

Jewishness and Judaism: A Spiritual Citizenship

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How do foreigners cross borders? How do outsiders transform themselves and become newly inducted members of the tribe, newly sworn citizens of the state, newly qualified minyan-makers?

Such questions confront religious groups, like churches; ethnic collectives, like the Sicilian people; and nations, like France. How do human societies determine who can become “one of us”? Who is a member of those “imagined communities” where distant people may never meet each other yet share “deep horizontal comradeship,” inspiring us to live and die for each other (in the words of political scientist Benedict Anderson)?

Though the boundaries of such communities may be abstract, elastic, and permeable, they are real. Discovering what carries a person over the boundary — transforming non-members into members — reveals a society’s fundamental self-conception.

Modern states like the U.S. base naturalized citizenship upon relationships to a physical place: those not born here must establish prolonged residency. Some use a different physical standard: Turkey, Finland, and, of course, Israel, grant citizenship to those bearing that country’s ethnic bloodlines wherever they were born.

Religions typically base conversion on common beliefs — inward markers, not physical ones. One adopts Islam by attesting that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet,” or evangelical Christianity by “accepting Jesus as the lord and savior.”

Asking similar questions about conversion into Judaism is timely. With intermarriage certain to be a permanent feature of American Jewish life, the “hows” and “whys” of conversion will be important for marriage, child-rearing, and much of communal life. Also, given the divisions among Orthodox and non-Orthodox streams, in Israel and in the Diaspora, our understanding of conversion will be critical to how our own people — how Jews — relate to our various sub-communities.

More important, thinking about conversion is illuminating: Is a Jew mostly a member of the Jewish people, and thus Jews-by-Choice acquire a stake in the ethnos of *Jewishness*? Is a Jew mostly an adherent to Jewish religion, and thus one converts by adopting the faith of Judaism?

The true answer, of course, is *both*. Jewish nationalism without Torah? Count me out. Abstract Torah teachings without Jews who concretize them in deeds? Not good enough. My Jewishness is inseparable from my Judaism; my Judaism needs *am Israel*. This compound identity is a “spiritual citizenship,” membership in an ethnic collective, defined through its spiritual commitments.

In fact, the classical laws of conversion encode precisely this dialectic. Through physical conversion rituals — circumcision for males and immersion for all — a gentile is symbolically reborn. Naked as the day they were born, dripping rain water, males bleeding from their penises, their bodies become ethnically Jewish. But before a physical transformation, classical halakhah requires an inward commitment: a convert must symbolically stand at Sinai and “accept the commandments.”

Both the ethnic and religious transformations are indispensable for acquiring spiritual citizenship, at least in classical halakhah. Inevitably, however, we all emphasize certain aspects and mute others, making some primary and others peripheral.

The oldest layers of rabbinic and early medieval law emphasized the physical rituals, implicitly stressing every Jew’s connection to Israel’s body. Ever since the High Middle Ages, emphasis has shifted to the volitional adoption of mitzvot, implicitly stressing every Jew’s link to Torah.

What should teachers in our age stress?

In our postmodern, multicultural, multi-racial, technologized, globalized contemporary societies, the power of ethnicity to grab hearts and minds diminishes. By definition, ethnicity divides people from their neighbors, creating “us” and “you.” Consciousness of difference can prompt mutual admiration; sometimes it prompts relatively benign alienation; and in numerous gruesome cases, it prompts slaughter. And as our world grows more integrated, we are better able to grasp what Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from a Birmingham jail: All people “live in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Increasingly the burden of proof lies on us ethnic partisans to defend why our corner of destiny’s garment should remain different.

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November 2008
Kislev 5769
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I doubt we can meet this burden unless our citizenship is spiritual. That is, only a wise, holy, and ennobling relationship to Torah — its teachings, tales, and commanded deeds — justifies bringing a gentile across the border into the imagined community of Israel.

We skirt too close to something genuinely ugly if conversion amounts to punching a

Gentile's ethnic ticket, and washing them off. Instead, marking new Jews' bodies and ushering them into a new family is justifiable because their citizenship will be devoted to the ethical, spiritual, and sacral demands of God's Torah. "Take care to fulfill it, for this Torah is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the other nations." (Deut. 4:6)

Converts: Power and Consequences

Jess Olson

The last two years have been a trying time for converts to Judaism in both the United States and Israel. With very little warning, the status of individuals who make the highly personal and private decision to convert to Judaism has become the lynchpin in a massive shift in Israeli rabbinic authority and, through a new kind of religious imperialism, a robust assertion of power over both Israeli policy and the American rabbinate.

Converts to Judaism in Israel have often found themselves in the middle of a uniquely Israeli culture war. There, conversion is not just a matter of individual choice and identity, but of national identity and state policy, with its own bureaucracy under the auspices of the chief rabbinate. In the early days of the state, placing "personal status" issues under a chief rabbi who was reflexively Zionist seemed of little consequence in a homogeneously Jewish and Ashkenazi society. But the question of conversion intensified in the 1980s, the unintended result of welcoming hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jewish immigrants to Israel. To streamline these *olim* into full Jewish citizenship in Israel, the Israeli government has attempted — in concert with religious authorities — solutions that converted them without undermining the halakhic integrity of the chief rabbinate. The latest attempt is the Conversion Authority, formerly supervised by Religious Zionist Rabbi Chaim Druckman.

In the U.S., matters have always been different. Religious identity here is a personal matter, largely devoid of implications beyond the synagogue walls. While issues of denominationalism — whether Orthodox authorities would accept Reform or Conservative converts — are a real part of American Jewish politics, they have little impact on a convert's acceptance into the American Jewish community.

And if American Jews, converted under Orthodox auspices in the U.S., made *aliyah* they could usually count on their conversions being recognized by the chief rabbinate, regardless of the specific affiliation of the Orthodox rabbi who supervised them.

But in the last year the status quo in both countries has been dramatically upset by two separate but linked incidents. The first was the decision made by the Great Rabbinical Court of Israel to affirm a decision by the *Bet Din ha-Gadol* of Ashdod that invalidated the Jewish status of a woman converted by the state Conversion Authority under Rabbi Druckman. Audaciously, in a decision penned by R. Abraham Sherman, the council then declared *all* conversions performed by Rabbi Druckman's commission retroactively invalid. And Rabbi Druckman, aged 75, was forcibly retired, ostensibly because he had reached the maximum age of service under civil service laws.

Further, in recent years, the Israeli state rabbinate has turned its attention to the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), one of the two largest Orthodox institutional bodies in the U.S. In a decision contrary to the entire history of the relationship between the RCA and the chief rabbinate, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar, whose portfolio includes authority over the status of converts, announced that individuals who converted under the auspices of the RCA would no longer be uniformly accepted as Jews in Israel. Seemingly in response, last February the RCA created the "Gerus Policies and Standards" (GPS), which identified a list of fifteen acceptable *batei din* in the U.S. that would be acceptable to the chief rabbinate as the only sanctioned bodies to perform conversions.

As conversion is a complex and sensitive process, it makes sense to argue that it is best

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November 2008

Kislev 5769

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