

PROSPECTIVE CONVERT WHO FEARS CIRCUMCISION

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QUESTION: Is there any precedent in the *halakah* for a prospective convert who fears circumcision to avoid it? Similarly, is there a precedent for a prospective convert who has a deeply-rooted fear of water? Must he/she proceed with the requirement for *Miqveh*? (Rabbi Lawrence A. Englander, Mississauga, Ontario)*

ANSWER: The traditional requirements for conversion are clear (*B. Yev. 46, 47; Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 268; Yad, Hil. Issurei Biah 15*). A court of three is necessary, and prospective converts must be warned that they are joining a persecuted community and that many new obligations will be incumbent upon them. In the days when the Temple stood, they were to bring a sacrifice, take a ritual bath, and -in the case of males -be circumcised. To this day, the requirements of a *Bet Din, Tevilah, and Berit* remain for traditional Jews. Sources are clear on the requirements, but considerable discussion about them exists in the Talmud. For example, R. Eliezer stated that if a prospective male convert was circumcised or took a ritual bath, he was considered a proselyte. R. Joshua insisted on bath, and his point of view was adopted (*Yev. 46b*). Hillel and Shammai disagreed about a prospective male convert who was already circumcised. *Bet Shammai* insisted that blood must be drawn from him, while *Bet Hillel* stated that one may simply accept the circumcision without drawing blood (*Shab. 135a*). The Rabbinic authorities decided in favor of *Bet Shammai* (*Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 268.1; Yad, Hil. Issurei Biah 14.5*). Clearly, there were differences of opinion about the steps necessary for the ritual conversion in ancient times. As is well known, the *Talmud* also contains a variety of opinions about the desirability of accepting converts. These reflect the historic competition with Christianity, persecution, etc. in the early centuries of our era.

As we view the rite of conversion from a Reform point of view, we should not that the Reform Movement has placed its stress on careful instruction, with more attention to intellectual rather than ritual requirements. The Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1892 abolished the requirement of any ritual, including circumcision. Most Liberal rabbis, however, require circumcision or accept the existing circumcision (in accordance with the opinion of Hillel in *Shab. 135b*). Converts were to be accepted after due instruction before "any officiating rabbi assisted by no less than two associates." There has been very little discussion of *tevilah* by Liberal Jewish authorities. The custom has fallen into disuse, but was never actually rejected by Liberal Judaism. There are a number of cities in the United States and Canada in which *tevilah* has been encouraged or required for Reform conversion, as there has been cases of *tevilah* undertaken at the express wish of the prospective convert.

Immersion in a *miqveh* should not prove particularly difficult, however. The *miqveh* itself need contain only forty *seah* of water, which is approximately a hundred and twenty gallons, and must be about four feet in depth, so that a person can easily submerge himself completely (*Sifra 6.3; Yoma 31a, Er. 4b*). During most of the conversion procedure the convert would be in water up to his/her neck, and then for an instant be completely submerged. In other words, as we are not discussing a deep body of water or an extensive one, it should not be much more difficult than entering a bath; therefore, someone with a phobia about water should be able to undergo the ritual. However, as it is only rarely used for Reform conversion, we can dispense with it for such a convert even in a community where it is usually utilized.

Theoretically, circumcision may be viewed similarly according to the statement of the Central Conference of American Rabbis of 1892. In practice, circumcision has, however, been a

virtually universal requirement. It may be made easier, especially for an adult or an older child, by providing an anesthetic. The early authorities of the last generation were against using an anesthetic (Meir Arik, *Imrei Yosher II*, 140). This was part of the rejection of all innovations, but more recent authorities have not hesitated to approve the use of an anesthetic (J.L. Zierelsohn, *Maarchai Lev*, 53; Gedalia Felder, *Nahalat Tzevi*, p. 57). When the operation is done on a new-born child, it is presumed that the nervous system does not yet fully convey a sense of pain, but as that is not true of an adult or an older child, anesthetic may alleviate the pain and remove the fear of the impending operation. Circumcision may, of course, be postponed indefinitely due to health reasons, and we might consider the phobia as such a health reason. In this way, one could also assure the convert that he would be acceptable even without circumcision.

The prospective convert should be encouraged to undergo circumcision although, strictly speaking, this requirement may also be waived according to the earlier Reform decision.

*Walter Jacob, *American Reform Responsa*, New York, 1983, #69.