

Dissenting opinion and explanation to Barry Leff's teshuvah on converts choosing their own patronym

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This paper was submitted in January 2011 as a dissent to "Name of a Convert" by Rabbi Barry Leff. Concurring and dissenting opinions are not official positions of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.

My assessment of the spoken and unspoken issues caused me to vote against the paper, despite Rabbi Leff's earnest and sensitive portrayal of the feelings and tensions involved. I wish to confirm several points of similarity and to note the aspects of difference, which others might also want to take into account when making decisions on this question for themselves, their families and communities.

My opposition to the teshuvah is both meta halakhic and part of a general approach to change. I am cautious about the general approach I often perceive from Conservative rabbis that we always have to respond to what "the people are doing" and often feel pressure to make them feel ok about it instead of accepting the obligation to address all the sides of an issue and to make balanced demands, even if at times that means "going against the grain."

Next, I am concerned with the growing rift between us and what is perceived to be "tradition" and the ability of other Jews to feel at ease in our services. On matters that relate to the boundaries of the Jewish people such as conversion, marriage, divorce etc., we should be especially careful since we have seen what turmoil it causes when movements have radically different standards of personal status and people-hood.

It seems the main reason for converts to choose another name is embarrassment, wanting to hide the fact that they are converts. In an ideal world it would be considered the highest badge of honor, not something of which to be shy or ashamed. I understand the concept of not reminding people of their roots, but feel in this case we need to work on the community norms, making sure being reminded of their roots is really a reminder of their courageous and dedicated choice to live as Jews. By allowing the exit alternative of covering it up, we are essentially admitting to converts that their past is a blemish, which we do not want to believe or say or affirm at all.

Admittedly, today there is very little practical reason to identify *gerim* by their ancestry. Arnold Goodman's teshuvah permitting a Kohen to marry a convert rested on overturning the assumption that converts held by lesser standards of premarital modesty. "Solemnizing a Marriage Between a Cohen and a Convert," *CJLS*, 1996. If we accept that the behaviors of a certain social group are similar across ethnic lines, there is no good reason to write a lower sum in the ketubah for a widow, divorcee or convert, and, unfortunately, no automatic assumption that a single Jewish woman is a virgin.

Therefore since the distinction in names (*giyorta* etc.) and corresponding sums still appears in our rabbis' manual, I understand that many of our colleagues do not use these distinctions.

However the principle that in choosing Judaism one is reborn with a different identity, even soul, is a powerful symbolic statement. I do accept Avram Reisner's teshuvah (Avram Israel Reisner, "On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children" CJLS, 1988) allowing adoptive parents to name their converted children with their own names as patronymic and matronymic, following the dictate in Talmud Megillah 13a that one who raises another person's children is a parent in every real sense of the word. I would also agree with Reisner and allow one whose father is Jewish to convert and choose only to refer to their father's Hebrew name. However when an older child or adult chooses Judaism, carrying on to their non Jewish parent or parents' names represents a conceptual problem (which, incidentally, Reisner chose not to address). Adopting a new Jewish name, in the limited ritual times when they are referred to by their technical Hebrew names, symbolizing receiving something and giving something up. They keep their names and family names in the vernacular and will often continue to identify themselves as products and members of their host culture, like Jewish born people often do. But by choosing to join the Jewish people, they symbolically are reborn into another extended family/ tribe/ community and give up those customs and beliefs of their childhood that conflict with Judaism. Taking on the identity of a descendant of Abraham and Sarah symbolically represents taking on a Jewish past as well as present and future,

as reflected in Maimonides's famous response to Obadiah, a convert, who queried whether he could recite the words, "Our God and God of our Fathers" [in the Amida].

Maimonides replied: "Abraham, our father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his way and the father of his disciples and of all the proselytes who adopt Judaism. Therefore you shall pray, 'Our God and God of our fathers,' because Abraham, peace be unto him, is your father.

(Franz Kobler, *A Treasury of Jewish Letters*, Letter of Maimonides p. 194ff cited in Goodman, p. 2).

This amazingly creative way of offering the Jew by choice Jewish roots is not something to be given up lightly.

In the question Rabbi Leff asks one *lechatchila* question and the other *bediavad*. Of course I agree that after the fact, "If a proselyte had a halakhically valid conversion, but the rabbi allowed a patronymic other than 'ben/ bat Avraham Avinu' that the person need not be renamed. But *lechatchila*, from the outset, I would urge that Jews by choice continue to take on the appellation 'ben/ bat Avraham Avinu veSarah Imenu' or at the very least 'ben/ bat Avraham veSarah.'

The one reason I might accept for concurring with Rabbi Leff is the principle which he left unstated of honoring one's parents, if this is the convert's motivation for wanting to choose their names as patronymics. However, since the parents will probably not be present often at Torah reading, which is the main time the name would be mentioned, this is a lesser concern. One important concession I would make is when reading the ketubah at the wedding of a convert, I would say his or her Hebrew name as written on the ketubah as ben/ bat Avraham Avinu veSarah Imenu" but in the vernacular translation (whether it is written on the ketubah or merely rendered as an oral translation) by their original family name, in order to make the parents feel valued and included in the ceremony and not further alienate them from Jewish customs or from their child and future in laws.

Inasmuch as Rabbi Leff's paper did receive some support at the committee, to ascertain the parallelism and inclusiveness that he surely intends, I would remind him to add Sarah our mother to the conclusion and psak on page 5.