

*CONVERTING A GENTILE MOTHER WHOSE
CHILDREN REMAIN CHRISTIAN*

A Gentile woman has been married to a Jew for twenty-five years. They have three grown-up children, all three Christian. The youngest, a son now fifteen, also Christian, still lives at home. The woman, active in our Sisterhood work, now wishes to convert to Judaism. Should she be accepted for training and conversion? (From Rabbi Seymour M. Rosen, Margate City, New Jersey.)

THE reason for asking the question is that her children, especially the son who lives at home, will remain Christian. But there is a previous question frequently asked in the legal literature: May a Gentile woman married to a Jew (of course by a non-Jewish marriage ceremony) be Jewishly married to the Jew she has lived with?

The Law in general objects to such a conversion and marriage. The first objection is based upon the "insincerity" of the conversion. A conversion must not be made if there is suspicion that the purpose of it is to marry a Jew. A conversion must be out of pure conviction of the truth of Judaism, and not for any ulterior purpose, such as marriage to a Jew. That is why the Orthodox rabbinate is generally reluctant to accept proselytes these days, since it is obvious that the purpose is marriage to a Jew. Here it is clear that her marriage to the Jew is a consideration in her petition for conversion; therefore the conversion is questionable. The question of sincerity is also in the mind of the questioner, since she has no objection to her son who lives with her remaining a Christian.

But there is a second objection which applies more specifically to the case in question. The Mishna (*Yevamos* II, 8) says that if a man is suspected of living with a Gentile woman, he may never marry her (i.e., if she be converted) because such a marriage would confirm the suspicion.

As to these objections to her conversion, first that it is in relation to marriage and not purely out of conviction, and second that it is a case of a Jew living with a Gentile, both of these objections have been losing their force in recent decisions. For example, Jehiel Weinberg, the authority of the Berlin Orthodox Hildersheimer Seminary (and the successor to David Hoffmann) decides in almost precisely the case here in question, to permit the conversion and Jewish marriage (cf. *Seridey Esh* III, 50). The reasons are practical: First you cannot really say that the purpose of the conversion is in order to marry a Jew, since she feels that she is already legally married to him; and secondly it is meaningless to discuss "suspicion" since it is an open, publicly known fact that they have been living together. So far as the two "classic" objections to this conversion, they need no longer be considered as applicable.

There remains only the last question, whether the fact that her fifteen year old son is to remain a Christian, is not a proof of insincerity on her part. As to this, it may be said that if her boy were still an infant and she, therefore, could make the decision as to his religion, it could be expected that she should raise the infant as a Jew. But a boy of fifteen must make his own decisions and she can hardly be responsible for them.

The fact that this boy and her other two children, both adults, are Christians, has no bearing on her conversion. According to Jewish law a convert is considered to be a

"new born child," i.e., (technically) no longer related to her family (*Yebamoth* 22a).

She may therefore be converted and remarried in a Jewish marriage. The remarriage, of course, should be a simple, private ceremony so as not to occasion any derogatory implications against the children.

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THE C.C.A.R. AND "ETHIOPIAN HEBREW" CONGREGATIONS

The struggle of the American Negro for justice and improved opportunities has raised again the question of the relationship of Judaism (through its organized bodies) to those Negro congregations in Harlem (and perhaps elsewhere) who declare themselves to be Jews. Some of the members of these congregations, or perhaps most of them, observe the Sabbath, the Jewish holidays, have their children circumcised and Bar Mitzvah. What is their status with regard to being Jews? (From Rabbi Morris N. Kertzer, Larchmont, New York, in behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee on Negro Jews of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.)

THE question is complicated, involving both theoretical and practical questions. First it must be made clear that Judaism is not a racial religion, neither in the smaller sense, meaning common descent, nor in the wider sense, meaning that it is confined to members of the white race. Of course, basically, Jews are of common descent. Nevertheless anyone who converts to Judaism is deemed to have become not only a