



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

CHOOSING JUDAISM

I remember a regular spring ritual I used to practice when I was still a congregational rabbi. The event took place early on a Sunday morning in the spring, as thirty eager people and I carpoled down to Laguna Beach. We arrived at the beach looking pretty out of place — me in my suit and tie, about a quarter of the people in loose fitting swimwear, and everyone else looking weepy while burdened with cameras, gifts, and snacks. Why were we there? Not to play volleyball, and not to bask in the glorious California sunshine. Our purpose was much more sacred and venerable than all that. These 30 people were among the 100 students who had completed my Introduction to Judaism class and were now intent on converting to Judaism. I would gather the crowd around me (including several locals intrigued by our strange gathering). In a loud voice, I would read these words:

God loves the Ger Tzedek who has come by choice more than all the crowds of Israel who stood before Mount Sinai. The Children of Israel agreed to a covenant with God only after they witnessed the thunder, lightning, quaking mountains and the sound of trumpets. But the Ger Tzedek, who experienced none of these marvels, chooses to enter the Covenant with God and to take on the yoke of Heaven without the benefit of miracles. Can anyone be more beloved than this person?

Then I offered a blessing to those who were about to use the Pacific Ocean as their mikvah:

You have come to this place, demonstrating through an ancient practice that you desire to bathe in the waters of Judaism and that you seek to immerse yourself in the religion and people of your choosing. May this commitment always be a source of blessing and contentment to you and to those who love you. May your tevillah, immersion, inspire you and strengthen you in your resolve to navigate the ancient and endless stream of Jewish life. May you be among those who will tend that stream, so it will continue to be strong and to flow without end. You are Bountiful, Holy One our God, Majesty of SpaceTime, whose mitzvot add holiness to our lives, and who commanded us concerning immersion for the sake of conversion.

After my words by the shore of the sea, these would-be Jews ran into the chill waters, immersing themselves three times under the waves. Then they surfaced to recite the blessing that marked their entry into our ancient sacred pathway, the path of Torah.

That process, of joining the destiny and faith of the Jewish people, of making our special brit with God their own is an ever-inspiring story. It takes great courage and persistence to study the teachings of Judaism, to take on the mitzvot as personal obligations, and to willingly join a persecuted people.

During my ten years as a congregational rabbi I helped about 200 people find their way to Judaism (one became synagogue president, another is already a Conservative rabbi, and two more are studying toward ordination at the Ziegler School). At the American Jewish University, I supervise the Louis and Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism program, the nation's largest such program, as well as the University's beautiful Mikvah. For too long, the organized Jewish community has been uncertain about whether or not to embrace converts, whether or not to create access to help bring these wandering souls home. That time is passed. We cannot afford to be indifferent or tepid toward the many righteous Gentiles who have allied themselves to the Jewish people — through friendship, through shared interests, and sometimes through marriage. Conversion is the solution to the challenge of intermarriage.

Such a solution does not represent a modern deviation. To the contrary, the steps of conversion are found explicitly in the Talmud, and the rabbis of antiquity traced one of the requirements for conversion to the Torah. "Hear out your fellow, and decide justly between anyone and a fellow Israelite or ger (stranger or convert)." (Deut. 1:16) The rabbis understand the requirement of "decide justly" (u'shfatem tzedek) as establishing the rule that "a conversion requires three judges." Building on that Talmudic base, Rabbi Yehudah established that "one who is converted by a beit din is indeed a convert; one who converted by himself is not a convert."

Thus the key to a traditional Jewish conversion is the interview before the Beit Din—the religious court of three observant Jews. After a ritual immersion in a mikvah or the ocean, after either brit milah (ritual circumcision) or hatafat dam brit (taking of a drop of blood to symbolize ritual circumcision for one already medically circumcised) for the male convert, all converts must then appear before the Beit Din to demonstrate that they are sufficiently knowledgeable in Judaism and are interested in converting for sincere motives. Finally, each convert must explicitly accept the authority of Jewish law in its totality.

That last requirement is particularly ironic today, when so many Jews who are born to this wonderful heritage live much of their lives without reference to the mitzvot and the depth of the halakhah. While conversion to Judaism has always required (and still does require) explicit affirmation of the commandments, many people who are lucky enough to be born Jewish don't even pause to consider the place of mitzvot in their lives. Several years ago, the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis of Denver cooperated on joint standards to conversion. Those standards included (1) commitment to regular Torah study as an continuing process, (2) certain minimal ritual practices (fasting on Yom Kippur, affixing a mezuzah on the doorpost, candle-lighting on Shabbat and festivals, regular attendance at communal worship on Shabbat and festivals, maintaining a level of kashrut (the dietary laws), and (3) acts of lovingkindness (such as

giving to tzedakah, affiliation and involvement with a synagogue, a commitment to the Land of Israel expressed in a promise to travel to Israel, and a commitment to create a Jewish home in which all children would receive a Jewish education.

Those standards were a minimum expected to make entrance into the Jewish people more than just the addition of a new label. Yet I wonder how many of us, born into Judaism, could rise to the challenge of taking on those standards as our own?

I know that many Jewish fiancés or spouses of converting Gentiles were dragged to the introductory classes by their non-Jewish partner, only to surprise themselves by falling in love with the Judaism they discovered there. The wisdom, joy, and profundity of Jewish teaching aren't easily distilled to children and teens — it takes an adult mind and an adult range of experiences to reveal the light and depth of Jewish faith and practice. Those Jews had been taking their heritage for granted, blandly equating the ethnic garnish of Jewish living with the substance and beauty of Jewish living and learning. Introduced to the real thing, they found themselves falling in love with Shabbat, with Kashrut, with care for creation and reverence to the elderly, a passion for peace, the joy of a faithful marriage, and countless other blessings that Judaism brings into the world. Several of these Jewish partners now find themselves, a decade later, engaged in Jewish living at a level they would never have discovered without being dragged to those introductory courses.

In an age in which people are free to abandon their Judaism at will, in a time when so many Jews are raised without a Jewish education and lack the experience of Judaism in the home, we are all—in a very real sense—potential converts to Judaism. We each face a personal decision, whether or not to make Judaism something central to our identities and our lives, whether we are willing to grow to make the words of the Shema our own personal pledge of allegiance.

Like our ancestors standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, we have the power to affirm the gift that God offers us, or we can spurn that gift. A continuous legacy stretching across the millennia, a wise and joyous way of life that links the generations, a rich relationship with God and a sacred way of life—these riches are ours as a birthright, if only we are willing to accept them.

Perhaps now is a time to rise to the standards of those faithful people—the converts who bathed in the waters of Judaism for the first time, and those steadfast Jews who continue to act as beacons of light and fidelity by living their Judaism. Perhaps now is the time to just say “yes.”

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