

Why Is Conversion So Hard?

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Why Is Conversion to Judaism So Hard?

By Tzvi Freeman

Note: This article replaces a previous article that said much the same, but in a way that was often misunderstood. I hope this version will be much clearer to all.

Question:

Why do the rabbis make conversion to Judaism so hard? There are many Jews who don't keep anything Jewish, yet the rabbis demand full observance to become a Jew. Is that fair?

Response:

You have a very good point. Religion, after all, is all about belief. If you believe, you're in; if not, you're out. So why can't anyone who believes in the Jewish religion be considered Jewish? And why are those who don't believe and don't keep any of the Jewish practices still considered Jews?

That's what happens when you view the Jewish people through another people's lexicon—it all looks very puzzling. What, though, if we look at ourselves through our own language, through the original Hebrew?

Religion versus Covenant

We'll start with this word religion. Is Judaism a religion? Is that the right word?

Religions generally start when one teacher spreads his teachings to many disciples. The people who accept these teachings are considered coreligionists. Their common beliefs hold them together as a community.

Moses didn't preach a religion to individuals. He was more of a populist—a civil-rights leader who stood for empowerment of the people. He took his own people, who already had a common heritage, along with many who had decided to join that people, and brought them to Mount Sinai. There he brokered a covenant between a nation and G-d. G-d said, "I choose this nation to be my messengers of Torah light to the world." The nation, in turn, chose G-d, saying, "Whatever G-d says, we will do and we will obey."

The Jewish people, then, are best described as the "People of the Covenant"—meaning that they are a people because of a covenant. In Hebrew, a covenant is a brit—in this case, not a brit between two individuals, or even between an individual and G-d (as Abraham had made), but a brit between an entire nation and G-d.

So let's replace religion with brit and see what happens.

In a religion, you belong because you believe. In Judaism, you believe because you belong.

The brit, as I wrote, is what defines us as a nation—not geographic vicinity, language, government or culture. Even if we live in different countries, speak different languages, establish different leaders and eat different foods, that covenant still bonds us. Most significantly: even if we stop keeping our obligations under that covenant or decide not to believe in it, the covenant endures. A covenant, you see, is a two-way deal. It takes two to make it and two to break it. Just because the people have let go, doesn't mean G-d has.

That's why it's called an "eternal covenant"—because even if the people may be fickle, G-d doesn't change His mind.

So there's the difference: In a religion, you belong because you believe. In a brit (in this case, Judaism), you believe because you belong.

Believing is part of the brit. So are all the other mitzvot—obligations—of the covenant. It doesn't matter whether you believe in that covenant or those obligations, or believe that G-d obligated you, or believe in G-d at all. You can't fight with history. You are part of this people by virtue of having been born into it, and that's who this people are and what this people do. A deal is a deal.

Conversion versus Giyur

Let's look at another word—conversion—and things will become even clearer.

Let's say you weren't born into the Jewish people. Let's say you decide you want to enter into the same covenant as every other Jew. If this were a religion, no problem—you would just accept upon yourself whatever beliefs and rites are expected of you, and you're in. That's what people generally mean when they talk about conversion.

But this is a brit. To enter into G-d's covenant with the Jewish people, believing and doing is not enough. You need to become part of that people. How do you do that?

In this way, becoming Jewish is very much like becoming an American, a Moldavian or a Zimbabwean citizen. You can't come to a country and declare yourself a member. It's a two-way street: aside from you choosing your country, the government of that country has to decide to accept you.

Similarly, if you choose Judaism, you also need Judaism to choose you. Like we said, a covenant is a two-way deal.

So you need to become a ger (pronounced "gehr"). A ger is more than a convert. A ger literally means someone who has come to live among a people to which he or she was not born. A naturalized alien. That's how the ger is described in Torah, and how the process of becoming a ger is described in the Talmud: "A ger who comes to sojourn among us."

By joining this people, the ger instantly becomes part of the same covenant to which the people are part. And although the most essential part of joining this people is to accept the same obligations of the covenant in which they are obligated, it is not by force of his or her acceptance that the ger is obligated. Proof is, if the ger later has a change of mind, it helps zilch. The ger is obligated no matter what, because he or she has now also become "a child of the covenant."

That's one difference between this citizenship and citizenship of a modern country: You could always renounce your citizenship of a country. A Jew, however, is a member of an eternal covenant. Once in, there's no way out.

The details of joining

In short, a ger is an adopted member of the Jewish family. In the words of the paradigm of all gerim, Ruth the Moabite, "Your people are my people; your G-d is my G-d."

The rituals of that adoption are the same as what the Jewish people went through at Sinai: circumcision for males, immersion in a mikvah (ritual bath), and acceptance of all Torah obligations. The crucial element, however, is that all of these are to be supervised by a tribunal of learned, observant Jews—representing none other than G-d Himself. Their job is not only to witness that the ger was properly circumcised and fully immersed in the mikvah, but also to ensure that the ger is duly cognizant of the obligations of the covenant into which he or she is entering.

That's another distinction between obtaining citizenship of a

modern nation and joining the Jewish People: citizenship is mostly associated with the attainment of rights and privileges, while Jewish citizenship (gerut) is principally concerned with the responsibilities that come along with those privileges.

If the ger-wannabe learns of these obligations and feels they are more than he or she bargained for, so be it. You don't have to be Jewish to be a good person and to be loved by G-d. Believe in one G-d and keep His laws—the seven laws of Noah. Judaism—as opposed to Jewishness—is not just for Jews.

But if the ger does accept, then he or she is reborn as an eternal Jew, the same as any one of us who was born into the covenant. The soul of the ger, our sages taught, stood at Mount Sinai. In at least one way, the ger is yet greater, for the ger is the lost child who has found his way home.