

## AN INCOMPLETE CONVERSION

## QUESTION:

A Gentile girl married a Jewish man. Immediately after the marriage, she began the process of conversion before a Reform rabbi. She took the course of instruction in a proselyte class conducted by the rabbi. However, she did not participate in the final ceremony of conversion because she became pregnant. After two children were born to her, she returned to participate in the final ceremony of conversion, and she and her family have been living a Jewish life. But since her children were born before the final ceremony of conversion, she is now greatly concerned whether her children are Jewish or *not*. What is the status of her children? (Asked by L.S.F.)

## ANSWER:

IF THE PROCESS of conversion had been carried out according to Orthodox law, it would seem evident that the children are not Jewish by birth since their mother was not completely converted when she gave birth to them. However, in Orthodox law, there is a strong tendency to protect the Jewish status of children. Thus, if a man comes and says that he had been converted in some other city, he is not believed until he brings proof. His conversion is in doubt, but he is not permitted to cast doubt on the

Jewishness of his children (*Yore Deah* 268:11). Also, while the ceremonies of circumcision for a man and the *mikvah* for a woman and a man are, of course, essential in the Orthodox procedure, nevertheless, there is considerable indication that these final ceremonies are not the most important. There are two elements in the conversion process which are the most heavily stressed, one, the understanding and the acceptance of the commandments, and two, retrospectively, the life which has been led by the proselyte after the conversion or the claimed conversion.

The special stress placed on learning and accepting the commandments can be seen from the fact that the ceremonial bathing may be considered valid if it is not done in the presence of three, but the study and the acceptance of the commandments must be in the presence of three (preferably learned) men. Special stress is put not only upon the commandments, but also upon the Jewishness of the life led by the convert or by one who claims he is a convert. If a Gentile claims to have been converted in some other city, he must bring proof of the fact, but if he is seen to be living a Jewish life, observing the commandments, he is to be considered a true proselyte (*Yore Deah* 268:10). So, too, in the case of a minor who is converted—he may repudiate the conversion when he grows up, but if he has been living a Jewish life, that fact is decisive and his conversion is permanent. As for the importance of the conversion *mikvah*, even that is diminished by the following: If a man or a woman takes a ritual bath for some other purpose than conversion, this bath may be accepted as valid for conversion, although that was not the original intention (*Yore Deah* 268:3).

Yet, although the greater emphasis in the entire conversion process is on the spiritual and ethical elements, it would, of course, be incorrect to say that the purely ceremonial procedures, being secondary, may be set aside. Even though Rabbi Eliezer doubts the necessity of the ritual bath and says that a man is a full proselyte if he does not take the ritual bath but is circumcised, and even though Rabbi Joshua deprecates the necessity of circumcision and says that a man is a full proselyte if he is bathed but not circumcised (*Yevamos* 46a), actually both ceremonies are required. Therefore in the case of this woman, even though she took the instruction and even though she kept a Jewish home, she would not be considered a proselyte, and her two children, therefore, would not be Jewish.

It must be added that although the child was conceived while she was still a Gentile, yet if she had continued in the conversion process and the child had been born after her conversion was complete, then the child would be Jewish. This would be true even if the father was a Gentile, for the child that she was carrying would be deemed to have been converted with her (*seen Modern Reform Responsa*, pp. 143 ff., and *Yore Deah* 268:6).

But all the above is theoretical in the case which we are discussing, since the conversion process was under the guidance of a Reform rabbi. Reform Judaism has made a drastic change in the conversion process. One might say that the stress placed on the intellectual and spiritual elements in the Orthodox conversion Halachah became decisive in the development of the Reform ritual. The two purely ceremonial rituals, circumcision and *mikvah*, are

disregarded. They are no longer required. But the intellectual and ethical elements are strengthened. The Reform process of conversion involves a much longer and more complete course of training than the Orthodox practice requires. As for the closing ceremony after the instruction (in Orthodoxy this means circumcision *and/ormikvah*), in Reform it is not much more than a sort of solemn commencement exercise, a giving of a certificate after the study course is completed.

Since, therefore, the woman took the instruction, which is the important part of the Reform conversion process, and since she considers herself Jewish and her home Jewish, her conversion in this case may well be considered complete, for the sake of her children, even if she did not participate in the formal closing ceremony until after the children were born. Her children, therefore, from the point of view of Reform are fully Jewish. Even if they were to be deemed not Jewish, which in this case would be contrary to the spirit of Reform Judaism, the CCAR has decided that such children, if given full instruction in our religious schools, need no further acts of ritual conversion.