

In the Footsteps of Ruth: A NEW PARADIGM FOR CONVERSION

By Basil Herring

Avraham, a student at Yeshiva University who was about to start dating, recently became aware of a painful fact: his grandmother's conversion to Judaism put his own Jewish status in question. His grandmother had converted to Judaism in the 1940s in order to marry his grandfather, but the officiating Orthodox rabbi in the community, who was no longer alive, was not known to have insisted on proper conversion standards. As a result, Avraham chose to undergo a "gerut lechumra," a conversion to remove any doubts, so that his own status as a Jew would be beyond question.

Miriam, a Christian physician in a Midwest community, was fascinated when she took a course on Judaism at a local university. The more she learned about Judaism, the more she entertained the idea of converting. Upon further investigation, she was told by an Orthodox rabbi that he

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would help her convert but that she need not commit to Shabbat observance. This did not sound right to Miriam. In order to ensure that her gerut would be authentic, she decided to fly halfway across the country once a week—irrespective of the cost or inconvenience—to study with a well-known rabbi. She studied for a year and, soon after her conversion to Judaism, became a fully observant leading member of a growing Midwest congregation.

Last year, Chana from Los Angeles applied to a Jerusalem seminary, only to be told that, in light of a previous conversion in her family, there was a question regarding her Jewish status. She could not be accepted into the program without undergoing a conversion.

Sadly, such stories are not uncommon. In fact, the stories above, all of which are true, point to the pressing need for a structured, broad-based and widely accepted approach to conversions to Judaism, one that will minimize

needless heartache, provide reasonable assurances to sincere converts and establish a fair and responsible process that will bring *gerim* through the portals of our great faith.

Few areas of Jewish life are as fraught with emotion as conversion. Some Jews are deeply suspicious of all converts, no matter how observant the latter may be. Others believe we are morally compelled to do everything possible, including adopting marginal halachic standards, in order to welcome converts into our midst. In between these extremes are the majority of Jews, who understand how difficult it must be for a convert to embrace life as a believing Jew but also understand the importance of widely accepted and halachically mainstream standards and policies that define who is and who is not a Jew.

Complicating matters even more is the elephant in the room—growing

assimilation and intermarriage. Some argue that the availability of conversion only serves to encourage intermarriage and contributes to the ever-growing assimilation crisis.

Rabbis, of course, have to deal with the potential convert at every step of the way. With great patience and devotion, they introduce the *ger* to the beauty, profundity and intricacies of Torah life, culminating in the embrace of our eternal and singular people.

But it is often the rabbi who also experiences deep personal anguish. He may have to tell a non-Jew that halachic Judaism is too demanding and therefore not for him; he may have to break the news to a young couple that, after many months of study, the non-Jewish fiancée does not qualify for an Orthodox conversion or he may have to tell childless parents wishing to convert an adopted baby that, given their unwillingness to change their lifestyle, their baby will not be recognized as a Jew in the Orthodox community. And sometimes, he may have to make the difficult decision to endanger his rabbinic position and satisfy his conscience rather than agree to a powerful congregant's request to perform a questionable conversion.

Historically, Orthodox conversions in this country were left in the hands of individual rabbis. For the most part, there was little structure to the conversion process. Sometimes a rabbi would call on his local rabbinic colleagues (or synagogue clergymen or observant laymen) to constitute a *beit din* at the time of the mikvah immersion. The converts thus produced would generally be assured by the rabbi that his good name was sufficiently respected where it counted, and they should not be concerned about future acceptance for themselves or for their offspring.

But the fact of the matter is that while such assurances could be relied upon most of the time, this was not always the case. Even if a rabbi was a member of a recognized Orthodox rabbinic organization, it did not necessarily mean that his conversions would be automatically endorsed. In this respect, conversion was similar to *kashrut* supervision before the advent of nationally recognized *hashgachot*.

Decades ago, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) recognized this problem. Thus, in the late 1980s, the RCA formulated conversion guidelines, urging rabbis to voluntarily follow them and to register conversions that conformed to the guidelines with the RCA. Unfortunately, most conversions were not registered. Thereafter a new system was instituted, whereby rabbis could obtain formal RCA endorsement of a conversion by having the conversion process monitored and reviewed. In addition, a rabbi could obtain RCA endorsement for a conversion already completed if he attested, in writing, to having followed RCA guidelines and standards. Once again, requests for endorsements were the exception rather than the norm.

Beyond the membership of the RCA, other Orthodox rabbis and rabbinical groups were also performing conversions with even less oversight and monitoring.

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Could anyone therefore have been surprised to discover that when converts moved from one Jewish community to another, oftentimes the receiving community and its rabbinic leadership had to find a way to establish the bona fides of the converts in question? Could anyone have been truly shocked to find out that in some places lists of acceptable converting rabbis came into existence?

There may have been a time in Jewish history when it was reasonable to demand that every rabbi's judgment in matters affecting personal status should be acceptable to all other rabbis. But nowadays, with proliferating rabbinic training institutions and methodologies, the high rate of Jewish mobility and fluid communal and denominational structures and relationships, such mutual recognition is far from being a "given."

In light of these realities, two years ago the RCA decided to create a more formal, structured and efficient conversion framework. Together with our sister organization, the Beth Din of America, the RCA devised a system of regional conversion courts known as Geirus Policies and Standards (GPS), which is mostly comprised of RCA-member rabbis. This approach, which was put into effect within the past year, blends the benefits of personal rabbi-lay relationships with those of a networked local rabbinate. Together, the sponsoring rabbi of a particular convert and the RCA-approved local *beit din* work to adhere to formally adopted consensus policies and standards. This new system helps ensure uniform standards to guide rabbis and converts alike, while making sure that the personal sensitivities of conversion candidates will be respected and honored as they traverse the complex journey into Judaism. Finally, GPS makes concrete arrangements and provisions to ensure that there will be transparency, confidentiality, permanent record-keeping and all around accountability in the conversion process, from start to finish.

After GPS was established, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel formally rec-

ognized the network, endorsing all the rabbis who had been approved by the RCA's internal approval process, and by extension guaranteeing GPS converts automatic acceptance in Israel. As of this writing, more than 130 men and women have already either become candidates for conversion or have completed the conversion process under the new system.

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Additional courts continue to be established and additional *dayanim* continue to be approved, in an ongoing process that will continue into the future, depending upon local needs and developments.

There are those who are concerned that the creation of GPS means that a new and heartless rabbinic bureaucracy will be foisted on potential *gerim*, and that conversion will become so onerous that fewer and fewer candidates will successfully navigate the process. While these are legitimate concerns, the RCA took these fears into consideration when conceiving of GPS and therefore tried to make the process as smooth as possible.

Others have questioned what will be done with the "unendorsed" conversions of the past. GPS does not intend to question past conversions. There is neither the intent nor the ability to undertake reviews of what was done in the past. If someone does, however, feel the need to be reassured about his status, he will be able to seek such clarification with the assistance of the RCA or the Beth Din of America. But the new system in itself does not, in any way, invalidate conversions that were done prior to the creation of GPS. Rather, it was intended, and is being implemented to deal with future conversions.

Another concern raised is the matter of mitzvah observance. On this point, the RCA is absolutely clear: the standards enshrined in the new system are fully consistent with the standards articulated not just in the RCA conversion guidelines set forth twenty years ago, but also with the overwhelming consensus of halachic authorities in matters of conversion going back centuries and beyond. If, in the past, the particular requirements of Shabbat, *kashrut* and Jewish education, et al, were not clearly articulated in every halachic source text, it was not because these were not required but because they were a given, assumed by all, without question, in a Jewish world where mitzvah observance and a life of halachic conformity was the norm—unlike the case in our own time.

Change is often an unwelcome prospect. Human beings often naturally recoil at the prospect of the new and the unfamiliar. But change can also be a blessing, even when it causes us to rethink or revise that which is familiar. In fact, there are times when change and innovation can be a positive step.

In the case of Orthodox conversion in North America, and for that matter, conversion around the world, the new RCA system is a change that we can—and should—welcome, just as we have, for millennia, embraced the righteous and courageous men and women who walked in the luminous footsteps of Ruth the Moabite. 

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