



RAMBI - Index of Articles on Jewish Studies

[Quit](#)

[Basic Search](#)

[Advanced Search](#)

[Recent Search](#)

[Previous Searches](#)

[Basket](#)

Record View

[Full Record View](#) [Short Record View](#)

[Print](#) [Save/Email](#) [A](#)

▼ Record 17 of 29

[Previous Record](#) [Next Record](#)

Author [Abrams, Judith Zabarenko](#)
 Title [What characterizes the ideal ger-gioret? The politics of tradition's answer](#)
 In CCAR Journal 39,1 (1992) 29-34
 Subject [conversion, converts: Halakhah](#)
 Source (journal) [CCAR Journal; a Reform Jewish Quarterly. New York](#)
 ULS Link [Display ULS record for this journal](#)
 Record Number 000060407

[Previous Record](#) [Next Record](#)

What Characterizes the Ideal Ger/Gioret? The Politics of Tradition's Answer

Judith Abrams

One of the most rewarding tasks rabbis perform is teaching and counseling prospective converts to Judaism. Much time is spent not only on the study of Judaism, but on the intangibles of identification with, and commitment to, the Jewish people and faith. The three rabbinic texts which follow will show that these were important characteristics of an ideal ger/gioret in ancient days, as well. However, they will show us more than that. These texts can serve as a window on the world of the rabbis, for their definitions of the perfect ger/gioret reveal much about that world, and may also be useful in our own day and age.

The rabbinic texts under consideration all give new meanings to Ruth's statement of fealty, the credo of every ger/gioret:

Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16-17)

The rabbis examined every word in these verses for their significance and provided the dialogue that they imagined must have taken place to produce this statement. It is this imagined dialogue we will now consider.

The first dialogue is found in *Midrash Rabbah* on Ruth (1:22), a midrash composed in the Land of Israel, probably before the end of the 4th century. The rabbis imagined the following background for Ruth's statement:

JUDITH Z. ABRAMS is Rabbi of Congregation Beth El in Missouri City, TX and is the author of *The Talmud for Beginners*, vols. I and II (Jason Aronson)

And Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee." "...I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of another." When Naomi heard this, she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion, saying, "My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theaters and circuses," to which Ruth replied, "Whither thou goest, I will go." Naomi continued, "My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no *mezuzah*," to which she responded, "And where thou lodgest, I will lodge." "Thy people shall be my people" refers to the penalties and admonitions [of the Torah], "And thy god my god" to the other commandments of the Bible.

The Midrashic Evidence

Let us examine this midrash piece by piece before we look at its larger implications. First, Ruth testifies that she wants to be converted by Naomi. Naomi then begins to inform Ruth what it means to be a good Jew. There are certain things one must do beyond adopting the Jewish religion. For example, one must forego certain secular activities, such as attending Gentile theaters and circuses which had a deserved reputation for lewdness in those days. This is not merely a religious or legal prohibition. Rather, the rabbis are emphasizing that being a good Jew means being aware of a connection with the Jewish people, and how one's actions redound to the credit — or shame — of that group. Next, Naomi tells Ruth she must dwell in a house with a *mezuzah*. In other words, she must publicly identify herself as a Jew. Being a Jew is a public, as well as private, spiritual commitment. Naomi then equates peoplehood with following the prohibitions of the Torah (the Torah, note, not a *Beit Din*) and faith in God as following all the other commandments in Scripture.

The rabbis of the Land of Israel, who composed this midrash, seem to concentrate their definition of a good *ger/gioret*, and therefore, a good Jew, on basic core values of Judaism: identification with the Jewish people through following community norms, pride in Jewish identity and adherence to the Torah. We will contrast this definition with that of the Babylonian Talmud momentarily. However, let us first examine another interpretation of these verses from *Midrash Rabbah* on Ruth (1:23). It adds the following meanings to Ruth's statement:

WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE IDEAL GER/GIOMET?

Another interpretation: Whither thou goest I will go: to the tent of testimony, to Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, and the Permanent Temple.¹ And where thou lodgest I shall lodge. I shall lodge overnight with the sacrifices.² Thy people shall be my people, in that I will destroy all idolatry within me, and then thy God shall be my God, to pay me the reward of my labor.

Here, the primacy of the Land of Israel, and particularly the obligation to appear there during the pilgrimage festivals, is emphasized as a key mitzvah in Judaism.³ Ruth is portrayed as eagerly agreeing to go wherever the tent of Testimony — later to become the Temple — rests.⁴ One might say this definition of an ideal *ger/gioret* reflects a Zionist tendency. This second interpretation of Ruth's statement is unique in that it is not a dialogue, but rather an augmentation of Ruth's biblical statement. She, herself, agrees to destroy all idolatry within herself and trusts in God to reward her for her devotion.

Now let us turn to the commentary on Ruth's statement found in the Babylonian Talmud.⁵ Here, we see a subtly different emphasis given to Ruth's statement.

"We are forbidden" Naomi told her, "to move on Shabbat beyond the Shabbat boundaries!"
 "Whither thou goest, I will go," Ruth replied.
 "We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman."
 "Where thou lodgest I will lodge."
 "We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!"
 "Thy people shall be my people."
 "We are forbidden idolatry!"
 "And thy God my God."
 "Four modes of death were entrusted to the Beit Din!"
 "Where thou diest I will die."
 "Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beit Din."
 "And there will I be buried."

(Yevamot 47b)

This midrash is part of a discussion of the laws of conversion to Judaism. It follows the famous passage that details how a person wishing to convert to Judaism is to be addressed (Yevamot 47a):

Our rabbis taught: If at the present time a person wishes to convert to Judaism, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to convert to Judaism? Do you

not know that Israel at the present time is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," he is accepted immediately, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments.

Naomi is thus portrayed as following rabbinic procedure as she adjures Ruth regarding her wish to convert to Judaism. Here is where the Babylonian version differs from the version of this *drash* created in the Land of Israel. In essence, Naomi defines becoming a Jew as submitting to rabbinic authority. Ruth must obey the *Techum Shabbat*, which was ordained by the rabbis. She must forego any private meeting of man or woman, again a rabbinic edict.⁶ She must obey the commandments as outlined by the rabbis and submit to any punishment the *Beit Din* may mete out. This is quite a different emphasis from that of our first interpretations, which focused more on values, identity and loyalty to the Land of Israel. What could account for the different ways the two groups of rabbis saw the ideal *ger/gioret*?

Babylonia and the Land of Israel

To answer that question we must delve into the nature of Judaism in Babylonia and the Land of Israel. The rabbis in the Land of Israel were apparently able to exercise their authority over their community more easily than the rabbis in Babylonia. Both history and geography seem to have played a role in this development. "The rabbinic movement in Palestine had been a relatively confined, relatively centralized community, reflecting the concentration of the Jewish community at large in the Galilee during the Talmudic period."⁷ The rabbinic community of Babylonia, on the other hand, "was geographically far more diverse and ... coexisted with a larger Jewish community that continued, as far as we can tell, to be incompletely assimilated into the rabbinic form of Judaism."⁸ Cohen notes that Jewry's oldest diasporas, in Bavel, were "particularly jealous of their own distinctiveness."⁹

We see this difference in the relative power of these two groups of rabbis played out in their definitions of the ideal *ger/gioret*. The rabbis of Babylonia had to emphasize their right to rule in defining what makes a good *ger/gioret*. The rabbis of the Land of Israel, more secure in their authority, were able to make Jewish values and identity the core of their definition. Each group of rabbis' definitions of the ideal *ger/gioret* were apparently strongly influenced by their religio-political environments.

Which brings us to the question of our own day and time. Do the religio-political agendas of different groups of rabbis shape their definitions of the ideal *ger/gioret*, and thus the ideal Jew, today? Is the ideal *ger/gioret* one who follows rabbinic authority? Or is it one who identifies, both privately and publicly, with the Jewish people and faith? One may find support within the tradition for either definition, or both, secure in the knowledge that both are deemed legitimate and that it is allowable to mold one's view of the ideal *ger/gioret* in light of one's own religio-political situation.

NOTES

¹ These were the different places where the Sanctuary resided, until the Temple was permanently erected in Jerusalem.

² Deuteronomy 16:7, "You shall boil it [the Paschal offering] and eat it in the place which the Lord your God will choose, and the next morning you shall turn and go to your tents," was interpreted to mean that one had to lodge overnight in Jerusalem on the first night of the Festivals, after the Festival sacrifice had been offered.

³ Of course, these pilgrimages had economic benefits for those residing in the Land of Israel: visitors from other countries bought their sacrifices from among local animals and had to pay for lodgings, food and the like, thus enriching local merchants.

⁴ Ruth, the ancestress of King Solomon who built the Temple, could never actually have visited the Temple.

⁵ A form of this *drash* is contained in *Midrash Rabbah* Ruth (1:24), but I believe it is there borrowed from the Babylonian tradition. The passage is not used in its complete form, found in the *Bavli*, and what material there is that parallels the *Bavli's* version has been reedited and added to in order to form the *nechemta* for this section of the midrash (it constitutes the final words in this chapter).

⁶ The principle of *yichud*. Unless married, men and women were forbidden to remain together in privacy for any length of time. Note that both the Palestinian and Babylonian *drashot* emphasize chaste behavior between men and women, but that the Palestinian version frames it in terms of the secular, public sphere while the Babylonian version frames it in terms of a rabbinic precept.

⁷ Kraemer, David *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 119.

⁸ *Ibid.* Kraemer goes on to note. "Though rabbinic power in Babylonia continued to increase after the third century, it is evident that the rabbis' power to coerce other Jews remained limited ... Whatever the precise extent of their power, it was certainly necessary for the rabbis to secure their position by gaining the voluntary support of the Jewish community at large."

JUDITH Z. ABRAMS

* Cohen, Stuart A. *The Three Crowns: Structures of Communal Politics in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge, 1990), p. 149. Cohen also notes (p. 157) that another difference between the rabbis of the Land of Israel and those in Babylonia was the "increasing flexibility and lack of formalism [seen] in their [the Palestinian rabbis'] religious demands." This contrast between the views of the two groups of rabbis can also be seen in their different definitions of the ideal *ger/gioret*.