

On Mikva and Matan Torah: Observations from Witnessing the Conversion Process

As director of the Mechina program at Stern College for Women, a program geared toward women who are coming from unaffiliated or less affiliated backgrounds with limited to no formal Jewish education, I have had the opportunity and privilege of seeing young women from all over the world accept the yoke of heaven and the yoke of mitzvot and choose a life of Torah. For some of these women, though, the choice was not merely choosing a Torah lifestyle over a secular Jewish one, but rather choosing Judaism altogether. I have had the unique opportunity to guide several of my students through the *geirut* process and to experience the event as a layperson from the inside. And I must say, the entire experience, from the initial beit din meetings, to follow-up communication with the members of the beit din, culminating in the final *tevillah* (immersion), I have been struck time and time again by the sensitivity in which the process was handled. [Note: I have dealt solely with the Manhattan Beth Din for Conversions under the leadership of Rabbi Zvi Romm.]

To be perfectly honest, the first time I accompanied a student to the mikva,



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I'm not sure if she or I was more anxious, though in all fairness it was probably she. The mere thought of entering a mikva with a group of three rabbis was itself anxiety-provoking to say the least. It certainly didn't make it easier after the news media reported about mikva scandals involving a corrupt rabbi abusing his power over vulnerable women seeking conversion. The members of the beit din (that served on the cases that I have dealt with), Rabbis Rapp, Romm and Willig, deal with the immersion with tremendous sensitivity and modesty. Numerous steps are taken to ensure that the immersion takes place with the utmost standards of tzniut. Additionally, the rabbis, aware of the potential anxiety, do everything they can to put each woman at ease. My favorite line at one conversion of twin sisters was when one of the rabbis asked, "OK, who's going first?" and one of the young women pointed to her sister and said, "she will because

she's older," at which point the rabbi, to help lighten the mood, smiled and said, "You know, we can change that now too."

In my experience in accompanying these young women, the most inspiring part of the *geirut* process is the proceeding that takes place immediately before the woman is about to immerse in the mikva. While partially immersed and completely covered except for her head, Rabbi Romm asks her a series of questions before her complete immersion. Discreetly, from just outside the doorway, he begins by asking her, "By immersing at this time, do you agree to believe in one G-d and reject other gods and other religions?" He then continues asking her about the acceptance of other aspects of Judaism including belief in G-d's revelation of the Torah, both the Written and Oral Law, belief in reward and punishment, acceptance



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of Shabbat, kashrut, tzniut, tefilla. He then asks about her commitment to Jewish community: living in a Jewish community and being actively involved in a community that is committed to Torah Judaism and halacha. He asks if she is committed to raising her future children in a Jewish community conducive to Torah growth and sending those children to Jewish schools that embody those values. He asks about her commitment to her fellow man and her commitment to *mitzvot bein adam lachaveiro*, interpersonal mitzvot like tzedaka and chessed. Each loaded question begins with the identical wording, “By immersing at this time do you agree to...” And after each question there is a pause, and the woman responds with, “I agree.” The questions culminate with the woman immersing herself in the waters of the mikva with the help of the female mikva attendant as the rabbis leave the room. A few minutes later when she emerges Rabbi Romm gives her a *mi sheberach* blessing and like any new Jewish *neshama* born into the Jewish people, she receives her Jewish name.

Experiencing these events have been and continue to be among the most inspiring experiences of my life. As Rabbi Romm asks the young women to agree to a lifelong commitment to Torah and mitzvot, I find myself directing the very same questions to me. And as she agrees after each one, I find myself agreeing silently, noting that over the course of my life no one ever asked me those questions.

Moshe tells Bnei Yisrael at the beginning of Sefer Devarim:

ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ כָּרַת עִמָּנוּ בְּרִית בְּחֹרֵב. לֹא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת ה' אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אֲתָנוּ אֵינָנוּ אֲלֵה פֹה הַיּוֹם כְּלָנוּ חַיִּים.

Hashem, our G-d, sealed a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our forefathers did Hashem seal this covenant, but with us — we who are here, all of us alive today.

Devarim 5:2-3

Toward the end of the Sefer Devarim, he repeats this idea:

וְלֹא אִתְּכֶם לְבַדְכֶם אֲנֹכִי כָרַת אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֹּאת. כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמֵּד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם.

Not with you alone do I seal this

covenant and this imprecation, but with whoever is here, standing with us today before Hashem, our G-d, and with whoever is not here with us today.

Devarim 29:13-14

The Torah is a gift from G-d and is ours for the taking, even if we weren't actually at Har Sinai. Just as Moshe urges the next generation to take ownership of their Torah after they leave the supernatural bubble of the midbar and enter the Land of Israel, we too must take ownership of our portion in Torah. It makes no difference whether we grew up with Torah or we didn't, whether our knowledge of Torah was taught as the “Old Testament” or even if we learned the “new” one, at some point in our lives each one of us must try to reflect, take ownership of our Torah and commit ourselves actively, not just passively. *Na'aseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will listen, is not confined to the national unilateral response at Har Sinai over 3,000 years ago. Nobody is asking us the questions that the convert is asked before entering the mikva, but our *na'aseh v'nishma* can be manifested even in a silent “I agree,” more than 3,000 years later. It is most apropos to dedicate a Shavuot-themed publication to the topic of *geirut*. As we celebrate *z'man matan Torateinu*, the period of receiving the Torah, there is no better way to glean inspiration than to look at those who truly accepted the yoke of Torah in a very personal and profound way. On this Shavuot, may we all experience our own *matan Torah* individually and proactively.

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