

# Welcoming Converts to the Jewish People

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The most famous biblical account of a convert is that of Ruth, who followed her mother-in-law Naomi to the land of Israel. Ruth's words are of transcendent beauty: "For whither you go I will go; and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth chose to become part of the people of Israel and to follow the God of Israel—to cast her destiny with the Jewish people.

Each year, thousands of people throughout the world strive to follow Ruth's example by converting to Judaism. They come from different races, religions, geographical locations, and sociological conditions.

Some are drawn to Judaism for intellectual, spiritual, and idealistic reasons. Some have discovered their Jewish ancestry and now wish to reconnect with their ancestral religion and people. Others wish to marry a Jewish spouse. Many converts live—or plan to live—in Israel and want to feel fully part of Jewish society in the Jewish State. Whatever their impetus, this group of people is remarkable.

They make the fateful decision to leave religions that count hundreds of millions of adherents to join the tiny Jewish people who constitute less than .05 percent of humanity. They leave "majority" status to cast their lot with a minority religion/people that is harassed constantly and in danger. They choose to enter a world, and bring children into a world, that is saturated with anti-Semitism.

The great medieval sage, Maimonides, once wrote a letter to a proselyte by the name of Obadya, praising the spiritual heroism of converts to Judaism. Sincere converts embrace the life of Torah and strive to come closer to God. To convert to Judaism, wrote Maimonides, was to demonstrate that one was "intelligent, understanding, and sharp-minded, upright, the student of Abraham our father who left his family and people to follow after God."<sup>1</sup>

“...the Messiah himself will be a descendant of a convert.”

Historically, Jews have been cautious in accepting converts. After all, our faith teaches that the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come. One does not have to be Jewish to be loved by God, to live a good life, or to enter heaven. To join the Jewish fold, then, requires a special sense of purpose and commitment; the convert's motivation must be sincere and spiritually compelling.

The non-Orthodox movements have become more interested in reaching out to potential converts and in welcoming them into the Jewish community. Within the Orthodox community, there is far less receptivity to this form of outreach. Yet, even within the Orthodox community, there is a growing recognition that the conversion phenomenon cannot be ignored. Because Orthodoxy insists that conversions be performed according to halakha (Jewish law) and that non-halakhic conversions are not valid, it is essential that Orthodox rabbinic and lay leadership take a more positive role in enabling sincere converts to enter the Jewish fold.

It is indeed regrettable that the Orthodox rabbinic establishment is actually moving in the opposite direction by making halakhic conversion more difficult. At a time when thousands of non-Jews are interested in conversion, the Orthodox rabbinate is essentially turning its back on all but a very few of these people. Although the Talmud, Rambam, and the *Shulhan*

*Arukh* offer a meaningful and accessible way for non-Jews to join the Jewish people, contemporary halakhic authorities have preferred to rely on the most stringent opinions of later halakhists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Recent pronouncements of Israel's Chief Rabbi Amar represent a serious step backward in relating to converts. Rabbi Amar has asked the Israeli government to rescind the law of return for converts, he has undermined the authority of conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis in the Diaspora, and he has espoused a restrictive, insensitive attitude toward converts. How huge is the gap between his statements and those of his great predecessor, Rabbi Benzion Uziel, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1938 to 1953! Rabbi Uziel offered a compelling, compassionate, and inclusive view, seeking to bring converts into Judaism in a loving and understanding way.<sup>2</sup>

The Rabbinical Council of America has established a *Geirut* (Conversion) Commission, with the basic intent of conforming to the demands of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. The seeming goal is to take conversion out of the hands of individual Orthodox rabbis and place it in the hands of regional *batei din* that will comply with the stringent views of the Chief Rabbinate. Even now, before this system is put into place, a number of cities in North America have instituted *batei din* for conversion. These *batei din* invariably have taken the restrictive view and convert very few people of those who would want halakhic conversion.

In addition to causing pain and frustration to the would-be converts, these policies do a vast injustice to the Jewish people. Many fine individuals are turned away from Judaism altogether or find non-halakhic ways to become Jewish. The conversion process in the Orthodox framework often drags on for years, causing would-be converts to lose heart. In the case of women in their child-bearing years, these inordinate delays also lead to the loss of children who would have been born to the Jewish people.

For the sake of Israel—the people and the State—it is to be hoped that the Orthodox rabbinate and laity will rally in support of an inclusive and compassionate approach to conversion. We must wholeheartedly reject the narrowing of halakhic options, not just for the sake of the would-be converts but also for the honor of halakha itself. The Jewish people as a whole, and Orthodox Jews in particular, need to welcome lovingly all those non-Jews who make the fateful decision to become Jewish. They are a great source of strength to us and should be embraced as our brothers and sisters. We must always remember that the Messiah himself will be a descendant of a convert.

Boaz blessed Ruth with words that are appropriate for all righteous proselytes: "May the Lord recompense your effort; may your reward be complete from the Lord, the God of Israel, under Whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12).

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1 *Iggrot ha-Rambam*, Vol I, ed. Yitzhak Sheilat, Ma'aliyot Publishers, Jerusalem, 5747, pp. 240-1.

2 For a discussion of Rabbi Uziel's opinions on conversion, see my book, *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel*, Jason Aronson Publishers, Northvale, 1999, Chapter 7.