

May a convert use a name other than “Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu?”

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**This responsum was approved by the CJLS on December 14, 2010 by a vote of eleven in favor, six opposed and one abstaining (11-6-1). *Members voting in favor:* Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Pamela Barmash, Elliot Dorff, Robert Fine, Reuven Hammer, Gail Labovitz, Aaron Mackler, Daniel Nevins, Avram Reisner, Elie Spitz, and Jay Stein. *Members voting against:* Rabbis Miriam Berkowitz, Josh Heller, Susan Grossman, Adam Kligfeld, Paul Plotkin, and Barry Starr. *Members abstaining:* Rabbi Steven Wernick.**

**Question:** May a convert choose to use a name other than Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu v'Sarah Imanu? If a proselyte had a halachically valid conversion, but the rabbi allowed a patronymic other than “ben/bat Avraham Avinu” is it acceptable to continue using that name, or must the convert change his/her name?

**Response:** There is a clear tradition that converts are named ben/bat Avraham Avinu. In the Shulhan Arukh it states: בגט גר כותב: פלוני בן אברהם אבינו “In a convert’s get is written: Ploni son of Avraham Avinu.”<sup>1</sup> The Rosh in a teshuvah states, אלא כך נוהגין לכתוב בכתובות, ושמו המובהק כותבים, ואב המון גוים הוא אבי כלם “thus it is our custom to write in ketubbot or gittin of converts: Ploni ben Avraham, and his preferred name is written, and he is the father of a great nation, father of all.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Reasons for using the patronymic Avraham Avinu**

R. Isaac Klein states “The patronymic ben or bat Avraham Avinu is insisted upon for purposes of identification.”<sup>3</sup>

From looking at the various teshuvot on the subject, it is clear that identification means simply identifying the correct person, not that there is any other reason to identify a convert. The Tur elaborates on this concept, stating על אחד ששמו יוסף בן שמעון והמיר אביו ויהבן היה לו לגרש ולא רצה להזכיר שם אביו וכתב יוסף בן שמואל שהגט פסול שהרואה אומר אחר מגרשה “regarding one who’s name is Yosef ben Shimon, and the father converted (to another religion) and they were estranged and the son did not want to mention his father’s name, and he wrote ‘Yosef ben Shmuel’ the get

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<sup>1</sup> Shulhan Arukh Even HaEzer 129:20

<sup>2</sup> Rosh, Clal 15:4

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, p. 445



### Reasons a proselyte might prefer to choose another name

Some converts have reported that they have a stronger sense of identification with biblical characters other than Abraham and Sarah. If a convert feels a particularly strong connection with Ruth and her journey, for example, she may feel herself a “spiritual descendant” of Ruth, and prefer to call herself “bat Rut” instead of “bat Sarah.” Allowing a convert to select a name that resonates more strongly with him or her may have the beneficial effect of increasing the sense of comfort he or she has with his or her new Jewish identity.

Unfortunately, in spite of the efforts of our rabbis to educate our congregants about how wonderful it is when someone chooses, of his or her own free will, to join the Jewish people, converts not infrequently find themselves encountering prejudice from some of their fellows who were born Jewish.

The Talmud cautions us not to oppress the convert: In the Mishnah in Bava Metzia we find “if he was the son of converts, do not say to him ‘remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is written ‘do not wrong or oppress the stranger’ (Exodus 22:20).”<sup>9</sup> The Gemara continues and warns us “לא תונו איש את עמיתו - באונאת דברים. הא כיצד? ... אם היה גר ובא ללמוד תורה אל יאמר לו פה שאכל נבילות וטריפות, שקצים ורמשים בא ללמוד תורה שנאמרה מפי הגבורה א”ת תורה אל יאמר לו פה שאכל נבילות וטריפות, שקצים ורמשים בא ללמוד תורה שנאמרה מפי הגבורה”<sup>10</sup> “A man shall not oppress his neighbor – refers to oppression with words ... If he is a proselyte and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, ‘Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!’”<sup>10</sup> Thus we learn from the Talmud that to remind a convert, or the child of a convert, of their former status is a violation of oppressing the stranger. The Gemara continues with a discussion of how terrible it is to publicly embarrass someone—going so far as to say “כל המלבין פני חבריו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים”<sup>11</sup> “anyone who embarrasses (lit. “whitens the face”) of his fellow in public is as if he spilled blood.”<sup>11</sup>

The Shulhan Arukh affirms the requirement not to oppress converts: “צריך לזוהר ביותר באונאת הגר, בין בגופו בין בממונו, לפי שהזוהר עליו בכמה מקומות”<sup>12</sup> “One needs to be especially careful about oppressing the convert, whether himself or monetarily, therefore we are cautioned about this in several places (in the Torah).”<sup>12</sup>

A convert therefore may wish to choose a name other than ben/bat Avraham Avinu v’Sarah Imanu – especially in these days when many people are called to the Torah by the name of both the father and mother – to help avoid being identified as a convert every time they have an aliyah to the Torah.

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<sup>9</sup> Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 58b

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 228:2

Yet another potential reason for choosing a different name is that many people finding their way to Judaism discover they have some Jewish ancestry several generations earlier. They may wish to restore a feeling of connection to their Jewish past by using the name of a Jewish ancestor.

### **Historical Precedent and Sources Permitting Other Names**

The Beit Yosef provides an alternative to using the name Avraham Avinu. The Beit Yosef on the Tur brings a teshuvah from the Mintz, R. Moses ben Isaac (15<sup>th</sup> century Ashkenaz) which says: מצאתי שצריך שיכתוב בלשון דלישתמע מיניה שהוא גר כגון שיכתוב הגר או בן אברהם אבינו "I found that one needs to write in language that implies that the person is a convert, for example write "*hager*," the convert, *or* son of Avraham Avinu (emphasis added)."<sup>13</sup> This teshuvah clearly says that even in a get it is sufficient to identify the person as a convert, without necessarily also naming them after Avraham Avinu.

That the concern with a convert's name is related to identifying the correct person is reaffirmed in a contemporary responsum from the Beit Din of the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem: ובגט גר כותב פלוני בן אברהם אבינו. ובב"ש ס"ק לט ואם לא כתב אבינו צריך לכתוב הגר, ואם לא כתב גר פסול דמשמע שהוא בן אברהם. "In a convert's get Ploni ben Avraham Avinu is written. And if Avraham Avinu is not written, 'the convert' needs to be written, for if 'the convert' is not written the get is *pasul*, as it could be implied that he was the son of [a person named] 'Abraham.'"<sup>14</sup> While the Beit Din of Jerusalem clearly anticipates that the convert is at least named "son of Abraham," the message is reaffirmed that the concern for naming converts "ben Avraham Avinu" is for identification purposes.

Tosefta Gittin 6:4 (cited by Tosafot to Bavli Gittin 34b) goes even further: it says גר ששינה שמו בשם הגוים כשר (וכן אתה אומר כשר) וכן אתה אומ' בגירה גיטין הבאין ממדינת הים אע"פ "a convert who changed his name to a gentile name [the get] is kosher, and thus you say regarding gittin that come from overseas, that even though the names are like gentile names, they are kosher, because Jews who are overseas have names like Gentile names."<sup>15</sup>

One could argue that even insisting on identification as a convert in official documents such as ketubbot and gittin is unnecessary since if a person is commonly known by a name, it is unlikely that he or she will be confused with someone with a similar name because the identifier marking the person as a convert is missing. We choose not to make that argument here because there is a greater halachic basis for identifying the person as a convert in official documents than there is for insisting on the name Avraham Avinu.

We do have records of converts using names other than ben/bat Avraham. In his teshuvah "On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children," Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner shows that using the name "ben/bat Avraham" is just a custom. R. Reisner writes:

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<sup>13</sup> Beit Yosef, Even HaEzer 129:20, quoting Moses ben Isaac

<sup>14</sup> Piskei Din Yerushalayim, Dinei Mamonot u'birurei Yahadut 5 page 201.

<sup>15</sup> Tosefta Gittin 6:4

“Yet even the standard custom is simply that, as evidenced by many historical converts who did not carry the name בן אברהם (son of Abraham). Thus, in *Yevamot* 101b the *amora* Rav Samuel son of Judah reports about himself: ואנא גר אנא (“I am a convert”), yet he is named בר יהודה (son of Judah), as Rashi explains it, after his natural father who converted together with him. Similarly, among many converts working in the early Jewish printing trades we find alongside Jacob son of Abraham and Moses son of Abraham the names of Jacob son of Gedalya, Moses son of Gedalya and Moses son of Jacob.”<sup>16</sup>

Rabbi Reisner concluded that adopted children who are converts, or children of a Jewish father, do not need to use ben/bat Avraham.<sup>17</sup>

Another interesting example of a convert using a name other than ben Avraham Avinu is found in a commentary in the Tosafot on the name of the *amora* Bar He He: בר הי הי להלל. יש מפרשים שגר היה והיינו בן אברהם ושרה שנתוסף ה"א בשמן “Bar He He to Hillel. There are those that explain he was a convert, and Abraham and Sarah added the letter he to their names...”<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Even if it is minhag, not strict halacha, one might argue that ever since R. Yosef Caro codified the use of the name Avraham Avinu in the Shulhan Arukh, the use of that name has become a longstanding tradition that we should be reluctant to change.

It is good to honor tradition. However, in this case, we have a clear understanding of why the tradition came about—it was to make sure that converts were accurately identified in documents. This need can be fulfilled in other ways, by simply identifying the person as a convert in any official documents.

The “default” position should continue to be that a convert will be named Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu v’Sarah Imanu, both because it is a long-standing tradition, and because it is good to encourage a connection our father Abraham, who is the spiritual father of us all. However, we need not strictly insist on it since there are alternative ways to make sure there is no confusion in identifying a convert in official documents.

## Psak Din

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<sup>16</sup> Avram Reisner, On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children (Proceedings of the CJLS 1986-1990, p. 168)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 174

<sup>18</sup> Tosafot Chagigah 9b

- 1) Converts should be encouraged to follow the tradition of using the patronymic Avraham Avinu as he is the spiritual father of us all.
- 2) If a convert chooses a different name, it is preferred that in any official documents, such as *ketubbot* or *gittin*, that the convert be identified as הגר or הגיורת in order that there will not be any possibility of confusion in identifying the person, as described in the teshuvah from the Mintz.
- 3) In accord with the Reisner responsum mentioned earlier, children who are converted and adopted into a Jewish family may certainly use the patronymic and matronymic of his adopted parents, and need not use בן־בת אברהם אבינו.<sup>19</sup> The same is the rule for people of patrilineal descent (children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother who underwent conversion). Such persons also do not need to be identified as הגר or הגיורת in official documents.
- 4) And certainly, בדיעבד, after the fact, if a convert had received a name other than Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu at the time of a halachic conversion, there is no requirement for the person to change his or her name, providing that he/she is identified as a convert in any official documents such as *ketubbot* or *gittin*.

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<sup>19</sup> Reisner, op. cit., p. 174.