

THE PROSELYTE AND HER GENTILE PARENTS

QUESTION:

A young woman has come to be converted. She intends to marry a Jewish young man. Her parents favor her conversion. However, the couple, when married, intend to move to Israel. Her parents are firmly opposed to that plan. Is the attitude of the parents likely to create enough difficulties to the marriage that the rabbi would be justified in refusing to convert the young woman? (Asked by Rabbi Mark Staitman, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.)

ANSWER:

The situation as described does indeed involve potential bitterness and family division. Whether or not these probabilities should concern the rabbi depends first of all on the question as to whether the acceptance of the proselyte in Judaism is a mandatory duty (as, for example, it is in Christianity). The consensus of opinion seems to be that we are not mandated (as Christians are) to go and seek proselytes, but that if a worthy person comes to be converted, it is our duty to convert him. (See the discussion in **New Reform Responsa**, p. 73.) Therefore, in this case, since there may be difficulties involved, some of which may possibly lead the young wife to leave her husband, or to return to her former religious affiliation under the influence of her parents, the rabbi is justified in his hesitation and this is the basis for the question.

Perhaps the best way to clarify the situation is to assume for the sake of discussion that the young woman has already been converted and has been married to the Jewish young man. Now, he wants her to move to Israel with him. We pass over the question for the moment of the

acceptability of a Reform conversion in Israel and assume that the form of this conversion will not be an impediment to their settlement there if that is their wish.

We were not told by the questioner what the young woman's own attitude is with regard to moving to Israel. We will assume that she is willing to do so. However, her parents are firmly opposed to the move. This sharp difference of opinion between them may, of course, intensify and embitter all involved and even endanger the marriage and the stability of the conversion. This may well be, but it need not necessarily be so. As long as the young bride can remain bound in her love to her parents, she may well keep communications open with them and perhaps ultimately establish some agreement. Therefore, the question now arises: How close, according to Jewish law, may a convert remain to her parents?

The bare statement of the law would seem to indicate that having been converted, she no longer has any relationship with the parents. The wording of the law is: A convert is a newborn child (Yebamot 22a). That is to say, like a newborn child, she has no past. What she was, what her relations were, no longer exist (incidentally, this must be the background of the expression in the Gospel: ("Unless you are like little children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.") Therefore, since by this bald statement of the law she no longer has any kinship with her Gentile parents, she could now be permitted to marry any of her former close kin, or would no longer have the duty which all children have to respect and honor her parents. Therefore, the law has been immediately modified for otherwise she could say, "Before I converted I could not marry those of close kinship to me but now do you permit it? Before I converted I was in duty bound to honor my parents,

and now do you say I am no longer obligated to do so?" It is because of these potential protests on the part of the convert that the law was modified at once and as it stands now she must still consider herself akin to her parents and must continue to honor them in every way (**Shulhan Arukh** Yoreh Deah 241:9).

Therefore, in spite of the present disagreement between her and her parents as to settling in Israel, she is still in duty bound by Jewish law to respect their opinion and keep in close relationship with them. Because of this continued family relationship, it may well be that the disagreements can be fully and peaceably discussed and eventually settled to everyone's satisfaction.

Let us say now that she had been willing to go to Israel but that after discussing the move with her parents, she has changed her mind and is now opposed to the move. Does her refusal violate Jewish law? Is she in duty bound by the **halakhah** to accompany her husband to Israel? The original law stated (**Mishnah** Ketubot, last chapter) is that a husband may compel a wife to move to Israel with him; and if she refuses, he may divorce her without even giving her the **ketubah** amount. But this law has been almost completely modified. The **Tosfot** (Ketubot 110b) says that the law does not apply any more since roads are now dangerous (this was said in the 11th century). Joseph Caro (**Shulhan Arukh**, Even Haezer 74:4f) compromises and says that if the journey to Palestine is short and safe, as from Alexandria, he may compel her to join him, otherwise not. The **Be-er Hetev** sums up the law as follows: "Since whether he can compel her or not is a subject of disagreement among many authorities, he no longer can compel her to accompany him." Therefore, we may conclude that if after they are married, she changes her mind because of her parents' influence and refuses to go to Israel,

she has committed no sin, and that from this point of view also, there is no objection to converting her. (See full discussion in **Contemporary Reform Responsa** p. 69 ff.)

To sum up: Since the bond and relationship with her parents will indeed continue, and since the point of issue, settling in Israel, no longer involves a religious mandate, it is possible that the matter of settling in Israel may be satisfactorily decided either way. There is therefore no strong objection to the conversion.

CIRCUMCISING CHILD OF AN APOSTATE MOTHER

QUESTION:

The Jewish wife in a mixed marriage has given birth to a baby boy. They want the child circumcised. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that the mother has converted to Christianity. Should this child be circumcised? (Asked by Rabbi Michael B. Berk, San Jose, California.)

ANSWER:

Since the mother was born Jewish and the child follows the status of the mother, the only question involved is the fact that the mother has converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Jewish law, she is still Jewish and her child is Jewish, and there is no reason why there should not be a **bent milah**

Now as to the question of the wife having converted to Christianity The easiest way to deal with the relevance of this statement is to consider the status of an apostate in Jewish law The specific question then becomes this: Has the woman's conversion to Christianity