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Can Converts to Judaism Say "God of Our Fathers"?

SHAYE J. D. COHEN

Converts to Judaism are Jews "in all respects." Like native Jews they are obligated to observe all the commandments of the Torah. To the extent that Jewish identity is based on belief and practice, a convert can become fully equal with the native, because a convert can affirm Jewish beliefs and observe Jewish practices. To the extent that Jewish identity is based on birth and lineage, however, a convert is not, and can never be, fully equal with the native, because a convert was born a non-Jew and has non-Jewish lineage. Unlike native Jews, converts have non-Jewish fathers and mothers, and this fact cannot be effaced by conversion. Religion (or "culture") can be changed, but birth cannot. Thus, gentiles can change their religion, convert to Judaism, and join the community of Israel, but within that community they remain legally and socially distinct, because they are not absolutely equal with natives under the law and because their foreign extraction prevents them from becoming true "insiders."

The Mishnah and the Yerushalmi

These principles are illustrated by Mishnah Bikkurim 1:4-5:4:

A. The (following people) bring (first fruits to the Temple) but do not recite (the declaration prescribed by Deuteronomy 26:3-11):
B. The convert brings but does not recite.
C. Because he cannot say "... (the land) which God has sworn to our fathers to give us" (Deuteronomy 26:3).
D. But if his mother was of Israel, he brings and recites.
E. And when he prays by himself, he says, "God of the fathers of Israel."

1. B. Yer. 47b.
4. For the manuscript evidence, see Seder Zera'im, ed. Nissan Sacks (Jerusalem: Institute of the Complete Israeli Talmud, 1975). This edition also provides a rich collection of medieval testimonia which I exploit below.

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F. And when he is in synagogue (with the community), he says, "God of your fathers."

G. But if his mother was of Israel, he says, "God of our fathers."

H. R. Eliezer b. Jacob says,

J. A woman who is the daughter of converts may not marry into the priesthood,

K. unless her mother is of Israel.

L. (This rule applies equally to) converts and emancipated slaves;

M. even until ten generations, (the daughters of converts or emancipated slaves may not marry into the priesthood) unless their mother is of Israel.

N. (The Mishnah lists other categories of people who bring first fruits but do not recite the declaration.)

This Mishnah treats three areas in which converts suffer legal disability because of their non-Jewish lineage: [A-D] when bringing their first fruits to the Temple, converts may not recite the declaration prescribed by Deuteronomy; [E-G] converts may not say "God of our fathers" in their prayers; and [H-M] the daughter of converts may not be married to a priest. In all three areas the legal disability disappears if the convert has a native Jewish mother.

This Mishnah assumes that converts are Jews. Like other Jews, they are obligated to bring first fruits to the Temple [B] and to pray, whether by themselves [E] or in synagogue with the community [F]. They are members of the matrimonial congregation of Israel [J], that is, they may marry and be married to other Jews. But the Mishnah’s validation of conversion is offset by its assertion of the legal inferiority of the convert. Other Jews recite the Deuteronomic declaration upon presenting their first fruits, but converts may not. Other Jews say "God of

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5. How does a convert have a Jewish mother? The simplest explanation is that the Mishnah is referring to the offspring of a convert father and a native Jewish mother (or, a ferluor, the offspring of a native Jewish father and a convert mother). The word convert (ger) in the Mishnah refers either to a gentile who converts to Judaism or to a descendant of a convert. In several aspects of Mishnaic law, "convert" status is inherited from the father, just as Priestly (kehut), Levitical, and Israelite status is inherited from the father. Thus, according to our Mishnah (clause [J]), the offspring of two convert parents inherits the status of a convert and suffers the same legal disabilities as the parents, while the offspring of a convert and a native Jewish parent (a native Jewish mother, or a ferluor, a native Jewish father) does not inherit the status or legal disability of the convert parent. The Yrakhel suggests that the Mishnah is addressing the case of the son of a Jewish mother and a gentile father, but this interpretation is unlikely; such a son certainly can say "our fathers," but he is not a convert in any sense, and the Mishnah is speaking of converts. For full discussion, see my article, "Can a Convert to Judaism have a Jewish Mother?" in Torah ve-Hokhmah: Studies in Halakhah, Kabbalah and Philosophy . . . in Honor of Arthur Hymen (forthcoming). The offspring of a gentile mother and a Jewish father is a gentile by birth; if the offspring converts, he would not be able to say "our fathers," because no legal paternity exists between him and his biological father. See my article, "The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law," Association of Jewish Studies Review 10.1 (1985): 19-55 (with bibliography), and "The Matrilineal Principle in Historical Perspective," JUDAISM 34.1 (Winter 1985): 5-13.
our fathers" in their prayers, but converts may not. Other Jews may give their daughters in marriage to priests, but converts may not.

According to this Mishnah, the legal inferiority of converts derives from their lack of Jewish "fathers." Because converts lack Jewish fathers they cannot say "I acknowledge this day . . . that I have entered the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us" (Deuteronomy 26:3) — the God of their fathers is not the God of our fathers! Because converts lack Jewish fathers they cannot pray to the "God of our Fathers" — the God of their fathers is not the God of our fathers! The daughter of converts lacks Jewish ancestry ("fathers") and therefore may not be married to a priest.

At the conclusion of its discussion of this Mishnah, the Yerushalmi (that is, the Palestinian Talmud) cites the following:

A. It was taught in the name of R. Judah:
   B. A first-generation convert brings (first-fruits to the Temple) and recites (the declaration prescribed by Deuteronomy).
   C. What is the reason? (Because God said to Abraham) for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:5). In the past you were a father to Aram, but now, henceforth, you are a father to all the nations.
   D. R. Joshua, b. Levi says:
   E. The law follows R. Judah.
   F. A case came before R. Abbahu and he rendered a decision according to R. Judah.

R. Judah [A-B] explicitly rejects the Mishnah. Like other Jews, converts are obligated to bring first fruits to the Temple and to recite the declaration. Converts can truthfully utter the Deuteronomic reference to our fathers because Abraham is a father to all the nations, that is, Abraham is a father to all gentiles who convert to Judaism.8 R. Judah accepts the Mishnah's logic that all those who recite the Deuteronomic declaration must have Jewish fathers, but denies the Mishnah's assumption that converts fail to meet this criterion. According to R. Judah, converts do, in fact, have Jewish fathers — their Jewish father is Abraham [C]. R. Joshua b. Levi declares R. Judah correct and the Mishnah wrong [D-E]. The anonymous editor of the discussion supports this view by citing a story about R. Abbahu [F]. In the mid-third century CE, when R. Abbahu lived, there was no Temple in Jerusalem, and no one brought first fruits and recited the declaration. If R. Abbahu decided a case in accordance with the statements of R. Judah, it must

8. Having a mother who is "of Israel" presumably means the likelihood of having Jewish "fathers" as well. In our egalitarian and gender-conscious age, we would prefer to translate and as "ancestors" rather than "fathers," and utenu as "our ancestors" rather than "our fathers," but the writers of the Mishnah and their successors meant "fathers."
7. Y. Bikkurim 1:4, 6a Venice, 3a-b Vilna.
8. The source for this idea is Tosfia Brokat 1:12, p. 5, ed. Lieberman (cited in B. Brokat 13a), and numerous midrashim on Genesis 12:4.
have been a case involving the right of a convert to say "God of our fathers" while praying. R. Abbahu ruled that the convert may, indeed, say "God of our fathers," and adduced R. Judah for support. Thus, R. Abbahu extended R. Judah's ruling from first fruits to prayer.

At issue in this debate between the Mishnah and the Yerushalmi is the nature of the claim to possess Jewish "fathers." For the Mishnah, the claim is historical and real. Native Jews, who descend from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, have Jewish fathers. Converts, however, do not. The fact that a gentile has changed religious allegiance and now observes the commandments of the Torah does not change the fact that a convert does not have Jewish ancestry. Converts are members of the Jewish community but their unconverted ancestors are not. A convert's past cannot be rewritten or wished away. Therefore, the Mishnah concludes, converts may not recite liturgical references to "our fathers" and are excluded by marriage laws that require native extraction.

For the Yerushalmi, by contrast, the claim to possess Jewish "fathers" is metaphorical and mythic. Converts do not really have Jewish ancestry, but they have a Jewish father in Abraham, the first convert and first Jew. By abandoning false gods and recognizing the true God, they are following in the ways of Abraham. Abraham is the archetype of "father" for all converts, not just from Aram but from all nations. Therefore, the Yerushalmi concludes, converts are not excluded by liturgical references to "our fathers."

While the Yerushalmi rejects the Mishnah, the Bavli (the Babylonian Talmud) accepts it. There is no Bavli tractate on Bikkurim, but, in another context, in another tractate, the Bavli cites our Mishnah as authoritative and offers no reason or source to reverse it. Thus, the debate between the Mishnah and the Yerushalmi is also a debate between the Bavli and the Yerushalmi. There were a fair number of converts in rabbinic circles in antiquity, in both the land of Israel and Babylonia, so that the rabbinic debates about the status of converts may well reflect bona fide differences of opinion concerning the status of real people. This plausible assumption cannot, however, be confirmed. The case cited by the Yerushalmi in [P] is the only extant rabbinic evidence showing how converts were instructed to behave — and, presumably, how they actually behaved — when praying. Otherwise, the rulings of the Mishnah, the discussion of the Yerushalmi, and the citation of the Mishnah by the Bavli, are prescriptive rather than descriptive. They do not tell us how real people were behaving in real life.

The Halakhot Gedolot, a compendium of rabbinic law written in Ba-

9. B. Mekhor 19a (citing the paragraph on the Deuteronomic declaration concerning first fruits).
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In the ninth century, is the first post-Talmudic work to cite the Mishnah under discussion here. It is striking, however, that this citation does not occur in the section of the work dealing with converts and the laws of conversion, but in a chapter containing miscellaneous rules about the Temple and Temple rituals. This author, then, under the influence of the Bavli, accepts the Mishnah and ignores the Yerushalmi, but apparently does not realize that the ruling concerning "our fathers" affects converts even in the absence of the Temple. How converts behaved in ninth century Babylonia — and they probably were very few — we do not know.

The Twelfth Century and Beyond

The debate between the Yerushalmi and the Mishnah was revived in the latter part of the twelfth century. Here are excerpts from three reports of actual cases in which a convert's right to say "our fathers" was challenged. The reports derive from three of the major Jewish communities of the time: Egypt, Germany, and northern France.

The fullest and most detailed report is a letter of Maimonides (1135-1204) to Obadiah the Convert. Maimonides wrote the letter from Cairo, but Obadiah's origins and location are unknown.

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say, in the blessing and prayers you offer alone or in the congregation: "Our God and God of our fathers." — Who has sanctified us through his commandments and con-

11. Halakhah Gedolat, Hilkhot Menahot, vol. 3, p. 150, ed. Hildesheimer (1888). The citation would seem to belong in Hilkhat Hilat Grinim, vol. 1, pp. 216-223. Some Ashkenazic sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries claim that the authorities of the previous generations (seventh to the eleventh centuries) followed the position of the Yerushalmi. R. Asher, in his commentary on Mishnah Bikkurim, the anonymous author of the Responta and Decisions of the Sages of Germany and France, ed. Kugler (see note 17 below), and R. Heschel b. Jacob of Mogelsburg (see note 23 below) claim that the Sefer Vehizhir endorses the Yerushalmi; the Rokeah, cited below in note 23, says that "all the Geonim" decided in accordance with R. Judah in the Yerushalmi. I do not know how to evaluate these claims. The extant portion of Sefer Vehizhir nowhere mentions the view of either the Yerushalmi or the Mishnah (see Freiman's edition, 1873, p. vi). The Rokeah does not name any of the Geonim who allegedly followed the Yerushalmi, and if the word "Geonim" has its usual meaning of "masters of the Talmudic academies in Babylonia," the claim seems inherently implausible (why would Babylonian Geonim follow the Yerushalmi rather than the Bavli?). If the word means simply "rabbis of olden times," the claim is too vague to be helpful.

12. In ninth century Babylonia, virtually all converts will have been emancipated slaves to whom special rules applied; see Ben Zion Wacholder, "The Halakhah and the Fratriciding of Slaves During the Geonic Era," Historia Judaica 18 (1956): 89-106.


14. Here and below, Twersky (following Kohler) translates "Our God" and "God of our
manded us," "Who has separated us," "Who has chosen us," "You who have given to our fathers to inherit (a pleasant, good, and spacious land),"15 "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt," "You who have worked miracles to our fathers," and more of this kind.

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessings and prayers, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in congregation. The reason for this is that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God ... Ever since then, whoever converts and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father . . . .

In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus, Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all converts who adopt Judaism.

Therefore, you shall pray, "Our God and God of our fathers," because Abraham, peace be with him, is your father. And you shall say, "You who have given to our fathers to inherit (a pleasant, good, and spacious land)," for the land has been given to Abraham . . . As to the words, "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt" or "You have done miracles to our fathers" — these you may change, if you will, and say, "You who have brought Israel out of the land of Egypt" and "You who have done miracles to Israel." If, however, you do not change them, it is no transgression, because since you have come under the wings of the Divine presence and confessed the Lord, no difference exists between you and us, and all miracles done to us have been done, as it were, to us and to you . . . . There is no difference whatever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, "Who has chosen us," "Who has given us (his Torah)," "Who has taken us for his own," and "Who has separated us": for the Creator, may He be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah . . .

The letter concludes with a citation of the Yerushalmi to prove that a convert may say "God of our fathers."

The second report is transmitted by R. Eliezer b. Joel Halevi (known as the Raviyah, c.1140-c.1225) in the name of his father. The incident that concerns us, relating to a convert, took place in Würzburg.16

A spirit came forth from God and rested on the heart of this man, fathers." In this translation, the convert's right to say "Our God" is as much an issue as his right to say "God of our fathers." I think this translation is wrong because I see no evidence that converts were ever prohibited from saying "our God." The word "our God" is simply the first part of the phrase "our God and God of our fathers."

15. Here and below, this phrase is mistranslated by Twersky (following Kohler). It is a quotation from the second paragraph of the Grace after Meals. The Maimonidean version differs slightly from the one in use today; see "The Oxford Manuscript of Maimonides' Book of Prayer" in Daniel Goldschmidt, On Jewish Liturgy: Essays on Prayer and Religious Poetry (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), pp. 215-216.

R. Abraham b. Abraham our Father. And when the spirit rested on him, he drew near to the work of God to seek out the Lord and to study scripture and the holy language. He dwelt with us for a long time, and was meek and upright, "a dweller of tents." One day I, who am signed below, found him sitting and copying a pentateuch from a book belonging to priests and unfit for use. I said to him, "What is this that you have?" He replied and said to me, "I know the language of priests but I do not know the holy language. It is the book of the priests is like a commentary (on scripture) for me. Furthermore, the sages of Speyer lent me books belonging to priests in order to copy them, and have not interfered with me. If this is wrong in your eyes, I shall cease and desist." I replied to him, "Know that this action in my opinion is wrong." (R. Joel discusses his decision and concludes that it was wrong, because in reality the convert's action was not prohibited.)

Furthermore, he told me that in Würzburg he was prevented from praying in the place of the representative of the congregation (that is, he was prevented from serving as a cantor). It seems to me that they (who prevented him) went diving in mighty waters and brought up clay in their hands, for even though we learn in the Mishnah (here R. Joel quotes the Mishnah cited above) . . . nevertheless in the Yerushalmi it states (here R. Joel quotes the Yerushalmi cited above) . . . and the law follows the Yerushalmi. And he (the convert R. Abraham) prevailed upon me to make my opinion public, and this I did ....

The third report comes from the school of the Tosafists, glossators on the Talmud who lived in northern France (and Germany) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The authorities mentioned here are R. Jacob of Ramerupt (known as Rabbenu Tam, 1100-c.1171) and his nephew, R. Isaac of Dampierre.17

It once happened that a convert was leading the assembled diners in the grace after meals, and they began to complain against him; how could he be say, "You who have given to our fathers to inherit a pleasant, good, and spacious land?" (The case came before Rabbenu Tam.) Rabbenu Tam responded (that the convert may not lead the grace after meals): we learn in tractate Bikkurim (here R. Tam quotes the Mishnah cited above) . . . But R. Isaac disagrees with this, and adduces proof from the Yerushalmi (here R. Isaac quotes the Yerushalmi cited above) . . . Converts at this time are accustomed to say "God of our fathers" in accordance with R. Judah (in the Yerushalmi) . . . (Rabbenu Tam and R. Isaac proceed to debate the correct interpretation of the Yerushalmi.)

These reports show that, in certain circles throughout the medieval Jewish world, the liturgical disabilities imposed on the convert by the Mishnah not only remained in force but had been extended and strengthened. In Egypt, advocates of the Mishnah sought to prohibit a convert from saying the phrase "our fathers" wherever it appears in the liturgy. In Germany and France advocates of the Mishnah pro-

17. Responsa and Decisions of the Sages of Germany and France, ed. Efraim Kupfer (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1973), pp. 101-105, no. 60. This is the fullest version of the debate between R. Tam and R. Isaac; for other versions see Tosafot Iyun Avot 81a n. 11muri, and the commentary of R. Asher on M. Bikkurim 1:4.

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hibited a convert from leading the daily prayer (Germany) and the Grace after Meals (France), because converts and native Jews cannot use the same wording when reciting these texts. In Egypt, advocates of the Mishnah went even further: since converts cannot say "our fathers," they should also abstain from all liturgical first-person plural references to the sacred history and Divine election of Israel.

In response to these developments, Maimonides, R. Joel Halevi, and R. Isaac rejected not only the expansions of the Mishnaic ruling but also the Mishnaic ruling itself. All three appealed for support to the Yerushalmi cited above, even though, in normal cases, a Mishnah endorsed by the Rashi would clearly outweigh a counter-position taken by the Yerushalmi. Maimonides' statement, the fullest of the three, reveals that the debate does not turn on the technical question of whether a passage of the Yerushalmi can overturn a Mishnah. The heart of the matter is the status of the convert. The Mishnaic position, especially as extended by its medieval advocates, does not allow a convert to attain a position of normalcy within the Jewish community. Every time the congregation turns to prayer, every time Jews eat together and prepare to recite the Grace after Meals, the convert is reminded of his foreign extraction and anomalous status. For Maimonides this was intolerable. "Since you have come under the wings of the Divine presence and confessed the Lord, no difference exists between you and us." We may presume that R. Joel Halevi and R. Isaac were motivated by similar sentiments.

These reports also show clearly that, in the latter part of the twelfth century, the debate between the Mishnah and the Yerushalmi had practical consequences. The eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed a perceptible rise in the number of converts, perhaps rivaling or surpassing the number in the Talmudic period. Statistics and percentages obviously are unattainable, but the extant evidence leaves the impression that the number of converts was not small, and that encounters between native Jews and converts would not have been unusual either in western Europe or in Egypt. As a result, the status of converts became a live

18. Or, as some jurists explained in the case of the Grace after Meals, because their obligation is of a lower degree than that of native Jews. The convert encountered by R. Joel Halevi clearly had some difficulty with Hebrew, and perhaps this fact, which simply highlighted his foreignness, contributed to the decision of the community of Wurzburg not to allow him to officiate as a cantor.

19. It is striking, however, that even Maimonides recommended that converts not say "our fathers" when the phrase referred to the sacred history of Israel: "As in the words 'You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt' or 'You have done miracles to our fathers'—these you may change, if you will, and say, 'You who have brought Israel out of the land of Egypt' and 'You who have done miracles to Israel.' In other words, in spite of his protestations, even Maimonides cannot quite convince himself that converts really are like natives.

20. Ben Zion Wacholder, "Cases of Proselytizing in the Tosafist Responsa," Jewish Quar-
issue for many communities of the period. Some communal authorities appealed to the Mishnah to justify their sense that converts, whose education and background were so different from those of native Jews, were not readily assimilable into the community. In contrast, others appealed to the Yerushalmi to justify their sense that converts, who had endured hardship and danger to join the Jewish community, should be treated like natives from the moment of their conversion. 21

Maimonides' immense authority and prestige guaranteed the victory of his position among Sephardim (the Jews of Spain and their descendants). 22 Among Ashkenazim (the Jews of central and eastern Europe), however, the question was debated for some time: the authority and prestige of R. Joel Halevi and R. Isaac were more than balanced by the authority and prestige of Rabbeinu Tam. 23 By the sixteenth century, Cohn (1981); 209-215 (who discusses the question of "our fathers" on p. 302), and Norman Golb, Jewish Proletarianism: A Phenomenon in the Religious History of Early Medieval Europe (University of Cincinnati Judaic Studies Program, Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture, 1987).

21. Ben Zion Wacholder argues that Sephardic authorities were more rigorous than Ashkenazim in testing the sincerity of potential converts, but that, in return, they treated converts more as equals than the Ashkenazim did. See his article, "Protesting in the Classical Halakhah," Historia Judaica 20 (1988): 77-90, esp. 90-91, where he discusses our debate. This distinction does not hold up, however, as there are too many exceptions to the proposed pattern. R. Isaac is no less Ashkenazic than Rabbeinu Tam; R. Judah Halevi, who, in his Kuzari treats converts as lower-level Jews, is no less Sephardic than Maimonides. Those authorities who, like Judah Halevi, have an ethnic conception of Judaism, will inevitably assign to converts a lower place than those authorities who, like Maimonides, have a philosophical conception. I do not know the ideological underpinnings of the debate between Rabbeinu Tam and R. Isaac.

22. Maimonides is cited, or is followed rather closely, by the following Spanish scholars: Nahmanides (known as the Ramban, 1194-c.1270) in his novellae on Bava Batra 81a; R. Solomon b. Adret (known as the Rashba, 1235-1310), a disciple of Nahmanides, in his novellae on Bava Batra 81a (whome endorsement of Maimonides is much more muted than that of his teacher); R. Yom Tov b. Abraham ibn Ashvili (known as the Riba, first half of the fourteenth century, a disciple of the Rashba), in his novellae on Makkot 19a; R. Eshkol HaRambh (born c. 1280), Kafos uFeren, c. 42, pp. 556-567, ed. Munich; R. Nissim b. Reuben of Gerona (known as the Ram, d. 1380), in his novellae on Bava Batra 81a; R. Joseph HaShviva (first half of the fifteenth century, Nimukei Yosef on Bava Batra 81a) in the Nimukei Yosef on Nedarin 31a. R. Joseph explains that converts are "children of Abraham," ben Abraham, but are not the "seed of Abraham," zera Avraham.

In addition, two Provençal scholars follow a Maimonidean position: R. Abraham b. Nathan of Lunel (flourished c. 1200), Sefer HaMa'asseq, Hilkhot Se'udah 17, and R. Aaron Halevi of Lunel (flourished c. 1300), Orhot Hayyim, part 1, Hilkhot Ye'alah 18. The Riba and R. Abraham of Lunel confirm R. Isaac's statement that converts are accustomed to recite "God of our fathers."

23. R. Joel Halevi is followed by R. Morelelhai b. Illele (c. 1240-1298), Megillah, chapter 1, sect. 786. Rabbeinu Tam's view is endorsed by R. Isaac b. Moses of Vienna (c.1150-c.1250), Or Zera'ah, part 1, sect. 107, p. 20a, and by R. Meir b. Baruh of Rothenburg (known as the Maharal, d. 1295) in his responsum, ed. Moses Bloch (Berlin, 1901), p. 66, or. 551; cf., too, Me'ull Zahiram on Deuteronomy 26:5 (ed. Sasson, p. 512). Rabbeinu Tam may have been following the view of his grandfather, R. Solomon
tury, however, the position of Maimonides, R. Joel Halevi, and R. Isaac had triumphed. In the Shulhan Arukh, the code of Jewish law that would become canonical for virtually all Jews, Ashkenazim and Sefardim alike, the Sefardic R. Joseph Karo (1488-1575) follows Maimonides, and his Ashkenazic glossator, R. Moses Isserles (c.1525-1572), does not demur. Converts may say “God of our fathers,” and may lead the congregation in prayer and grace after meals.24

Concluding Reflections

The integration of converts into Jewish society is no less a challenge for the Jewish community of contemporary America than it was for the Jewish communities of twelfth century Europe and Egypt. The major obstacle to their integration is the fact that we Jews see ourselves as members of an ethnus or nation or tribe, a people linked by descent from a common set of ancestors. This self-definition forms the basis of the ruling of the Mishnah that converts may not say “our fathers.” Against the Mishnah, we moderns readily concede that this self-definition is mythic rather than historical, because we know that the Jews of the world do not constitute a single gene pool or racial type. The power of the ethnic self-definition is so great, however, based as it is on the narratives of the Tanakh, that we readily yield to self-delusion: we like to pretend that we are a single people united by ancestry and history. And because their ancestry is not our ancestry, and their history is not our history, converts remain liminal, on the margins of the community but not securely within it.

We do not need the Yerushalmi and the Yerushalmi’s medieval advocates to convince us that converts should be allowed to say “God of our fathers.” All of us, politically correct or not, traditionally observant or not, sense the injustice and invidiousness of the Mishnaic position. But we need the Yerushalmi to give us an antidote to our ingrained ethnic self-definition. Abraham, the first Jew, was also the first convert. Abraham, our father, is the father of all converts, in that he is the father of all who recognize God and accept the Torah. Thus, converts are not liminal; no less than natives, they are the children of Abraham and share fully in the blessing of the fathers.

b. Isaac (known as Rashi, 1040-1105); see Rashi’s commentary on Deuteronomy 26:11. R. Isaac’s view is endorsed by his disciple, R. Samuel b. Abraham of Sens (c.1150-c.1215) in his commentary on M. Bikkurim, and by R. Eleazar of Worms (1180-1237), Sefer Rabbeinu, sec. 331. The following authorities summarize the views of Rabbenu Tam and R. Isaac but do not decide between them: R. Jacob b. Asher (c.1270-c.1343), in Tur, Orach Hayim 199; R. Hezekiah b. Jacob of Magdeburg (second half of the thirteenth century), as cited by R. Israel of Krems (middle of the fourteenth century), Hagahot Oshri on the Rosh, Bava Batra 81a; and Hagahot Meimonides on Maimonides, Laws of Prayer, 8:11.