

The Conversion of Abraham Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

This week I had the pleasure of attending and participating in “Gathering the Waters,” an international mikveh conference run by Mayyim Hayyim in Newton. Mayyim Hayyim is our local pluralistic mikveh located just fifteen minutes away next to Newton Wellesley Hospital. Not only is it an incredible mikveh that people use for conversions, for life-cycle events (such as before weddings and bar/t mitzvahs and for monthly immersions), but it is also utilized for other moments in life, such as after a miscarriage, recovery from illness, or other traumatic or deeply personal and intense moments.

I myself have used this mikveh as a preparatory spiritual experience before I was installed as your rabbi, before the high holy days and other moments. Many more families and young people are visiting the mikveh and going through its educational programs. This conference was filled with fascinating sessions. As part of a track dealing with conversion, I was on a panel discussing with how to make the *beit din*, the court of three rabbis who talk the potential convert right before immersion, more meaningful. Ultimately, that *beit din* makes the final decision as to whether or not the potential convert is ready to become a Jew.

In addition, I spoke about the *hatafat dam* ceremony ceremony, the taking of the drop of blood from the site of the circumcision of boys and men who are in the process of converting so they can enter into the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

We shared ideas about how to make these moments more meaningful by adding readings and blessings. All this talk about conversion takes me back to my father who is visiting this Shabbat. My father, Rabbi Stephen Lerner, has served as a rabbi now for four and a half decades. He has worked in pulpits on Long Island, in Manhattan, and in Northern New Jersey. But his love has been conversion. For thirty years, he has run the Center for Conversion to Judaism with programs in Manhattan and Northern New Jersey.

Although he has not counted, by my estimate he has brought over 1500 individuals, *tahat kanfei haShekhinah*, under the wings of the Divine Presence, the metaphoric phrase the Rabbis use for conversion.

There is one story of his I wish to share. It goes back even before he opened his center. My father was a rabbi in the late 1960's and early 70's at Town and Village Synagogue on 14th Street in Manhattan. There he would encounter individuals from many different walks of life. Once, a couple came to see him – a husband and wife who were Christians of Latino descent who were

living in the Bronx. They were studying the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, as part of their Christian studies and were drawn more and more to the more ancient traditions of the Torah. They started reading articles and books about Judaism and finally came to my father for conversion. My father took them on as students, and they began to study with him in his intense one-year program with weekly meetings. Since they needed a synagogue in their own neighborhood, they joined an old Conservative synagogue whose heyday was in the 1950's.

One Shabbat, a fire broke out in the synagogue. Flames and smoke were pouring out. All the congregants rushed out. Since this was their shul, this couple was also there on that Shabbat.

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Before I share the end of that story, I want to speak some about conversion in the Jewish world today.

On the one hand, we have the terrible events that are going on in Israel, where the ultra-Orthodox have now taken over the chief rabbinate, making conversion less and less a possibility. This is particularly distressing to the hundreds of thousands of Israelis from the former Soviet Union who require a process of conversion since they are not halakhically Jewish. Many of them were not even raised as Jews.

These Russian Israelis participate in the full gamut of life in Israel. Unlike the ultra-Orthodox, they serve in the military. They pay their taxes. They find productive jobs and work hard to support the country. But, they are not allowed to marry other Israelis nor to be married by rabbi under the aegis of the Chief Rabbinate since they are not Jewish. They are also not allowed to be buried in Jewish cemeteries. This terrible situation is brought home during times of war or terrorist attacks when these Israelis are sometimes killed and they are not give the full honors and rites of burial as a Jew in a Jewish cemetery.

Many of them want to convert, but are not being welcomed by the increasingly Haredi government rabbis who insist on their adopted a fully right-wing Orthodox lifestyle.

In response to this, there was a bill put forth this summer by David Rotem of Lieberman's Israel Beteinu party, which draws the bulk of its support from recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The thinking was that this bill would make it easier for some of these Russian to convert, but at the same time it threatened the right of Jews-by-choice from outside of Israel to make aliyah under the Law of Return. Given the fact that the bill would give the Chief Rabbinate the ultimate responsibility for conversion, Jews of the Diaspora saw this proposed legislation as threatening the status quo which recognized our conversions under the Law of Return.

Because it was intrinsically problematic and because most of us did not believe it would actually help, we as a community, along with hundreds of other communities of Reform and Conservative backgrounds, fought this bill this year and the bill has been tabled.

Today, if one wants to convert in Israel and have one's conversion recognized by the state, one must go to government-appointed rabbis, most of whom are Haredi and require an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle.

Here in American, the situation is different. Conversion is practiced by all movements, although, due to the pressures by the Chief Rabbinate and the ultra-Orthodox in Israel, Orthodox conversion is becoming more and more restrictive. Families who wish to adopt children, for example, and are members of Orthodox synagogues in many areas are told that they will have to be *shomer* Shabbat, observing Shabbat strictly, never driving to synagogue, etc., that they will have to attend synagogue punctiliously, that women may not ever wear pants and that they will send the child to all thirteen years of education at Orthodox day school.

Suffice it to say that many families have not been able to reach this standard and have turned to Conservative rabbis to help them. On the other side, the Reform movement has made conversion somewhat superfluous. Given that children are considered Jewish in the Reform movement if either the father or the mother is Jewish and they are being raised exclusively as Jews, there is less incentive to convert the children if the father is Jewish and the mother is not. This has created a very difficult situation for us in American Jewry today as we have different standards as to who is actually Jewish. In addition, the Reform movement has seen fewer and fewer converts as it is not a requirement for their children, and given that some Reform rabbis perform intermarriage, it is not a requirement for marriage either.

The movement that is engaging the most in conversion is the Conservative movement. We are open and welcoming to people wherever they are in their spiritual journeys, and if they want to make the commitment to join the Jewish people on a formal level, then we are a movement that has an incredibly rich source of educational opportunities and the strongest conversion program in our area – and in many areas.

Every year, we have students who are studying with Rabbi Jacobs and myself for conversion. They learn each week with the Jewish Discovery Institute's regional program, meet with us regularly, come to shul, joining the Jewish people fully.

Traditionally, Judaism has been overwhelmingly positive attitude towards conversion. The Babylonian Talmud relates the following from *Masekhet Yevamot*, (47a-b).

“Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: ‘What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?’ If he replies, ‘I know and yet am unworthy,’ he is accepted immediately.

“He is then given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed (of the sin of the neglect of the commandments of) Gleanings, the forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man’s tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. [...]

“He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith.”

A thousand years later Maimonides was asked if converts should recite the traditional prayers. He wrote that they can recite “our God and God of our forefathers’ and ‘who has sanctified us through His commandments’ and ‘who has separated us,’ and ‘who has chosen us,’ and ‘who has given to our forefathers,’ and ‘that You have taken us out of the land of Egypt,’ and ‘who has worked miracles for our forefathers,’ and all similar matters as these.

“You should say all this in the prescribed manner and do not change anything. Rather, just as every Jew by birth prays and pronounces blessings, so too you should pronounce blessings and pray, whether you pray alone or as the leader of the congregation.

“The principle that Abraham our forefather was the one who taught and enlightened all the people, and let them know of the true path and of the oneness of the Holy Blessed One, and he rebuffed idol worship and he rejected its service, and he brought many under the protective wings of the Holy Presence and taught them and instructed them, and he commanded his children and those of his household to guard the path of God...”

Although Maimonides does not mention it here, traditional commentators also teach that Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women. The Torah states that Avram and Sarai left Haran for the land of Canaan with “*v’et hanefesh asher asu v’haran*” – literally, “the persons they had made” or “acquired.” The Midrash understand these souls to be those they had converted to Judaism, bringing them to an understanding of the one true God.

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In my own life, growing up in my father’s synagogue, which was a part-time synagogue, many of the students moved to our area so that they could be part of the synagogue. At meals we had many converts. The president of the synagogue was often a convert, and they filled our home and our lives with

Judaism. Their zeal and their passion for Torah and learning were infectious. In fact, often it was they who increased the observance of their children, of their spouses and partners, or of their in-laws who were Jewish from birth! In addition, it was such a powerful force that it attracted other Jews who saw their levels of commitment as inspirational.

So where does this leave us today? Jews-by-choice have enriched our communities in the United States as they have enriched communities in Israel. We must seek to strengthen these links and oppose any proposal which would damage this linkage and the unity of the Jewish people.

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Now, back to my story in the Bronx. While this fire raged in this old shul, the husband of the couple who joined the Jewish people ran into the burning building despite the dangers. He grabbed the *sefer* Torah and brought it safely outside.

May such people be accepted as Jews in Israel and like Abraham, the first convert, may Jews-by-choice serve as an inspiration to us all.

Shabbat Shalom.