

Conversion Panel

Introduction of the topic for discussion as presented to the panel:

"The subject of conversion is the practical expression of the issue of "who is a Jew?" The questions of who guards the gate to the Jewish nation, who can enter and under what conditions, circumscribe the boundaries of the Jewish nation. However, these boundaries are not accepted by the community as a whole and are a source of ongoing controversy: What are the conditions set forth to recognize an individual as Jewish?

Is conversion a religious or a national action? Who is authorized to conduct conversions? What are the implications of the fact that Israel grants citizenship to converts? Considering all of the above, is it possible to reach a wide-ranging agreement regarding the borders of the Jewish community or are we destined to carry on this difficult argument?"

Opening Presentation by Rabbi Gilah Dror:

The answer to the question of "Who is a Jew?" depends very much on our understanding of "What is Judaism?" and very basic to my understanding of Judaism are values that include "כבוד האדם" [human dignity] and "הגדר כבוד" [respect for the convert] and "הגדר אהבת" [love of the convert].

As a Conservative/Masorti congregational Rabbi who has served both in Israel and in the United States, I have had the pleasure and the privilege of accompanying many *gerim* [converts] on their journey as they become Jews by choice and have witnessed the joy and the gift of their contribution to our people.

For us, as Conservative/Masorti rabbis, the process of conversion includes a significant period of time spent in study of Torah and mitzvot and in being a part of Jewish community and life. It includes study of Jewish history and tradition, familiarity with Hebrew and with prayers and rituals. And, finally, *milah* (circumcision) for men and *tevilah* (ritual immersion) for both women and men and appearance before a *bet din* where a conversation exploring the journey that the potential convert has undertaken and including a discussion of the significance of accepting *עול מצוות*, the responsibility and the rewards associated with the commandments takes place.

The discussion of what ***exactly*** constitutes a valid conversion to Judaism dates back to our ancient sources. As far back as the Talmud, we see that rabbis had differing approaches to conversion, and even different ideas of what was required for a conversion to be considered valid. Also, as part of a dialogue in the Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 46a) we read: "If a prospective convert comes to undergo *conversion in the present era*, we say to him: "What did you see that made you come to seek conversion? Do you not know that ***nowadays*** the Jewish people are afflicted, oppressed, ...and that hardships come upon them? If he responds: 'I know and I am unworthy [of joining them]' we accept him immediately. And, we inform him of some

minor commandments and some major commandments.....Just as we inform him of the punishments for [transgressing] the commandments, we inform him of the rewards [for observance].....**We do not overwhelm him, nor are we strict with him.** Once he received, we circumcise him immediately..."

The repetition of phrases such as: "**in the present era**" and "**nowadays**" point clearly to the fact that in making decisions about acceptance of converts to Judaism, we should be taking into account **present day** realities, circumstances and hopes.

Since today, as throughout Jewish history, we Jews see our world and Jewish reality and aspirations with very different eyes, all of which are part of our tradition, we are not likely to arrive at one universally accepted halakhic approach today, any more than we have in the past.

The Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative/Masorti rabbis, has recently outlined its guidelines for conversion in a document entitled: *Petach HaOhel* [The entrance to the Tent]. The name of the document captures the spirit of "definition" and boundaries, along with a sense of openness, inclusiveness, and intimate connection. Jewish community is an *ohel* [tent] which is by definition defined in space, it has boundaries, but it also has a *petach* [an entrance]. *Petach HaOhel* evokes the image of *Avraham avinu* [Abraham, our patriarch] sitting at the *petach* waiting to welcome those who are traveling on the road; Indeed Abraham *ratz likratam* [ran toward them] with open arms, welcoming them to our "tent" which we define by our understanding of the requirements of halakha.

There are a number of examples of stories in the Talmud of rabbis who were so rigid in their views and far too quick to misjudge people's motivations and by doing so the ended up bringing more harm than good to our people. Take, for example, the Talmudic story (Shabbat 33b) about Shimon bar Yochai and his son who fled from the Romans and hid in a cave for 12 years just studying Torah and praying. When they emerged for the first time and saw people plowing their fields and simply living their lives, they immediately assumed that the people were indifference to Torah and to mitzvot. Their anger burned up all that they saw. A Divine voice sent them back to the cave for an additional 12 months of reflection and for further refinement of their study. The message of this story is that we must always be very careful and deeply thoughtful in the application of our Torah to life.

As for the situation in Israel - before the establishment of the State of Israel, each Jewish community was guided by its own spiritual leadership's understanding and interpretation of our heritage. But, with the establishment of the State, which we defined as both Jewish and democratic, we began in earnest to attempt to reach one global Jewish understanding of "who is a Jew" that would bind all Jews, at least in relation to laws of the State of Israel.

It can be argued, that Israel is an *insular* community unto itself, and as such, has every right to make its own decisions regarding the question of "who is a Jew". But, if Israel sees itself as a homeland for all the Jews of the world, and as a significant spiritual and national inspiration to

all Jews everywhere, then the discussion of "who is a Jew" as it relates to Israel and Israeli law, has to include the voices and the reality of world Jewry as well.

Practically speaking, Israel not only *presents* itself to world Jewry as such a center, but it also *relies* (and *rightly so*), on world Jewry and, to a very great extent, on American Jewry, for support in Israel's ongoing struggle to combat the ever growing delegitimization campaign which seeks to undermine the very existence of the State of Israel. The fact of the matter is that different religious streams play a vital role in Jewish life today and most of the Jews of the world are Conservative or Reform. Strong Zionist support abroad comes from the Conservative/Masorti Movement and from people who resonate with the vision of a Jewish and democratic Israel. And, the Conservative/Masorti Movement is the Jewish group that does the vast majority of conversions nowadays!

Lack of recognition of our converts, and those of the Reform Movement as well, as a part of the tapestry of Jewish life and community both in Israel and abroad is a recipe for disaster and for divisiveness among the Jewish people. It is a strategic threat to Israel just when Israel is facing such a strong campaign to delegitimize her very existence!

Political realities in Israel being what they are, perhaps the Jewish agency, which unites all the various Jewish constituencies around the world in discussion and action, should be the venue that houses conversion courts of all the streams under it's umbrella, and provides parallel options for marriage for those who convert through those courts. I am convinced that if we put our minds to it, we can be creative, and we can work together, even with our differences, for the sake of those who want to become Jewish, for the sake of our people, for the sake of Israel, and for the sake of God.