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HALAKHIC LENIENCY IN MODERN RESPONSAS
REGARDING CONVERSION

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The process of conversion to Judaism is paralleled to the acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people at Sinai. In Jewish sources, the Sinaitic experience is viewed as a mass conversion of the Jewish people. The essence of this conversion was the acceptance of the commandments as binding upon the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{1} Similarly, the essence of a Gentile’s conversion to Judaism in later generations, is his acceptance of the yoke of the commandments as binding upon him.\textsuperscript{2} In fact, the Talmudic sources go so far as to state that the Jewish people at Sinai underwent the same process as a proselyte: circumcision, immersion in a mikve and the bringing of a burnt-offering.\textsuperscript{3} In short, traditionally, the essence of conversion was the acceptance of the mitzvot.

Already in Talmudic times the sages discussed the problem of Gentiles wishing to become Jews for some ulterior motive other than a true and honest desire to become one of the Jewish people and religion. The reasons for such attempts at conversion could be and were sundry – the most prevalent, perhaps, being the desire to marry a Jewish spouse. The Talmud, after discussing the above, comes to the conclusion that the Jewish court should not convert Gentiles to Judaism for an ulterior motive. However, the Talmud adds, if such a Gentile was nevertheless converted to Judaism, the conversion is valid and the proselyte is to be looked upon as a Jew. This was the decided law as found in the Talmud \textsuperscript{4} and codified in the major

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\textsuperscript{1} Ye\textit{vamot} 46a-b.
\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.} 47a-b.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Ibid.} 46a-b.
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.} 24b.
codes such as Maimonides’ code\(^5\) and Joseph Karo’s *Shulhan Arukh*.\(^6\)

The general attitude of Judaism toward proselytism and proselytes is diverse. Upon reading the sources in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature one is struck by two opposing attitudes towards the proselyte – either strongly negative or very positive.

On the one hand we read such statements as “whoever brings a heathen near (to God) and converts him is as though he had created him”,\(^7\) “beloved are the proselytes”,\(^8\) or “the Holy One blesed be He, did not exile Israel among the nations for any other reason than that proselytes may join them”.\(^9\)

But such eloquent passages in the ancient sources have their opposite counterparts. Perhaps the most well known is the statement of Rabbi Helbo that “proselytes are as hard to Israel as a scab”.\(^10\) Other pejorative statements in the Talmud are, for example “evil after evil comes upon those who receive proselytes”\(^11\) and “proselytes ... delay the advent of the Messiah”.\(^12\)

The topic we will be discussing concerns the attitude of certain 19th and 20th century halakhic scholars and their decision making concerning proselytization, and the reasons behind their legal pronouncements. As we shall see, the sentiments underlying their specific decisions were not usually based on their general outlook as to proselytes and proselytization. Rather, the non-legal background to their decisions was made up of their own psychological views of the convert, of individual Jews and of the Jewish people. All this – within the historical context of Judaism and the Jewish people in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It is incumbent upon the Jewish court that deals with conversions, to scrutinize the candidate and be convinced that he or she is seeking conversion for the sake of Heaven and not for any ulterior motive. From Talmudic times onwards, the *halakha* has been, and remains to this day, that a Jewish court should not convert a Gentile to Judaism if the candidate’s motive is his love for a woman (or her love for a man).\(^13\) A second principle

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6 *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De’ah* 268:12.
8 Mekhilta Tractate *Niziken*, sec. 28 (Exodus 22:20-23).
9 Pesahim 87b.
10 Yevamot 47b; *Kiddushin* 70b.
11 Yevamot 109b.
12 Niddah 13b.
13 Supra nn. 4-6.
of Jewish law is that if the potential convert is not willing to accept all the precepts of Judaism in toto, even if he or she is willing to comply with everything the Jewish religion demands of its adherents except for one minor rabbinic precept, the court should not accept the candidate for proselytism. The purpose of this article is to discuss the views of nine acknowledged 19th and 20th century rabbinic authorities who have come to the conclusion that one may, or perhaps even should, at times, allow and take part in such conversions. Although there are also dissenting, more stringent, views of other no less prominent rabbinical scholars, these nine rabbis can undoubtedly be looked upon as representing a bona fide expression of the halakhah. These rabbis’ views are certainly significant precedent for any future decision-making.

The rabbis I have chosen, are the following: Shlomo Kluger (1785-1869), Shlomo Yehuda of Sighet (1832-1908), Shalom Shvadron (1835-1911), David Zvi Hoffman (1843-1921), Haim Ozer Grodzinski (1863-1940), Yehiel Weinberg (1885-1966), and three former chief rabbis of Israel, Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953), Isser Yehuda Unterman (1886-1976) and Ovadia Yosef (1920- ). I have classified the reasons which formed the basis for their lenient outlook into seven different headings, and I will elaborate on each one of them.

Ground number one: It is preferable to commit a less severe transgression, that is to convert a Gentile whose dominant reason for converting is for the sake of a man or a woman, so that a more severe transgression will not be committed – the more severe transgression being the cohabitation of a Jew with a non-Jew.

Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda of Sighet was asked concerning a Jew who had been living with a Gentile woman for a number of years and who had already fathered four daughters. Was it permissible to convert the woman to Judaism? The rabbi in his response allowed her to convert. The Rabbi’s line of reasoning was that if she would not be accepted as a proselyte, the father of the girl would continue living in sin as in the past.

What is unusual in such a decision is that it seems to contradict an established halakhic principle of not telling someone to sin (here, the someone being the court) – even a minor transgression (here, converting a Gentile

14 Bekhorot 30b; Rambam, Issurei Bi’ah 14:18.
16 Tshurat Shai, vol. 2.3.
whose reason for converting is the love of woman, not love of the God of the Jews) — in order that another person should not sin — even if the sin is a major transgression. Under the circumstances of the case, Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda of Sighet was willing to weigh the alternatives and come to the conclusion that one could or even should sacrifice the lesser evil so that the greater evil would be avoided. What is even more far-reaching is that the transgression one wants to avoid here is not in itself inevitable but would, rather, be a result of an intentional act on the part of the Jew — his choosing to continue to live together with the Gentile. The Rabbi was aware of this, but nevertheless decided as he did.

Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman is of the same opinion — a view enunciated in a responsum concerning a couple of who had married in a civil ceremony and the wife, the Jewish partner, was already pregnant. Rabbi Hoffman adds a psychological - halakhic twist. The continued cohabitation of a Jew and a non-Jew who had already married civilly, especially where the woman is already pregnant, need not be viewed as an intentional transgression, for if it were intentional it would be difficult to have the Jewish court commit the sin of converting the Gentile for the purpose of helping a flagrant sinner who chooses, of her own free will, to sin. Rabbi Hoffman classified the Jewish woman’s continued living with her Gentile spouse as an act done under duress. Since the woman was pregnant from her civil law husband, she cannot bear not living together with her spouse. Her remaining with him is not a purely voluntary act — the circumstances, in effect, force her not to get up and leave.

In another responsum, Rabbi Hoffman had to deal with a similar but even more difficult case. Here the Jewish husband who married a Gentile woman was of the priestly family — a Kohen. Even if she were to convert the husband would not be permitted to marry her since a Kohen is forbidden to marry a convert. But here too, Rabbi Hoffman, taking all things into account, including the woman’s subjective feeling that if she were not allowed to convert she would possibly go mad, allowed the conversion. One of the major grounds for this decision was that living with a Gentile woman is a greater evil than a Kohen’s living with a proselyte. Therefore, it is preferable that he commit a lesser offence of living with a proselyte than a greater one of cohabiting with a Gentile woman.

17 Shabbat 4a; Kiddushin 55a; Menahot 48a.
18 Melamed Leho’il, Yoreh De’ah 48a.
19 Ibid., Even Ha’ezar 8.
Chief Rabbi Uziel decided\(^{20}\) in a similar vein and specifically stated that "it is incumbent upon us to save an Israelite from a sin from which he himself cannot free himself". Such a situation is similar to the case of the beautiful Gentile woman who is desired by the Jewish soldier.\(^{21}\) The Talmud states\(^{22}\) that the Bible allows the soldier to have sexual relations with her since the Torah takes into account man's evil inclinations. Rabbi Uziel learns from this law that "wherever the Torah fully understood the psyche of a man who cannot desist from his ravenous evil inclinations" it allowed for some sort of compromise, as was the case with the beautiful woman. Since according to Jewish law certain conversions which should not have taken place but were in fact made, are valid post factum, in situations such as these the court could, or even should, convert the Gentile partner in the first instance. Bringing indirect evidence from Talmudic literature, Rabbi Uziel goes on to say that we should, in fact, help the Jewish partner so that he will not remain a sinner all his life. As long as the woman remained a Gentile and they lived together as man and wife, the Jewish partner would be constantly transgressing the law against cohabiting with a Gentile. In cases such as these one should take literally the verse — "it is time to act for the Lord, violate your Torah".\(^{23}\) That is, convert the woman in the first instance although the decided law dictates to the Jewish court not to do so.

**Ground number two:** Fear that if we do not convert the Gentile, the Jew involved will estrange himself from the Jewish community.

This fear which sometimes served as a reason for converting, usually concerned one of two possibilities: either the Jew would completely cut himself off from the Jewish people and most probably become an apostate, or the couple would go to a liberal or Reform rabbi who would perform a non-halakhic conversion for the Gentile partner. Although some rabbis did not consider these threats sufficient reason for relaxing the standards for conversion,\(^{24}\) other rabbis did. For example, the danger of apostasy was a major factor in the response of Rabbi Shlomo Kluger,\(^{25}\) who sanctioned the conversion of a Gentile woman with whom a Jewish soldier had fallen

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20 *Piskei Uziel* 60; cf. *ibid.* 63.
21 Deuteronomy 21:10-14.
22 *Kiddushin* 21b.
23 Psalms 119:129.
24 E.g. *Resp. R. Azriel Hilderseimer, supra* n. 15.
25 *Tuv Ta'am Ve'da'at*, vol. 1, 230.
in love. Rabbi Shalom Shvadron\textsuperscript{26} also refers to the possibility of the Jew's converting to Christianity, and this fear became a factor in leading him to decide to allow the non-Jew's conversion to Judaism. Rabbi Uziel adds\textsuperscript{27} that where a potential convert is rejected by the Jewish halakhic authorities and his or her Jewish mate is thus driven to apostasy, such an apostate may turn into an enemy of the Jewish people – something the Jewish people have so tragically experienced throughout their history.

Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman took into account\textsuperscript{28} the possibility of going to a Reform rabbi for the purpose of conversion: it is preferable, then, to perform the lesser evil of converting the Gentile woman in an orthodox Bet-Din even though it is clear that ulterior motives were present, than to allow the greater evil which would follow as a consequence of a Reform conversion.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Ground number three:} Public reaction – both Gentile and Jewish – can also be taken into account.

It is proper to take into account the reaction of the Gentiles, as well as the reaction of the Jews, to a negative attitude toward conversion. A reaction which could bring criticism upon the rabbis may be a valid reason to go ahead with a conversion which would most likely not have been performed if not for the fear of such adverse reaction.

Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman states,\textsuperscript{30} regarding a situation where there is fear that a rejection of a conversion may lead to the mental breakdown of a Gentile woman seeking conversion, that one must also take into account the reaction of the Gentiles before making a final decision. Where there is a possibility that the Gentiles will react to a refusal of this sort by saying that the Jews are heartless toward a Gentile girl and do not care if she goes mad, such a situation could be classified as a desecration of the name of God, and so the rabbis should also seriously take this factor into account when deciding whether or not to convert.

Not only is the Gentile reaction to a possible refusal to convert a valid consideration, generally Jewish public opinion should also influence the decision-making process as to whether to convert or not to convert.

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{26} Resp. Maharsham, vol. 6, Yoreh De'ah 109.
\bibitem{27} Piskei Uziel 65.
\bibitem{28} Melamed LeHo'il, Yoreh De'ah 85.
\bibitem{30} Melamed LeHo'il, Even Ha'ezar 8.
\end{thebibliography}
Chief Rabbi Unterman,\(^{31}\) in discussing what the attitude should be toward immigrants from Russia during the early 1970's, among whom mixed marriages were a common phenomenon, specifically states that the rabbis who have to decide whether or not to convert the Gentile spouses must also take into account the reaction of the Russian immigrants. These immigrants should not be made to feel that the rabbis look upon them unfa\-vourably and only want to act harshly toward them. The opposite attitude should be the rule. Rabbi Unterman's view reminds one of the words of Rabbi Haim Ozer Grodzinski, the great rabbi of Vilna during the two world wars, who wrote in a responsum \(^{32}\) that even though according to the halakhah one should take a comparatively stringent attitude concerning conversions, one should not go out and protest against conversions performed where the converts did not take upon themselves the keeping of the commandments. One should not rush to protest because this would lead to the profanation of the name of God before the ignorant masses who would say that the rabbis do not allow conversions.

*Ground number four:* Even where the obvious reason for conversion is in order to marry a Jew, in modern times such a situation may also be looked upon as a conversion "for the sake of Heaven". If it were not so viewed, the Rabbinical court would be obliged to reject the request for conversion.

The reasoning behind this lenient attitude was already enunciated by Rabbi Shlomo Kluger\(^{33}\) and was followed by a host of leading halakhic scholars.\(^{34}\) Briefly, the argument is as follows: Since the emancipation there is a legal possibility of marrying in a civil ceremony. As one can do so according to the laws of the State, an application to convert to Judaism in order to live together, or continue to live together, as Jews after conversion and a Jewish marriage ceremony, is not to be classified as a request for the sake of man or the sake of woman. Given the present reality in which there is no problem to marry civilly or live together as man and wife – as was usually the case when such requests were made – one could explain the motive for conversion as an honest desire to become an integral part of the

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32 *Ahiezir, Even Ha'ezir* 26.
33 *Tuv Ta'am Ve'da'ar*, supra n. 25.
34 E.g. Rabbi Uziel, *supra* nn. 20, 27 and Rabbi Unterman, *supra* n. 31; Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in "Problems of Conversion in Our Times," *Torah Sheb'el Peh*, *supra* n. 31, at 21; Rabbi Yehiel Wieneberg in *Seridei Esh*, vol. 3, *Even Ha'ezir* 50.
Jewish people. Rabbi Kluger permitted the conversion of the Gentile girl who had been living with her Jewish lover for some time: even without the conversion they could and would continue to live together, and therefore the request to convert was due not to lust of the body but to a true desire to convert to the Jewish religion. In most of the actual cases discussed by the rabbis who followed Rabbi Kluger’s innovative way of thinking, the couples were already married in a civil ceremony. Conversion under such circumstances, based on similar reasoning, was permitted by all nine of the rabbis whose views form the basis of this essay. Here and there some further nuances were added to the general theme enunciated by Rabbi Kluger. I will mention a few, beginning with Rabbi Kluger’s own precedent-breaking and precedent-making decision.

Rabbi Shlomo Kluger explained35 that the original prohibition on converting where the purpose was for love and marriage referred only to a case where the couple did not as yet cohabit. In such a case, the urge to have intercourse is very strong. The court is not allowed to convert the Gentile since the ulterior carnal motive is the sole motive of the applicant. But where couples have been living together either without any ceremony or after a civil ceremony, the sex drive is not now as dominant since their desire has already been consummated; therefore the application for conversion is to be looked upon not as a request to fulfill a need of the flesh, but a need of the spirit.

Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman36 refers to a case where a Jewish woman was impregnated by a Gentile; the Rabbi had very good reason to believe that if the Gentile were not to be converted, the couple would marry civilly. Therefore, Rabbi Hoffman reasoned, the request to convert and then marry in a Jewish ceremony as Jews is not to be considered conversion for the sake of cohabitation, and he allowed the conversion.

Ground number five: A novel interpretation of the Talmudic statement that if one wants to convert and is willing to comply with all the commandments – both Biblical and rabbinical – except for one minor injunction of the rabbis, he should not be converted.

The above-mentioned rule, which is presented in the codes as authoritative,37 seems to close the door to many possible converts whom we know will not fully comply with all the stringencies of the halakah, and who even admit as much during the conversion process.

35 Tuv Ta'am Ve'da'at, supra n. 25.
36 Supra n. 18.
37 Rambam, Issurei Bi'ah 14:8; Semag, negative commandments, 172.
This problem bothered Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman in the responsum\textsuperscript{38} concerning a \textit{Kohen}, who had married a Gentile woman in a civil marriage and now wanted the woman converted. In general, as we already noted, Rabbi Hoffman was in favour of the conversion since, in his view, it was more sinful for the man to live with a Gentile than for a \textit{Kohen} to live with a proselyte – although the latter, too, is iniquitous. It was no secret that after the conversion the couple would continue living together. Hence we have a case of not accepting all of the commandments and it is therefore forbidden to convert the woman. Rabbi Hoffman’s solution was the following. If the woman specifically states that she does not want to accept this commandment, it is forbidden to convert her. But in the present case she did not specifically say so, therefore, even though we know that she will not keep this commandment, we may convert her, since we want to help the \textit{Kohen} and his future offspring. Rabbi Hoffman adds in explanation that there is a difference between converting someone for his own good and converting someone in order to help a Jew. In this case we want her converted so that her Jewish spouse will not continue to live in constant sin, cohabiting with a Gentile. In such a situation, we are not to be too stringent about the rule prescribing the proselyte’s duty to embrace each and every halakhic demand.

Perhaps Rabbi Hoffman’s reasoning seems strained. However, not long afterwards a novel interpretation by Rabbi Haim Ozer Grodzinski opened up a new vista and other rabbis followed in his footsteps. Rabbi Haim Ozer explained the Talmudic passage as follows.\textsuperscript{39} What the Talmud rejected was the case of an applicant for conversion who tells the rabbinical court that he is willing to convert on condition that he be freed from complying with one minor enactment of the Rabbis. In such a case, no conversion is allowed. There is no such thing as a partial conversion – the proselyte must take Judaism as a whole. But if he who takes upon himself to obey all the commandments knows that he will sin, not on principle but because he cannot control himself, this is not considered a defect in accepting the commandments. As I mentioned, Rabbi Grodzinski’s interpretation was adopted by others, such as the two former Chief Rabbis of Israel, Rabbi Isser Yehuda Unterman and the \textit{Rishon Lezion}, Ovadia Yosef.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Ground number six:} The interest of family members is a legitimate rationale for converting.

\textsuperscript{38} Supra n. 30.
\textsuperscript{39} Supra n. 32.
\textsuperscript{40} See supra n. 34.
A major innovation in the lenient approaches toward conversion in modern times is the specific reference to other people, not only the candidate for conversion himself, as a factor in the decision-making process. The main concern is for the offspring of the couple.

When Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman had to decide whether to convert a Gentile who had married a Jewess in a civil marriage and the Jewess was pregnant, Rabbi Hoffman thought of the child to be born. The child, according to Jewish law, would be Jewish. If the father would not convert to Judaism and remained a Christian, it would be most probable that the child would be reared as a Christian. Is it the innocent child’s fault to have been born into such a situation, asks, rhetorically, Rabbi Hoffman? Therefore it is preferable to convert the father even though according to strict law the facts of the case would not justify such a conclusion.

Rabbi Uziel is of the same opinion but goes even further. Where a Jew is the father of a child born from a Gentile woman, one should even encourage conversion of the mother even though the child is not halakhically Jewish. Rabbi Uziel brings arguments based on certain Talmudic sources to prove that the child is indeed, albeit not technically Jewish, considered of the seed of Israel. Therefore one should also try to prevent this halakhically Gentile child from being brought up by a non-Jewish mother. The couple’s children are referred to by Rabbi Uziel as lost sheep. If we reject them, he continues, we will be summoned to the Heavenly court and charged with transgressing the verse from Ezekiel “neither have ye brought back that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost ...

Chief Rabbi Unterman, too, speaks much of the effects on the family as a whole if one takes too harsh a stand concerning conversions in mixed civil marriages. He too is concerned with the halakhically non-Jewish child of a non-Jewish mother. However, according to Rabbi Unterman, there is a difference between this child and ordinary Gentiles. Without explaining his reasoning Rabbi Unterman makes two interesting statements: first, that although the child is a Gentile whose lineage is that of this mother’s, his Jewish biological father is considered the child’s guardian for a number of purposes; second, that the biological parenthood of the Jewish father is a factor which should be taken into consideration and which determines

41 Supra n. 18.
42 Piskei Uziel 64.
43 Ezekiel 34:4.
44 Supra n. 31.
such guardianship, and the child is considered the progeny of his Jewish father.

Both Rabbi Uziel's and Rabbi Unterman's assertions concerning the bond between the Jewish progenitor and the Gentile child seem to be at odds with the prevalent view in Jewish law that there is no link, legal or otherwise, between the two. As a result of these novel assertions, both Chief Rabbis came out strongly on the side of leniency when dealing with the question of converting the mother of the child who is, in a manner not wholly clear, somehow linked to the Jewish people even according to the Jewish law.

Ground number seven: Public policy and the specific Israeli situation are valid considerations as to the propriety of converting.

Not only do the rabbis take into account the ramifications for family members of refusing a conversion, general public policy matters are also part of the decision-making process. We have already seen that outside reaction, both of Jews and Gentiles, is also a consideration in determining whether to take a lenient or stringent attitude toward conversions. Other more general considerations play an important role, especially the historically new situation of a Jewish State in the Land of Israel. Of all the rabbis I have referred to, no one better expresses these feelings than Rabbi Unterman. Although specifically referring to Russian immigrants and mixed marriages between Russian Jewish immigrants and their Gentile spouses, his attitude can serve as a basis for other similar situations.

Rabbi Unterman admits that as a rabbi in England he would not convert Gentiles when the motives were mainly for the purpose of marriage. He explains that in England there were two main additional reasons for taking such a stand. The first reason was the need to try and stem the tide of intermarriage; if the attitude of the rabbis would have been lenient and the Gentile partner could be easily converted, other Jewish men and women would see no reason for not intermarrying. The second reason was that even after a conversion, the converts would continue living in a Christian country and environment, without feeling themselves cut off from their past. Such converts do not see themselves as spiritually reborn, as the case should be. This is not so when the Gentile spouse of a mixed marriage leaves his or her natural environment, homeland and culture, and comes to live in Israel in an all pervading Jewish environment. This is especially so of immigrants from Russia who usually detest the society from which they came and really and truly want to begin anew within a Jewish framework. In situations such

45 Ibid.
as these, the attitude of the Rabbinate must be one of openness and lovingkindness toward these Gentile spouses who want to cast in their lot with the Jewish people in the land of the Jews, where the Jewish religion is dominant.

Rabbi Unterman also adds another reason for converting the Russian Gentile wives of the new Russian immigrants. It is clear, he says, that the women will remain in Israel and bear children. These children will naturally integrate and become part of the dominant Jewish community in Israel. Since this new generation, who will appear to be Jews in Israeli society, will halakhically not be Jewish if their mothers did not convert, it is preferable to convert these women in order to avoid the innumerable future problems which undoubtedly would arise as a result of such an unhealthy situation.

It is obvious from what we have observed in this brief overview of the views of nine leading halakhic scholars, that not only technical halakhic reasoning goes into the decision-making process. The method used before arriving at a decision include both legal manipulations – in the positive sense – of halakhic rules, and, perhaps even more important, what at first glance seems to be meta-halakhic reasoning. The truly outstanding respondents, like the great judges in other legal systems, knew what the solution to the problem should be to their mind, and then found the reasoning needed to substantiate their feeling. In the great majority of cases which come before a judge, no great intellectual, psychological, social or legal breadth and insight is needed. It is only when the problem posed is basic and the solution may have far-reaching consequences, either to the parties themselves or to the public in general, that the special qualities demanded of outstanding judges can come to the fore. Even if some readers may not agree with part or most of the reasoning discussed above, I am certain that it is clear to all that the manner in which the question before us was addressed is not only of major significance for the law of conversion, but demonstrates the dynamism and creativity inherent in the halakhic system as a whole.46