist on a certain level of knowledge, it is mandated to determine the candidate's level of commitment, and in the contemporary world, one way in which to do that is by observing the depth of commitment generated by the acquisition of knowledge.

Our beth din generally insists on the candidate learning at least basic Hebrew reading. While this is not

halachically required, we find that the connection to Hebrew enhances the connection to Torah and community. A few months after we asked a stellar candidate to learn how to read Hebrew, she wrote to us:

I write to you to express deep gratitude for asking me to learn to read Hebrew in preparation of my joining the Jewish people.

I am excited and humbled by the new world that has been opened up to me. Instead of doing my prayers in English, I read them in Hebrew...yes, it takes me a long time but the joy is immeasurable... I have a long ways to go before I can read fluently with speed, but I can read, I can follow prayers in shul from my siddur.

It is an amazing feeling! I am really looking forward to the High Holidays, G-d willing I will be a halachic Jew who for the first time will use the Machzor's Hebrew side. I will need translation but not transliteration.

Those of us who were born Jewish



PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION

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would do well to reflect on the idea that knowledge is a key to commitment. The better we can understand a Jewish experience — a holiday, a lifecycle event, or even a simple halachic practice — the more committed we will feel to that experience and the joy will truly be immeasurable.

Community Really Matters

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l sees the declaration of Ruth (1:16) — “Your nation is my nation; your G-d is my G-d” — as reflecting a dual aspect of conversion. The convert not only commits himself or herself to the Jewish religion. He or she commits to become part of the Jewish people.

In a broad sense, this means developing a sense of kinship with the

struggles and triumphs of the Jewish people worldwide and historically. In a more focused sense, this means that a conversion candidate needs to integrate into a specific Orthodox community before we can consider finalizing the conversion. This is often a complicated prospect. Full integration into an Orthodox community means living within comfortable walking distance of a functional Orthodox synagogue, something that can be challenging for many candidates.

And yet — integration into a community is essential to the conversion process. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even born Orthodox Jews often drift from observance when they do not feel part of the community. I would say that successful integration into a

community is probably the single most important element in the conversion process to help ensure that the convert will remain committed to a life of Torah and mitzvot in the long term.

Doing What is Right

A non-Jewish woman in her twenties met a Jewish man who, like his parents, was nominally Orthodox but not fully observant. The family insisted that the woman undergo Orthodox conversion before any possibility of marriage would be considered. As the woman began to study with an Orthodox tutor, she gradually began incorporating Orthodox practice into her life and was disappointed to see that her boyfriend was maintaining his non-

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observant lifestyle. She truly came to love Orthodox Judaism and sincerely wanted to lead her future life as a fully Orthodox Jew. Ultimately, she presented her boyfriend with an ultimatum: If you will not become fully Orthodox yourself, we can no longer be in a relationship.

The couple chose to end the relationship, and the woman continued to pursue conversion. But there was a catch: The boyfriend's parents had been advised that the beth din would only convert a candidate who was living in an Orthodox community. They had therefore rented an apartment for the woman in an Orthodox neighborhood. When the relationship ended, the boyfriend's parents no longer felt a vested interest in the woman's conversion process, and they stopped paying her rent,

forcing her to move back to her family, who lived quite a distance from any Orthodox resources. This was a cruel irony; her very devotion to Orthodoxy had set her back, in a very real sense, in her pursuit of conversion!

The beth din continued to provide both pastoral support to this idealistic woman, as well as connecting her to apartment possibilities in Orthodox neighborhoods which would be within her price range. After a number of disappointments, the woman was able to find an apartment she could afford in a vibrant Orthodox area. We completed her conversion not long thereafter. Today, she is studying Torah full-time and has begun applying for Aliyah.

I think this story speaks for itself. The tenacity this woman displayed — keeping to her goals, even when her

decisions seemed, superficially, to backfire — should inspire us to “keep at it” and do what we know is right, even when we seem to be hurt by doing so in the short run.

We are Fortunate to be Chosen

A man in his twenties became attracted to Judaism through reading. During the course of his exploration of Judaism, he suffered an accident which left him temporarily bedridden and depressed. By that time, he had already purchased a Hebrew-English siddur. He randomly opened up the siddur, looking for some comfort during the difficult period he was experiencing. The siddur opened to Aleinu. The man read Aleinu for the first time and found its message

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Today, our daughter is a sophomore at Yeshiva University. We are thrilled with the education she is receiving and her growth in Torah. She couldn't be happier.”

Michele & Jody Bardash
YU Parents



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incredibly inspiring. At that point — he later related to the beth din — he became convinced that he was on the right path and went on to seek out a more formal structure in which to study Judaism, ultimately leading to his conversion.

I find this story striking on several levels. Unfortunately, Aleinu is a prayer that is often recited without feeling even by those who attempt to invest their prayers with meaning. Aleinu has the “misfortune” of being placed at the end of our davening, a time when even the more devout among us often have “one foot out the door.” The idea that Aleinu could clinch someone’s decision to convert should certainly give us pause the next time we recite Aleinu mechanically.

What is even more striking, though, is that Aleinu’s content often causes us a degree of discomfort. Aleinu proclaims that we are fortunate to have been chosen to be Jewish, privileged to be able to worship G-d, and grateful that the Jewish role in the world is distinct from that of a non-Jew. Many of us chafe at that unabashed expression of pride in the Jewish mission. In fact, I have frequently heard born Orthodox Jews express amazement that anyone would want to convert. Why, they ask, would anyone voluntarily take upon themselves a whole host of extra obligations?

Our discomfort should be disturbing to us. It is true that halacha mandates impressing upon a prospective convert the gravity of his or her

decision, and the fact that he or she need not feel obligated to undertake these extra mitzvot. At the same time, we certainly view the system of mitzvot as a privilege, not a burden. If we are surprised that someone would voluntarily choose to be an Orthodox Jew, perhaps we need to do a better job affirming to ourselves our sense of pride and privilege in being bearers of the Torah. Perhaps we really do need to say Aleinu with a little more feeling!

We Can Powerfully Influence Those Around Us

Our beth din worked with “Marty,” a man in his sixties who had been married to a non-observant Jewish woman for many years. Along the way, he developed an interest in Orthodox Judaism. He and his wife began attending services and classes at an Orthodox synagogue located about fifteen minutes’ drive from their home. As their observance intensified, the couple ultimately acquired a “Shabbat apartment” near the synagogue where they spent Shabbat, now fully observant. The journey toward conversion culminated with the man undergoing circumcision and immersion in a mikveh; a few hours after the mikveh immersion, the couple gathered in the Orthodox synagogue where they were married according to Halacha, surrounded by all the members of their newfound supportive community.

Although the synagogue was Orthodox, many of the members of the synagogue were not strictly

observant. One such member pulled me aside during the spirited simcha dancing and commented to me with great passion, “You know, if Marty can become a shomer Shabbos, what excuse do the rest of us have?”

I don’t know whether that member ultimately became shomer Shabbos. I do know that Marty went on to become extremely active in that synagogue, spearheading a successful campaign to build an eruv locally and organize a daily minyan. He certainly exerted a powerful influence on his surroundings.

Questions Can be our Lifeline to Faith

Many of the converts we have worked with were raised as Catholics. I often hear from them something along the following lines: “I went to Catholic school, where we were taught that questions were bad, that we should just have faith and not ask questions. I find Judaism to be so refreshing, because it validates and encourages asking questions.”

One such conversion candidate was a woman in her twenties. She had forged a learning relationship with a wonderful Orthodox woman who was quite pious and scholarly. But there was a problem: when the candidate would question certain aspects of Judaism, in a sincere attempt to try to achieve a better understanding, the Orthodox mentor impressed upon her the importance of accepting things on faith and



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limiting one's questions. In a different context, this might have been good advice, but it was devastating for this candidate. "This is exactly why I left Catholicism!" she complained. The beth din connected her with a different mentor who encouraged questions. The woman's intellectual curiosity was satisfied. She went on to convert with our beth din and today is living a life of commitment to Torah and mitzvot.

I have often thought about this case when contemplating our collective efforts to educate our own Orthodox youth. The candidate in question left Catholicism because she felt that she was not allowed to raise questions. If we discourage questioning and tell our youth — or, for that matter, the adults we seek to educate — that they should simply accept our Torah

practices and viewpoints on faith, might we not generate disillusionment with Judaism? Engaging a sincere questioner can often lead to a deepened faith and commitment, rather than a lackluster one.

Never Old, Never Stale

A young man who converted with our beth din about two years ago recently wrote me the following:

I have been told by a fellow convert that the conversion is over, and that I am a full Jew. The problem I have with that statement is that the actual moment that I became Jewish followed by the experience of my neshama coming into my body is something that I think about and relive every day of my life. It was such a positive moment that I really

cannot let it go.

His sentiment beautifully captures the attitude toward Torah that is championed by Chazal (cited in Rashi to Shemot 19:1): "Let the words of Torah be eternally new to you."

This attitude of wonder and freshness, expressed by so many converts, is the greatest source of inspiration. It can be easy to allow one's Torah learning and mitzvah observance to become rote and ossified. One of the "perks" in my role as administrator of the beth din is my constant exposure to men and women who are proud to "never let go" of the awe-inspiring experience of accepting a life of mitzvot, allowing it to be an ongoing source of inspiration.



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