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A CONVERT AND JEWISH BURIAL  
(Ruth's Vow)

## QUESTION:

Since Ruth said to Naomi, "Where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried," it is evident that Ruth felt that a vital element in her conversion was that, after her death, she be buried beside Naomi (i.e., in a Jewish cemetery). If that is so, why is Jewish burial not mentioned among the requirements put to a candidate for conversion? Should not a convert who promises loyalty to Jewish commandments be asked, also, to promise that he or she will be buried in a Jewish cemetery? (Asked by Rabbi Fredric Pomerantz, in behalf of a group of colleagues gathered at a meeting in Columbus, Ohio.)

## ANSWER:

THE PASSAGE in Ruth 1:17 in which Ruth describes her full conversion as involving the intention to be buried among Jews (or by the side of Naomi) has been used in the rabbinic literature as a basis for a number of conclusions regarding the laws and customs involved in the process of conversion. Therefore the question asked her is quite justified.

In fact, the earlier verses of the dialogue between Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are used as a comment on conversion. In verses 8, 10, and 11, Naomi

says three times, "Return to your homes, my daughters." From this threefold statement of Naomi, it is concluded (Ruth, *Rabba* II, 16) that we should not be too hasty to accept proselytes, but we should reject them three times at first (thus testing their resolution).

Now, as to Ruth's statement, "Where thou diest," etc., the comment in the Talmud and the Targum (b. *Yevamos* 47a and b) is rather a surprising one. Ruth's statement, "Where thou diest. .." is taken to be Ruth's response to a previous statement by Naomi; a statement not actually given in the Bible, but understood as having been said. Naomi says, in effect, that the law requires that a candidate for conversion be warned that he should be careful before he accepts Judaism; since once he accepts Judaism, he will be obligated to observe many commandments which he is not now obligated to observe, and if he violates them, he will (in the case of some of the commandments) be liable to the penalty of death. So the Targum and the Talmud (*Yevamos* 47b; also, Samuel de Useda in his commentary *Iggeres Shemuel* to the passage) say as follows: "There are sins for which the law ordains four types of death, stoning, hanging . . ." etc. This warning as to the penalties involved in the violation of the law is understood to have been given by Naomi to Ruth; to which Ruth now says, "I will risk these penalties of death." Then Naomi says further, "The Beth Din has two separate cemeteries for those who are thus condemned to death" (m. *Sanhedrin*, VI:5); to which Ruth says, "I am willing to take the chance that if I sin, there will I be buried."

Thus, the traditional comments on Ruth's statement are all more or less Aggadic. Her statement is not directly used as the Biblical source for an actual commandment, namely, that a convert must promise to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Actually, Ruth's statement could not possibly be used as the Biblical basis for any such commandment. When Ruth made her statement, she was still a Moabite Gentile. How, then, could her personal intention be made the foundation for a law in Judaism? If it had been Naomi who said, "You will be buried by my side," one might assume that Naomi, a Jewess, was revealing Jewish law. But no such conclusion can be derived from a statement, however lovable, of an unconverted Moabite Gentile.

Besides, is there actually, as a matter of fact, such a commandment, namely, that a person must promise to be buried in a Jewish cemetery? Of course, once a person is dead, no commandment is incumbent upon him any longer, since "the dead are free from the commandments" (b. *Shabbas* 30a). But it might be said that while a person is still alive, it is his duty to provide for his Jewish burial; but even that is not so. It is, of course, a *custom* for a person to provide for the future and buy a grave (see *Kol Bo Al Avelus*, p. 174) and that custom is based upon the statement of Rabbi Elazar in Leviticus *Rabba* 5:5. But this worthy custom is not a commandment. No Jew commits a sin if he fails to buy a grave or provide for his Jewish burial.

There is, of course, a commandment involved in providing burial. That commandment is not incumbent

upon the man himself, but upon his survivors. The *Mitzvah* of burying is a real *Mitzvah*, based on the verse, "Thou shalt bury" (Deuteronomy 21:23 and *Sanhedrin* 46b). In other words, Ruth, or any other convert, is not obligated to provide or to promise Jewish burial for herself, but her Jewish survivors *are* so in duty bound.

Furthermore, even if the "worthy custom" of providing for one's own burial were deemed to have attained the force of an actual *Mitzvah*, even so it should not be required specifically as a promise by the convert. The laws of what is to be required of a convert are mentioned in *Yevamos* 47 a and given in detail in *Yore Deah* 268:1 and 2. There are only two of the important commandments mentioned in order to caution the candidate of the risks he is taking if he violates them after his conversion. These two commandments refer to forbidden food and the Sabbath. Then the Talmud and the *Shulchan Aruch* specifically say: "We mention *some* of the commandments" (*Miktsas Mitzvos*) "and we do not go into detail as to the various commandments" (*Eyn M'dak'tkin*). Of course, the candidate must promise in general that he or she will obey *all* the commandments, but it is quite sufficient if only one or two crucial commandments are mentioned as illustrations. We are not in duty bound to go through the whole list.

To sum up: While the story of Ruth is used as Aggadic material dealing with the process of conversion, the actual *commandments* involved are not based upon it. Nor *could* they be based upon it because

Ruth spoke as a Gentile and her noble resolve could not be made the basis of Jewish law. As for the commandment itself (of Jewish burial) it is the duty of the *survivors* to provide it; but it is only a "worthy custom" for the person himself to make provision for it. Hence it could not be *required* of a proselyte. It is not required of born Jews. Finally, the laws as given in Talmud and *Shulchan Aruch* insist that we mention to the candidate that we only mention a few of the commandments and not all of them.

Of course, it is conceivable that at some future date increasing numbers of converts may ask to be buried in Christian cemeteries, in the lot of their Christian family. If this situation arises, it might lead us to cast doubt upon the sincerity of their conversion. But, actually, in twenty years I have received only one enquiry regarding such a request. So, for practical reasons as well as for the Halachic reasons mentioned above, we should not demand a promise of consenting to Jewish burial as a prerequisite to a conversion. We take for granted that a convert who is reborn as a Jewish child (*Yevamos* 22a) will receive Jewish burial.