

INQUIRIES

1

Inquiry

QUESTIONS FROM ISRAEL
ON PROSELYTISM

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Dear Mr. Maoz:

I shall be glad to answer your letter of July 29, but it is not possible to give a simple and direct answer to each of your questions in the order you presented them. The reason this is difficult is that some of the questions require an explanation of the basic philosophy of the Reform movement and it would be misleading simply to say "yes" or "no." This situation applies especially to Question 1, to what extent does proselytism by a Reform rabbi meet the requirements of the Halacha as to: a) Circumcision (*Brith-Mila*); b) Baptism (*Tevila*); c) Acceptance of the commandments (*Kabalat Ol Mitzvoth*). If I answered simply that we do not a) or do b) or c), I would fail to explain the reason for our basic attitude in such matters.

The attitude of Reform Judaism on ceremonial commandments is that they are secondary to the moral and

doctrinal commandments. So our emphasis in proselytism is as follows: We do not *require* as absolute prerequisites either circumcision or *Tevila*, but lay great emphasis on the instructions. This should not surprise you, for it is possible according to the *Halacha* to conceive of a conversion without circumcision or the *Mikvah*, because this was the very subject of the debate in the Talmud (*Yevamoth* 46a) where some of the authorities believe that a proselyte is a full proselyte even without circumcision or *Mikvah*.

But the debate in the Talmud is not the real reason for our practice. It is our general philosophy that the ethical and philosophical meaning of Judaism is more essential than the ceremonial. Therefore we may correctly say that less emphasis is placed upon circumcision and *Mikvah* and more on the instruction. That is to say, it is not the mood of Reform to *abolish* the first two rituals. Some rabbis require it, some do not. In some countries the Reform movement requires it and in some countries it does not. In ceremonial matters we avoid strictness; but on the third element, namely, the instruction, we put our great emphasis. In this regard, if I may say so, our method of accepting proselytes is superior to that of Orthodoxy. In Orthodoxy instruction is comparatively minor, although it is indeed required. With us it is major. Most large congregations have a class of proselytes whose instruction will last a half year or even a whole year; and as you may well imagine, while we teach the various home ceremonies which the candidate will observe (such as Friday night lighting of the candles, etc.) our main emphasis in this long

instruction is on Jewish history, Jewish teachings, Jewish ethics. Forgive this long answer. A short answer would have been no answer at all.

Now with regard to your other questions, some I will answer simply "yes" or "no," but with others I will give you a specific case in which your question came up and how it was answered.

2. Proselytism for material purposes, etc.: We examine the candidate carefully to make sure that there are serious and worthy motives leading to the desire to become Jewish. However the difference between us and Orthodoxy is this: Theoretically, but not actually, in Orthodoxy if a person comes to be converted for the purpose of marrying a Jew, this is deemed *unworthy*, but with us, we consider that the desire to establish a home of unified spiritual mood is a worthy motive. We do not consider that if a candidate desires to be married to a Jew that this is unworthy at all. I am enclosing the relevant section, which I will mark "A" from the report of the Central Conference of American Rabbis on "Mixed Marriage and Intermarriage," *CCAR Yearbook* LVII, 1947. This also answers Question 3.

4. Attitude towards a proselyte and a Cohen: Reform Judaism has abolished all differences in religious standing between Cohanim, Leviim and other Jews. We are all deemed equal. Therefore Question 4 has no meaning for us.

5. A proselyte continuing with his non-Jewish spouse: We would consider this wrong for the reason indicated in a responsum which I wrote a few years

ago, which was published in the CCAR *Journal* and is found in *Current Reform Responsa*, p. 215 (see appendix B).

6. Could a minor proselyte without his parents? No; we would not break up a family. With the consent of his parents, certainly. This is already mentioned in the Talmud in *Ketuboth* 11a.

7. As to the status of a minor who did not proselytize while his parent did, we have made a new provision for children whose parents have become Jewish. The change is in accordance with our general principle: Since the ceremonials of circumcision and *Mikvah* are not as important to us as the instruction, we have decided that if such parents wish their child to be Jewish and enter him into our school, when he graduates (or is confirmed, usually around the age of fourteen) this is deemed with us to be full and official conversion of the child (see appendix C).

8. To answer this question I must first answer 13e: Is there supreme Halachic authority in Reform Judaism? No; the Central Conference of American Rabbis and our other organizations, such as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, etc., are voluntary organizations for consultation and mutual guidance. We have at the Conference a Responsa Committee of which I have the honor to be Chairman. My decisions in answer to questions are made according to what seems to me a balance between the attitude of the *Halacha* and the needs of modern times. The decisions are meant for guidance and not for governance. We respect the *Halacha* as an expression of Jewish

spiritual thought and feeling for two thousand years, and we follow it whenever we deem it possible to do so.

Now, therefore, the question of No. 8: The Conference is opposed to the marriage of a Jew with an unconverted non-Jew. Nevertheless there are a few rabbis who do officiate at such marriages. They are a small minority. Even this few do not officiate indiscriminately, but only under special circumstances as, for example, if the couple are both old people or if they had been married already in the civil courts and the husband is going overseas to serve in the Armed Forces, etc. So your question deals only with a few special cases and we have not yet come to a conclusion as to what the status of such children should be.

9. Should the laws of proselytism be changed according to the principle of *Hora'at Sha'ah*? We think so. That is really the mood of Reform Judaism, but the motive for change must be a serious one.

10. Could a non-Jew become a Jew other than by proselytization? No.

11. Differences in Israel and abroad: My *personal* judgment is that proselytization should be made easier in Israel because the whole environment is Jewish and it is almost inevitable that a home in which one member is a convert will be a truly Jewish home.

12. Is Judaism a nationality or a religion or both? The question would make more sense in eastern Europe than in the western democratic countries. In eastern Europe as, for example, in Soviet Russia, historic groups are considered separate nationalities. In

western democratic nations each person is an individual. A nation is composed of individuals of equal status. There is no separate grouping of nationalities.

Nevertheless our sense of historic unity and our brotherly bond with the state of Israel is deep and real. The best description of Judaism according to the feeling of most Reform Jews is that we are a religion and a family with all the intimate relationships which the word "family" implies. This is in accordance with the spirit of Jewish law. A convert is converted not merely to a religion, but to a real kinship. He or she may now marry a Jew and is always part of the Jewish family. In fact, the historic phrase that a convert is like a new-born child is an exact expression of somebody being reborn (*Yevamoth* 22a).

13a, b, b-1: In actual practice only a rabbi officiates, but according to Jewish law, if necessary a non-rabbi can conduct a conversion. I am appending a responsum that I gave on this question to the congregation in Bombay.

13c. The authority or *Semicha* of a Reform Rabbi: Orthodox rabbis have no legal authority either. The true *Semicha* ceased in the third century. What is called *Semicha* today in Orthodox life is really *Hatarat Hora'ah*, the right to teach. In other words, it is exactly equal in status to a graduation diploma. The Reform rabbi has the same rights as an Orthodox rabbi, the right conferred upon him by his education and his acceptance by a congregation. No rabbi in the world has any greater authority.

This should answer 13d, since there is no actual legal

authority anywhere in the rabbinate, Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. I would answer "yes" to d, but an Orthodox rabbi does not recognize the status of any other type of rabbi. 13e is already answered.

14. The relation of a proselyte to his former neighborhood and family: Technically speaking, they do not exist for him; but as the Talmud says, he would then justly complain that he has left a nobler sanctity for a lower one (*Yevamoth* 22a). Hence in many ways traditional law recognizes the relationship that remains between the proselyte and his family. Practically the problem comes up in questions of whether proselytes should say *Kaddish* for their Gentile fathers. This has been answered affirmatively in Jewish law. I enclose an answer I have given to this question (appendix E).

15a. I do not know of this occurring often, but it did occur at least once, and I am enclosing a responsum on the question. A proselyte attains an indelible allegiance to Judaism and can never throw it off again.

I do not know any statistics regarding 15b or c and 16. My own experience has been that in many cases, proselyte women especially become more earnestly Jewish than many of their Jewish-born friends.

17. Is conversion *Reshut* or *Mitzvah*? This is an open question in Jewish law, and as far as we are concerned in the Reform movement it is still debated among us. For example, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations a few years ago passed a resolution that we should go out and seek converts. In other words, it is a *Mitzvah*. The Central Conference of