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AUTHOR: JUSTUS N. BAIRD

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A DOUBLE RAINBOW:  
THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

JUSTUS N. BAIRD

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Graduate Rabbinical Program  
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Advisor: Eugene B. Borowitz

## Thesis Summary: Theology of Conversion

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This thesis presents the theologies of conversion that emerged from a detailed study of traditional texts about conversion to Judaism. The primary materials for this thesis were volumes of texts from the biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic traditions that related to conversion to Judaism. Conversion out of Judaism is not considered in this thesis. Three primary chapters present findings from the biblical, classical rabbinic, and mystical traditions and represent the bulk of the thesis. In the summary of learning, a brief original sketch of how the theologies may have developed and how they interact with each other is offered.

While much has been written about historical attitudes toward conversion, little has been written about the theologies that inform those views. The thesis hopes to fill that gap. Understanding conversion has much to teach about understanding Jewishness, and this study shows how various definitions of Jewishness become visible through the study of texts about conversion. By studying how Jews understand the Other, this thesis strives to articulate how Jews understand themselves.

The primary goal of this thesis was to understand the meaning behind conversion. The following guiding questions directed the study: How can we better understand what it means to be Jewish by understanding conversion? Why did such a process materialize, and why did it remain marginal? By looking at the boundary condition of conversion, new and better understandings of what it means to be a Jew emerge.

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## Acknowledgements

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This study represents a personal milestone. A few years prior, I would not have been able to take on the work. Not only was I not trained or learned enough, I was also not courageous enough to confront the tradition. For guiding me to this point, I owe deep gratitude to two groups of people: the experts whose hearts and minds helped to shape this study, and the welcoming Jewish community in Houston who greeted me with open arms when I myself converted to Judaism years ago.

First among the experts is Eugene Borowitz, who not only served as my advisor, but also embodies the *gravitas* to which all theologically-minded Jews should aspire. To Dr. Borowitz: thank you for saying exactly what needed to be said, when it needed to be said. The comments of David Sperling, Alyssa Gray, and Sharon Koren shaped the biblical, rabbinic and mystical chapters respectively, and their corrections saved me from putting a variety of embarrassing things into print. Thanks go also to Elliot Wolfson (NYU) for guiding me through the Lurianic tradition and for providing unpublished copies of his work in the area. I take responsibility for all remaining errors and look forward to learning more in the future which will challenge what I have written in this study.

Few of us are aware of what our destinies hold. In the moment I underwent *hatafat dam brit* and *mikveh* to become a Jew, I certainly never thought that years later I would write a rabbinic thesis on the topic. If it weren't for the welcoming individuals that provided a sheltered place in which to explore and eventually enter the Jewish people, I probably never would have. To the Simon family (Sara, Debbie, B.R. and Harry), Ed Wolpert and the Beth

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This thesis is dedicated to those who work to embrace  
*gerei tzedeq* when they come knocking on our doors.

## Prologue

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It is a well-kept secret that one's feelings towards converts to Judaism reveal his or her own definition of Jewishness. In other words, our reaction to someone who converted to Judaism<sup>1</sup> is determined by how we understand what it means to be Jewish. Let me explain with the following three classic examples of things born-Jews say to converts.

An older Jewish man asks a convert, "Why in the world would you want to be Jewish? Don't you know how bad things have been for the Jews?"<sup>2</sup> This man is revealing his lachrymose conception of Jewish history, which makes it difficult for him to understand why a gentile would want to throw his lot in with the Jews. His pessimistic view of Jewish history makes him think that becoming a Jew is like joining the losing team. His understanding of Jewishness has a strong historical component.

A traditional Jewish woman asks a convert, "How can you actually change your religion? Aren't your parents *ferklempit*?" She is revealing her belief that religion – or at least Jewishness – is determined solely by birth, by lineage. For her, to change one's birth religion is an offense against one's family. She projects her own parents' views onto the convert's parents. Her understanding of Jewishness has a strong genealogical, ethnic component.

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis considers conversion *to* Judaism exclusively, and does not review conversion of a Jew to a non-Jewish religion.

<sup>2</sup> This is a paraphrasing of the question that the rabbis ask the convert in the classic *sugya* about the conversion process in Yevamot 47a. See rabbinic chapter (section 2) for details and analysis.

A Jewish grandmother remarks to her girlfriend about a convert, "Sure she can call herself Jewish, but there's no way that she can make a chicken soup like mine." According to her, there are many things a convert has to learn that the Rabbi doesn't teach. She understands Judaism as a complex set of cultural practices that have a rich history, almost like an elite cultural club. For this *bubbe*, being Jewish has a strong cultural component.

These three examples show that how we understand our own Jewishness has a strong impact on what we say about converts. If someone who is born Jewish has difficulty understanding why or even how someone would convert to Judaism, he is probably expressing his own ambivalent or even negative feelings about being Jewish. To stand in front of a convert – an outsider who truly wants to be one of us – is like standing in front of a mirror. If we are in love with our Jewish selves, we can celebrate that convert's decision to become a Jew. But if we don't love ourselves as Jews, then we can't imagine why this convert, or anyone else in his right mind, would want to be like us.

Scholars have also recognized the connection between Jewish attitudes towards conversion and the definitions of Jewishness that drive those attitudes. As one scholar puts it, "the development of the idea of conversion mirrors the development of biblical Israelite religion to post-biblical Judaism."<sup>3</sup> Another writes, "Understanding the process of conversion in theory has direct consequences on the understanding of the nature of the Jewish collective in Jewish tradition."<sup>4</sup> In many ways, how Jews have seen the nature of conversion throughout history is a window into the ways Jews have defined themselves. This study is a theological exploration into the ways in which the people Israel have defined themselves through much of their history, seen through the lens of conversion.

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen (1983) 42.

<sup>4</sup> Zohar and Sagi 246.

### **What's in this Thesis**

Long before Jews were making comments to converts like the ones above, the ancient Israelites were having their own struggle with foreigners who were living alongside them. The first part of this study reviews a wide variety of passages in the Hebrew Bible that record these interactions. While not exhaustive, the review of the biblical material is somewhat comprehensive. The experience of exile had a meteoric effect on the idea of conversion, an impact that is clearly visible in the texts. After having lived in exile and returned, the Israelites offer competing responses about how to deal with the foreigners they brought home. By the close of the biblical period, the modern understanding of conversion – that a gentile can change his or her identity and become a Jew – has not yet fully emerged. But the roots of conversion were planted in biblical soil.

The earliest rabbinic texts do know of conversion as we know it and even have rituals to mark the change of status. Sometime between the end of the biblical and start of the rabbinic periods, conversion becomes reality. (Recent scholarship suggests it happened in the Persian period of Jewish history, influenced by the Greek idea of Hellenization.<sup>5</sup>) But the sages of the classic rabbinic period do not agree on what factors constitute a legitimate conversion – and from their discussions I sketch four different theologies, which are outlined in the rabbinic chapter. Because of the breadth of material regarding conversion in the rabbinic corpus, this chapter is more representative than comprehensive.

In the third and last substantive chapter, I examine mystical views toward conversion, focusing on the Zohar and the work of two post-zoharic kabbalists, Cordovero and Vital. The mystics have a polarizing effect on views of conversion: their approaches are both the

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<sup>5</sup> This is Shaye Cohen's thesis in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*.

most stinging to the modern ear and the most inspiring. Their creativity challenges the tradition, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility, but along the way they offer theological approaches to conversion that warm the heart.

A brief summary of learning appears at the end. This final section reports key findings of the study, emphasizing material that, in my opinion, deserves special attention. For those in a position to teach others, I have also included in this summary a list of "most teachable texts."

### **Methodological Notes and Antecedents**

The written Jewish tradition is amalgamated and kaleidoscopic and records many different voices. Often these voices echo each other across time and geography, and often they refute each other. Other times they ignore each other. In this study, I have searched for those echoes and refutations. After an initial review of secondary sources,<sup>6</sup> I spent the bulk of my study looking for patterns in the chaos of primary material. Some patterns echoed loudly enough in my ear to demand mention on these pages. Other patterns will require more sensitive ears. The only bias I knowingly took into the study was a desire to find myself in the tradition. I am sure that my own background as a convert affected this study in ways that I am not aware. My intention, however, was to act only a megaphone and let the tradition speak for itself.

An important area of scholarship that was not explored in this thesis is the academic study of conversion in general and outside of Jewish tradition. While brief consideration was

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<sup>6</sup> There are a number of secondary works that greatly speeded up this study by pointing me toward relevant texts. All of these are listed in the bibliography, but the English works by Bamberger, Porton, Cohen, Zohar and Sagi deserve special mention. Recent works in Hebrew by Finkelstein and Zohar and Sagi have made a very important contribution to the field. None of these works were primarily a theological study.

given to works by giants in the field such as William James and A.D. Nock, this study was almost exclusively internal to the Jewish tradition. It asks and attempts to answer the question: how does Jewish tradition understand conversion to Judaism?

For simplicity, throughout the study I use male gender pronouns to refer to the convert. In almost all cases, except discussions about circumcision, this convention is intended to refer to both male and female converts.

Translations of all non-English texts are provided. Biblical texts are translated using the JPS translation, except where noted. All other texts, including rabbinic, mystical, and modern passages, are translated by me, except where noted. Because of the nuances of biblical Hebrew, biblical texts are presented both in the original and translation. Where translation of particular words or phrases is awkward or overly limiting, I have repeated the Hebrew or Aramaic phrases after indicating their meaning.

### **The Inspiration for the Study**

Above, mention was made of how attitudes toward conversion reveal understandings of Jewishness. Yet surprisingly little theological attention has been focused on conversion.<sup>7</sup> The unexplored nature of the topic and the importance it has for understanding Jewishness motivated this study. Another primary motivation behind this study, however, was personal.

Every convert's path to Judaism is unique, and mine is no exception. This is not the place to share those details. Suffice it to say that as a person who was raised Protestant, became a Jew as a young adult, and later chose to become a rabbi, I was curious about what the Jewish tradition had to say about people like me. Partly I felt this was an area in which I

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<sup>7</sup> The only published work I came across in my study that specifically investigated the theology of conversion was a brief chapter by Bamberger entitled "Conversion: Theologically Speaking" in Eichhorn's 1965 book.

could strive for mastery. Swimming in the sea of Jewish tradition is deeply humbling; it helps to have a lifejacket. Since I couldn't erase my own background as a convert – and there were certainly times when I wanted to – I thought perhaps I could turn it into a floatation device.

My own struggles with my identity as a convert to Judaism have sensitized me to the identity struggles of other Jews. Many have quipped that all post-Emancipation Jews are Jews by Choice. If there is truth behind this quip, it is this: all modern Jews have the option to shed – or at least successfully hide – their Jewishness. The inevitable consequence is that most Jews today must find a reason to keep their Jewishness. It is my sincere hope that this thesis will shed light on their enduring question, "What does it mean to be Jewish?"

### **About the Title: "Double Rainbow"**

In Genesis 9:13 we read that the rainbow is the sign of the covenant that God makes with Noah and his sons after the flood. The classic work of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, teaches that Moses wore the rainbow as a garment when he went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain for forty days and nights to receive God's teaching. "Through those garments he saw and delighted in it all."<sup>8</sup> These passages connect the rainbow to God's covenants. In Genesis, it is the sign of the Noahide covenant not to destroy the world again by floodwaters. In the Zohar, it is a mediating garment that Moses wore when he was receiving the revelation from God at Sinai.

Rainbows sometimes appear as double bows. The second bow, which is fainter and higher than the primary bow, is formed from water droplets higher in the sky. Its color scheme is actually the reverse of the primary bow. Instead of violet on the inside of the

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<sup>8</sup> Zohar 2:99a (*Mishpatim*), commenting on Exodus 24:18. This passage is cited and analyzed in the mystical chapter, section 3.



curve and red on the outside, the secondary bow has red on the inside and violet on the outside. In between the two bows, the sky appears darker, almost as if the two bows are forming colorful edges of a single phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Let's stretch the Genesis and Zohar passages for a moment, and imagine the rainbow – the double rainbow – as a sign for God's covenant with Israel. The primary bow is God's covenant with *benei Israel*, the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Jews who enter the covenant through birth. Less visible is the secondary bow, which represents the alternative path to becoming part of Israel: conversion. This fainter bow is part of the same covenant but represents the outer realm, formed from water droplets that are farther away. When the secondary bow appears, it makes the primary bow all the more interesting.

Rainbows make visible the individual colors of what normally appears to be unified white light. Just as there are many different colors that make up light, there are many different aspects of God's covenant. It is my hope that this thesis will – like a secondary rainbow – be a prism for those theological aspects of God's covenant with converts. By examining the covenantal colors of the fainter rainbow, the colors of the primary bow will glow more brightly.

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<sup>9</sup> For an array of images, visit <http://images.google.com> and search "double rainbow."

# I. Searching for Converts in the Hebrew Bible

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## 1

### Historical Views and Scholarship

Much modern scholarship regarding the biblical understanding of conversion points back to Yehezkel Kaufmann.<sup>1</sup> David Daube,<sup>2</sup> Jacob Milgrom,<sup>3</sup> Shaye Cohen,<sup>4</sup> and Christiana van Houten<sup>5</sup> each follow Kaufmann's theory that (1) the Babylonian exile ushered in a new understanding of and attitudes towards outsiders and their joining the Israelites and that (2) conversion to Judaism as we know it was "an innovation of the postbiblical period."<sup>6</sup>

Kaufmann, writing in 1929, identifies two types of conversion in the biblical corpus: an ancient type, which is national/cultural, and a later, religious type, which emerges slowly after the exile:

We find two types of conversion in Israel of old: the ancient conversion which is national/cultural, and the later conversion, which is covenantal. The former is the process of national assimilation: the foreigner comes to reside in the land of the Hebrews, assimilating over time in his surroundings; joining the national culture, he accepts the god of the land, and the result is that he is completely swallowed by the Hebrew people...the second [type of] conversion is entirely religious. It has no conditions of national allegiance of any type. The stranger who accepts the religion of Israel is considered, according to the concept of this later conversion, as an Israelite in every respect (or almost every respect) through his entrance into the Jewish religious covenant,

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<sup>1</sup> Kaufmann's approach regarding Biblical views of conversion is discussed in the most detail in *Golah v'Nekhar*, 226-256 (Heb).

<sup>2</sup> Daube's emphasis on the centrality of the exile follows Kaufmann closely, but without acknowledgement. "The fundamental division is between the period before the Babylonian exile and that from the exile onwards." (Daube, 3).

<sup>3</sup> Milgrom, 169.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen (1983) 43 (note 11).

<sup>5</sup> Van Houten, 111 (note 3). Van Houten's conclusions rely more heavily on Kaufmann's approach than her work acknowledges.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen (1983) 43 (note 11).

and also when he speaks in the language of his people and inhabits his land and his state. The concept of conversion that dominates the biblical literature is the ancient concept of conversion.<sup>7</sup>

Kaufmann explains that before the exile, foreigners living in the land could be assimilated slowly over time. The foundation of this ancient conversion was sociological and ethnic. Any religious character was only a consequence of joining the group, "the fruit of assimilation over generations or the acceptance of the yoke of the god of the sovereign group."<sup>8</sup> Mixed-marriage was an important step in the ancient conversion, since it allowed the foreigner to strengthen sociological and ethnic ties. In Kaufmann's words, "the marriage itself was part of the conversion."<sup>9</sup>

This ancient form of conversion was rooted in a time and place in which the Israelites were the sovereign or at least majority group in their own land. When the Israelites were exiled to Babylonia, the ancient conversion was no longer effective. The Israelites were suddenly a minority in a strange land, and when they returned, there were new foreigners in the land. Kaufmann explains the impact this must have had on the idea of conversion:

[After their return from Babylonia,] most of them were, even in the land of Israel itself, "converts" among the foreigners. The old Israelite "civilian" identity ceased to exist, and with it the old "conversion:" the settling of the land no longer depended on a connection to an Israelite tribe. Thus the ethnic-religious ideal, which was the basis of the ancient conversion of freemen, was invalidated...With the destruction of their national life, the power to "convert" foreigners via a slow, natural nationalization was taken away. There was no place anymore for natural "Judaization" that came with settling the land. The national boundaries of the Jewish settlement were lost, and with this the foundation of Jewish culture was destroyed. Religiosity was now the unique aspect of Judaism; it now established the spiritual "boundary" of her existence.<sup>10</sup>

Kaufmann sees the exile as the beginning of the shift away from a national/cultural type of conversion and towards a religious idea of conversion. Cohen, following Kaufmann, explains the shift in this way:

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<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann (1929) 226-7.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 232.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 235.

The national aspect of conversion explains why it was not until the sixth century BCE that the Jews began to develop the idea of conversion, and why, even after the ideology and institution of conversion were firmly established, converts held an ambiguous status in Judaism. As long as Israel was a collection of tribes living on its own land with its own government and worshipping its ancestral god, tribal and cultic status were determined by birth and the idea of conversion could not develop. How could a non-Israelite become an Israelite? Israelite citizenship was as restrictive as that of any other ancient people. Consequently the pre-exilic portions of the Bible are unfamiliar with the idea of conversion and have no term for convert. Once, however, the Israelites ceased to be a nation like the other nations; once the Temple was destroyed, the Jews exiled, political independence lost, and the tribal structure destroyed; once these things happened, the religious component of Israelite identity became paramount and the idea of conversion could begin to take hold. Israelites became Jews and Israelite religion became Judaism. A gentile could not become an Israelite, but he could become a Jew.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage Cohen not only explains why the idea of religious conversion could not emerge until after the exile, he also asserts that 'Judaism' as we know it could not begin to emerge until after the exile, an idea he fully develops in *The Beginnings of Jewishness*. In many ways the history of our relationship with foreigners is the history of our understanding of ourselves as Israelites and Jews, or in Cohen's words, "the development of the idea of conversion mirrors the development of biblical Israelite religion to post-biblical Judaism."<sup>12</sup>

The debt that recent historians have to Kaufmann's approach did not prevent them from adding nuance, detail and depth to the historical understanding of the idea of conversion. Because this is not a historical thesis, I will only gloss over the important understandings that were added by later historians.

David Daube emphasizes the gender differences in conversion and the role of circumcision, arguing that men could convert through circumcision, and women followed the identity of the associated male, usually converting through marriage:

The fundamental division is between the period before the Babylonian exile and that from the exile onwards. In the pre-exilic era, a man becomes Jewish by circumcision. A woman's

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen (1983) 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 42.

description follows her father's or husband's. As a rule, therefore, she becomes Jewish by marriage.<sup>13</sup>

After the exile, though, this system becomes ineffective, since the man who marries a foreign woman is more likely to assimilate into the dominant culture (hers) instead of asking her to assimilate into his own. Once the Israelites have resettled and reestablished a dominant culture, the fears can be relaxed, and intermarriage can safely resume. A new result is that a woman can convert on her own.<sup>14</sup>

Milgrom investigates the Priestly Code (P) to show that there was a major ethnic difference between the pre-exilic *ger* and the pre-exilic Israelite, and that difference can be seen in the laws regarding the treatment of the *ger*. He explains the difference between a foreigner's breaking a prohibitive commandment, which brings impurity, and omitting a performative commandment, which does not:

The underlying postulate is this: the *ger* is bound by prohibitive commandments and not by the performative ones. The violation of a prohibitive commandment requires an act. According to P, an act forbidden by God generates impurity which impinges upon God's sanctuary and land...it makes no difference whether the polluter is Israelite or non-Israelite....Performative commandments, on the other hand, are violated by refraining or neglecting to do them. Such violations are not sins of commission but of omission. They too can lead to dire consequences but only for the Israelite who is enjoined to observe them. The *ger*, however, is not so obligated. Sins of omission, of non-observance, generate no pollution either to the land or the sanctuary. Thus the *ger*, the resident non-Israelite, does not jeopardize the welfare of his Israelite neighbor by not complying with the performative commandments. Consequently, he need not, for example, observe the *pesach* (a performative commandment), but if he so desires he may be circumcised (Exod 12:48) and be in a state of ritual purity (Num 9:6-7, 13-14). However, under no circumstances may he possess leaven during the festival, a prohibitive commandment (Exod 12:19, 13:7). Another illuminating example is Yom Kippur (Lev 16:29, 31). The *ger* is required to refrain from work on this day (a prohibitive commandment) but he need not fast (a performative commandment). Thus the Priestly Code makes a precise legal distinction between the *ger* and the Israelite, i.e. he possessed his own ethnic identity. Though he may have worshipped Israel's God and was required to bring purification offerings to the sanctuary for polluting it by his

<sup>13</sup> Daube, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Daube, 7-8. Daube incorporates Ezra/Nehemiah's diatribes against intermarriage into his explanation, but his approach is not convincing.

inadvertent wrongs, he was not obliged to follow all the religious prescriptions incumbent upon his Israelite neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Although Milgrom's approach says more about the treatment of the *ger* during the pre-exilic period than about conversion, it has implications for the theological understandings of conversion. Here Milgrom, who assigns a pre-exilic date to the Priestly Code,<sup>16</sup> argues that in the pre-exilic period the *ger* who lived among Israelites had responsibilities regarding prohibitive commandments, thus making a distinction between the stranger living in the land and the foreigner outside the land. The stranger living in the land has the power to pollute and bring impurity by breaking a prohibitive commandment. This is a theology with geographic borders, in that a foreigner living outside the land cannot bring such impurity because God's rule does not extend beyond the land. Milgrom argues that the obligation to follow performative commandments fell only upon the ethnic group of Israelites, thus the stranger in the land could not bring impurity by omitting them, since they were not bound by those commandments. For our purposes, we will be interested to see if there are cases in which the stranger or foreigner is obligated to perform positive commandments, which would be a signal of the crossing of the ethnic/religious boundary.<sup>17</sup>

Cohen also makes historical claims that are relevant to this study. First, he argues that conversion as we understand it today does not appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible (following Kaufmann), and that it first begins to appear in the Persian period. He points to two texts from 2 Maccabees and Judith as evidence for this new type of conversion.<sup>18</sup> Second, he shows that the concept that an outsider can become a Jew is taken from the Greek

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<sup>15</sup> Milgrom, 170-171.

<sup>16</sup> David Sperling (personal correspondence) comments, "Most scholars, myself included, date "P" to exilic and post-exilic times."

<sup>17</sup> See analysis of biblical texts, following.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen (1999) 122. Extra-biblical texts are not analyzed in this study.

concept of Hellenization, by which an outsider can become Greek; "conversion to Judaism thus emerges as an analogue to conversion to Hellenism."<sup>19</sup>

Even if "Judaean" always retained its ethnic meaning, in the Hasmonean period common mode of worship and common way of life became much more important in the new definition of Judaean/Jew. Just as a barbarian could become a Hellene through speaking Greek and adopting a Greek way of life, a gentile could become a Jew through worshiping the God of Jerusalem (i.e., believing firmly in God) and/or adopting a Judaean way of life (i.e., observing the ancestral laws of the Judaeans).<sup>20</sup>

Cohen emphasizes that although Greekness was stripped of its ethnic connections, Jewishness was not. It became an ethno-religious identity. "Jewishness (Judaeaness) once had been a function of birth and geography but now in the Hasmonean period it became a function of religion and culture."<sup>21</sup> By changing their beliefs and adopting certain customs, individual gentiles could now convert to Judaism.

The third important historical claim Cohen makes is that a gentile's respect or affection for Judaism exists on a spectrum of behavior. He identifies seven "forms of behavior" on this spectrum: admiring some aspect of Judaism; acknowledging the power of the god of the Jews; benefiting the Jews or being conspicuously friendly to the Jews; practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews; venerating the god of the Jews and denying or ignoring all other gods; joining the Jewish community; converting to Judaism and "becoming a Jew."<sup>22</sup> Cohen's spectrum reminds us that gentile behavior toward Judaism cannot be understood in binary terms (either you convert or you don't), and that conversion itself should be understood as the culmination of a process in which a gentile occupies different places on the spectrum at different times.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 137.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, ch. 5, 140-162.

## 2

**Textual Analysis**

The Rabbinic sages would disagree with the historians that conversion does not exist in the Hebrew Bible. Yet the biblical text does not offer a clear example of conversion as we know it today. There simply is no narrative of an individual gentile who becomes an Israelite or a Jew through a ritual process that changes the person's status from 'not a member of the Jewish people' to 'full member of the Jewish people.'

Nevertheless, there are biblical passages that show how ancient Israelites understood conversion as *they* knew it. I have taken the most relevant passages and grouped them according to their theologies:

- A. Legendary proselytes: Exodus 18:1-12 (Jethro); Joshua 2:9-11 (Rahab); 1 Kings 8:41-43 (Solomon's Temple prayer); 2 Kings 5:13-18 (Na'aman); Esther 8:17 (*mityahadim*).
- B. An outsider looking for a people: Ruth.
- C. A response to exile (toward a more universal god): Isaiah 56:1-8 (attached foreigners sacrifice); Zechariah 2:14-15 (many nations will join).
- D. God is so great, even Gentiles will come to join us: Zechariah 8:20-23 (grab a Jew's cloak); Isaiah 14:1-2 (cleave to the House of Jacob).
- E. A consequence of living with foreigners: Ezra and Nehemiah (various); Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:34, 24:22; Numbers 15:29-31; Deuteronomy 29:9-12 (*ger* included in covenant); Ezekiel 47:21-23 (*ger* receives portion of Israel); Esther 9:27.

These groupings are not strict and are primarily a convenience for organizing the large volume of texts to be analyzed. The thematic range outlined above stands in tension with the ill-fated desire to find a single path of development of a conversion idea in the Tanakh. The



range of periods, settings and authorships of the biblical canon will necessarily reveal a diversity of views toward outsiders becoming insiders, to which we now turn.

#### A. LEGENDARY PROSELYTES

Gentiles who saw Israel's or God's power and were either very afraid or very impressed are labeled by Kaufmann as "legendary proselytes."<sup>23</sup> Five narratives fit this profile: Jethro, Rahab, the *nokhri* at Solomon's Temple, Naaman, and the gentiles in Esther 8:17. Each narrative sheds light on the biblical spectrum of conversionary possibilities. In each passage a gentile is profoundly impressed or afraid of the Israelites, the Jews or their God. While none of these cases constitutes conversion as we understand it today, each shows a gentile engaged in Israelitizing or Judaizing behavior, occupying a different place on Cohen's continuum.

#### **Exodus 18:1-12 (Jethro)**

In Exodus 18, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and a *kohen Midian*, "heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people." Jethro takes Moses' wife and two sons and brings them to the wilderness where Moses is encamped at the mountain of God. After Moses and Jethro greet each other, Moses "recounted to his father-in-law everything that the Lord had done..." Jethro then rejoices at Yahweh's kindness:

10 וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן בְּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר  
הִצִּיל אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִמַּחַט יַד־מִצְרַיִם 11 עַתָּה יָרַעַתִּי כִּי־גָדוֹל יְהוָה מִכָּל־הָאֱלֹהִים  
כִּי בִדְבַר אֲשֶׁר יָדַעְתִּי עָלֵיכֶם 12 וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מִשָּׁה עֲלֵהּ וּבָתִּים לָאֱלֹהִים  
וַיָּבֹא אֶתְרוֹ וְכָל זָקְנוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֶאֱכֹל־לֶחֶם עִם־חֹתֵן מִשָּׁה לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים:<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann (1977) 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ex. 18:10-12.

10 "Blessed be the LORD," Jethro said, "who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. 11 Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against the people." 12 And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law.

Jethro does three things worthy of attention: he speaks positively about Yahweh, both blessing Yahweh and acknowledging that Yahweh is the greatest of all the gods; he offers a burnt offering and sacrifices to Yahweh; and he partakes in a feast before God with Aaron, the elders, and presumably Moses.<sup>25</sup>

In Jethro's speech act, he opens by blessing God.<sup>26</sup> His justification for blessing God is that God saved Moses and his people (*etkhem*) from Egypt and Pharaoh. Since Jethro was not present at the Exodus, and because he is not an Israelite, he does say "us." Nevertheless, Jethro is so impressed with what God did for the Israelites that he declares Yahweh to be the greatest of all the gods using the phrase *yada'ti ki*. Interestingly, two other non-Israelites, Rahab (Josh 2:9) and Naaman (2 Kings 5:15) use this exact phrase to acknowledge Yahweh's power.<sup>27</sup>

Jethro's sacrifices and celebratory meal deserve analysis. Other non-Israelites make sacrifices to Yahweh in the Bible,<sup>28</sup> but Jethro's offerings, when combined with the meal in

<sup>25</sup> The text does not specifically say that Moses attended the feast. Because the feast is the culmination of a discussion between Moses and Jethro, it is reasonable to assume Moses was there (see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Hizkuni). Rashi says that Moses is not mentioned because he was serving the meal.

<sup>26</sup> Although Jethro is the first to bless God for redeeming the Israelites from Egypt, this is not the first time the phrase *barukh YHVH* appears in the Bible nor is it the first time a non-Israelite uses the phrase. The first distinction goes to Noah (Gen 10:26) and the second goes to Abraham's servant Eliezer (Gen 24:27; Eliezer recounts how he bowed low in homage to Yahweh and blessed Yahweh in v. 48). Because this servant (unnamed in Gen. 24) is primarily showing thanks for God's help in finding a wife for Isaac and shows no other conversion-like behavior, that narrative is not analyzed here. See also Abimelech with Isaac, Gen 26:28-29; King Hiram of Tyre with Solomon, 1 Kings 5:21,22 and 2 Ch 2:11; and the Queen of Sheba, 1 Kings 10:9.

<sup>27</sup> Rahab: Josh 2:9; Naaman: 2 Kings 5:15. These passages are analyzed below.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Jonah's shipmates (Jonah 1:16). Nahmanides' commentary to Ex. 18:12 points out that the sacrifices that Jethro makes (*olah* and *zevakhim*) are made to *elohim* and not YHVH, in contrast to the sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus.

which the leaders Moses, Aaron and the elders partake,<sup>29</sup> give the reader a sense that he has achieved some special status. That special status is confirmed in the verses that follow when Jethro counsels Moses about setting up a system for hearing cases.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Jethro is Moses' father-in-law should not be overlooked and is relevant to this analysis. As the father of Moses' wife and grandfather of his children, Jethro is part of Moses' immediate family. Perhaps more than anything else it is this relationship that leads to Jethro's blessing God, offering sacrifices, and partaking in the meal with the Israelite leadership. If anyone could have become an Israelite between the Exodus and the Sinai revelation, it would have been Jethro.

And yet, there is nothing in the Jethro narrative to indicate that Jethro joins the Israelites in any meaningful way; neither he nor the Israelites consider him to have become an Israelite. The text indicates that Jethro blesses God, engages in Israelite cultic behavior, and counsels Moses, but nowhere does the text indicate that Jethro has become an Israelite. In a passage that may refer to Jethro (Num 10:29-32) Moses invites his father-in-law to come with the Israelites to the promised land. His father-in-law declines, saying that he will instead return to his native land. Moses protests and entices the offer with a promise of the "same bounty that the Lord grants us." Presumably his father-in-law still declines the offer, since the narrative does not mention him again. The Jethro narrative illustrates both the extent to which a non-Israelite can adhere to the Israelites and the limits of such adherence. Taken at face value, the Jethro narrative cannot be read as a story of conversion.

#### Joshua 2:9-11 (Rahab)

9 וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאֲנָשִׁים יְדַעְתִּי כִּי־נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִי־נִפְלְאָה אִי־מַחֲכֶם  
עָלֵינוּ וְכִי נִמְנָה כָל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ כַּפְּנֵיכֶם 10 כִּי שָׁמַעְנוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הִבִּישׁ יְהוָה

<sup>29</sup> See Ex 24:11, where the same group, minus Jethro, join in a similar meal.

<sup>30</sup> Ex 18:19-23. Notably, in v. 23, Jethro says *v'tzivekha elohim* – God commands you to do this.

אֶחָדָם יָבִיט וַיֹּסֶף בְּפָנֵיכֶם בְּצֹאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם וְאַשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם לְשָׂנֵי מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי  
 אֲשֶׁר בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן לְסִיחֹן וְלֹעֲוִי אֲשֶׁר הִחָרְקִתֶם אוֹתָם 11 וַנִּשְׁקַע נַפְסִי דָבָנִי  
 וְלֹא־קִוִּיתִי עוֹד רוּחַ בָּאִישׁ מִפְּנֵיכֶם כִּי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם  
 מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת

9 She said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. 10 For we have heard how the LORD dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. 11 When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the LORD your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below.

In the Rahab narrative, two spies are sent by Joshua to scout out Jericho. They came to the house of Rahab, a prostitute and resident of Jericho, who hides them and lies to the king of Jericho regarding their whereabouts. She tells the spies that the city is terrified by what Yahweh has done for the Israelites, drying up the Sea of Reeds and helping them to win military victories. She declares Yahweh to be the only god in heaven above and earth below. Then she asks the spies for a *quid pro quo*: in exchange for her protection, she asks them to protect her and her family when the Israelites come to take the city. The spies agree and give their word of honor upon their lives, on condition that she does not tell anyone about their mission.

Rahab's actions appear to be directly related to her desire to rescue her family from imminent doom and can scarcely be considered a case of conversion with the exception of her declaration, *ki Yahweh eloheichem hu elohim bashamayim mima'al v'al-ha'aretz mitachat*. What relevance might there be to the fact that her words are almost exactly the same as Moses' in Deut 4:39: *ki Yahweh hu haelohim bashamayim mima'al v'al-ha'aretz mitachat ein 'od*? In addition, her words could be considered a fulfillment of God's words in Deut 2:25, "...I begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under

heaven, so that they shall tremble and quake because of you whenever they hear you mentioned."<sup>31</sup>

Rahab's speech glorifies God by showing the degree to which even non-Israelites recognize God's power and God's preference for the Israelite people. She is afraid for her life, and hopes that by praising the God of the imminent invaders, she can earn protection. But nowhere in the narrative is the reader led to believe that Rahab becomes a member of the Israelite people. That Rahab's declaration is in no way considered a speech act that would make her an Israelite (in either her eyes or the spies') is confirmed by her request for protection and her demand of some sign that the spies will indeed protect her family. If her speech in any way made her an Israelite, she would not have need to request protection let alone proof of the protection; the spies would have offered her protection as a new member of their people.

The Jethro and Rahab narratives function not as conversion narratives but rather as impartial testimony to the power of Yahweh. If the gentile witnesses became Israelites, their testimony would not be as convincing.

#### 1 Kings 8:41-43 (Solomon Requests Foreigners Prayers be Heard)<sup>32</sup>

41 וְגַם אֶל־הַנִּכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־מִעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא וְכָא מֵאֲרֶץ רְחוֹקָה לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ  
 42 כִּי יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ הַגָּדוֹל וְאֶת־יָדְךָ הַמְּצֻקָה וְיִזְעַקְךָ הַגָּשׁוּיָה וְכָא וְהִתְפַּלֵּל  
 אֶל־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה 43 אָתָּה תִשְׁמַע הַשָּׁמַיִם מִכּוֹן שִׁבְעָתְךָ וְעֲשִׂיתָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָא  
 אֵלֶיךָ הַנִּכְרִי לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּן כָּל־עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ לֵדָאָה אֲתָךְ בְּעַמְּךָ  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֵדַעַת כִּי־שָׁמָּה יִקְרָא עַל־הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בָּנִיתִי

41 "Or if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name — 42 for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm — when he comes to pray toward this House, 43 oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know

<sup>31</sup> Although this verse appears to be closely linked to the Rahab speech thematically, there are very few linguistic parallels in the two passages.

<sup>32</sup> See also 2 Ch 6:32-33.

Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built.

In Solomon's speech at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8), after introductory remarks explaining why he, and not his father David, built the Temple, Solomon makes a number of requests of God. The first five requests are to heed the Israelites' supplications; to act as a judge in disputes; to help Israel win battles; to provide rains; and to protect against plague and disease. The sixth request is found in vv. 41-43: to hear the prayers of foreigners and do what they ask.

The foreigner is described in this passage as one "who is not of Your people Israel [who] comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name...[who] shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm..." A *nokhri* impressed by God's actions toward the Israelites would come to Jerusalem and reside there. Solomon allows the *nokhri* to pray toward the Temple and asks God to grant "all that the foreigner asks for." Solomon's explanation for the request is that when God grants the requests of foreigners, the foreigners will know God and revere God, and know that the Temple is God's Temple (v43).

A keyword in this passage is *sh'mekha*, 'Your name,' which appears four times in the three verses. Of special interest is the use of the phrase *l'ma'an sh'mekha*, 'for the sake of Your name,' as the reason that foreigners come from a distant land. While the phrase appears in a variety of places in the Bible, its use here with regard to non-Israelites is unique.<sup>33</sup> Also of interest is the mixed use of singular and plural language in the passage. In some phrases the foreigner is an individual who travels from a distant land for the sake of God's name and comes to pray toward the Temple. In other phrases the foreigners are a

<sup>33</sup> The phrase *lema'an shemo* is used by the sages to describe a valid motive for conversion, roughly equivalent to "for the sake of heaven." See Rabbinic chapter, especially the second theology, "Faith."

group who hear about God's redemption of Israel and will come to know God's name and revere God.

The most compelling aspect of this passage from the standpoint of conversion may not be Solomon's request that the prayers of non-Israelites be answered by Yahweh, which must be understood in the context of the geographic theology of the biblical period. Since Yahweh is the only god who rules the land of Israel, the foreigners who come to the land have no one else to pray to, except Yahweh. Presumably, Solomon asks Yahweh to grant the requests of foreigners in order to make them feel welcome and encourage them to stay in the land. More compelling is Solomon's statement that as a result of Yahweh's answering the prayers of non-Israelites, "all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does Your people Israel." Other peoples' acting in ways *k'amkha yisrael*, 'like the people Israel' is a step towards conversion.

## 2 Kings 5:13-18 (Na'aman)

13 וַיָּגִשׁוּ עֲבָדָיו וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ אָבִי דָבָר גָּדוֹל הִקְבִּיא דְבָר אֱלֹהִיךָ הַלּוֹא  
 חֲשָׁשָׁה וְאֵף כִּי־אָמַר אֱלֹהִיךָ יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר 14 וַיֵּרֶד וַיִּטְבֹּל בַּיַּרְדֵּן שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים  
 כְּדָבָר אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשָּׁב כְּשֶׁרֹ בְּשָׂרֹ כְּבָשָׂר נָעַר קָטָן וַיִּשְׁהַר 15 וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־אִישׁ  
 הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא וְכָל־מִתְנָתוֹ וַיָּבֹא וַיַּעֲמֵד לִפְנֵי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה־נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין  
 אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ כִּי אִם־בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַעֲשֵׂה קַח־נָא בְּרִכָּה מֵאֵת עֲבָדֶיךָ 16  
 וַיֹּאמֶר חֲיִי־יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־עֲבַדְתִּי לִפְנֵי אִם־אֶקַּח וַיַּפְצֵר־בוּ לְקַחַת וַיִּקְחוּ 17  
 וַיֹּאמֶר נָשְׂקוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁתָּנָא לְעַבְדֶּיךָ מִשָּׂא עֲמֻד־פָּרָדִים אֲדָמָה כִּי לֹא־יַעֲשֶׂה עוֹד  
 עֲבָדֶיךָ עֲלֶיהָ וְנִכַּח לְאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים כִּי אִם־לַיהוָה 18 לְדָבָר הַזֶּה וְסָלַח יְהוָה  
 לְעַבְדֶּיךָ כִּבּוֹא אֲדָנִי בִּית־רַמּוֹן לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת שָׁמָּה וְהוּא נִשְׁעָן עַל־יָדָיו  
 וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתִי בֵּית רַמּוֹן בְּהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתִי בֵּית רַמּוֹן וְסָלַח־נָא יְהוָה לְעַבְדֶּיךָ כְּדָבָר הַזֶּה

13 But his servants came forward and spoke to him. "Sir," they said, "if the prophet told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, 'Bathe and be clean.'" 14 So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy's, and he was clean. 15 Returning with his entire retinue to the man of God, he stood before him and exclaimed, "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel! So please accept a gift from your servant." 16 But he replied, "As the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept anything." He pressed him to accept, but he refused. 17 And Naaman said, "Then at least let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice

to any god, except the LORD. 18 But may the LORD pardon your servant for this: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon — when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant in this."

Naaman, commander of the army of the King of Aram, was afflicted with skin disease. When he hears about a prophet in Samaria who could provide a cure, he asks permission from the King of Aram to pay the prophet Elisha a visit. Elisha does not greet the important commander when he arrives. Instead, he sends a messenger to instruct Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan. Naaman is incensed that Elisha did not greet him and cure him on the spot. His servants convince him to follow Elisha's instructions, and Naaman's disease is cured by the immersion. Naaman declares, "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel!" He implores Elisha to accept a gift. When Elisha refuses, Naaman asks for two loads of soil so that he can pray to Yahweh when he returns home.<sup>34</sup> Then he asks Yahweh for forgiveness in advance, since Naaman knows he will have to bow low in the temple of Rimmon as part of his duties to the King of Aram.

How are we to understand Naaman's response to the miraculous healing of his leprosy? The text indicates that Naaman is somehow changed after being cured: "his flesh became like a little boy's, and he was clean (*yit'har*)" (14). Just as his flesh "turns around (*vayashov*)," so Naaman "turns around" toward the prophet Elisha (15). Naaman not only declares the uniqueness of God's power in the world with words, he asks Elisha for two mule-loads of soil to take home, saying further, "your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any God except Yahweh" (17). Naaman the master in Aram has become Naaman the servant of Yahweh.

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<sup>34</sup> Another example of the biblical theology that Yahweh's power is connected to the land of Israel.



The Naaman narrative in 2 Kings 5 has both ritual and theological elements worthy of analysis. The ritual element is immersion: although the pretext for the immersion is healing, Naaman's seven immersions in the Jordan are reminiscent of the three immersions in the *mikveh* required for conversion under halakhah. In addition, Naaman's flesh becoming like that of a little boy's is reminiscent of the rabbinic claim that a convert becomes like a newborn child.<sup>35</sup> Theologically, Naaman professes allegiance to Yahweh. He acknowledges God's greatness and promises to serve only Yahweh (except when he must appear by his King's side in the temple of Rimmon).

These ritual and theological elements make a compelling case that Naaman in some way "converted." One has the sense that Naaman will be loyal in his faith toward Yahweh, even though it will be difficult and awkward, especially when he is in the temple of Rimmon.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, important aspects of a conversion are missing. Neither Naaman nor Elisha make any statements or actions that lead the reader to believe that Naaman has become an Israelite. On the contrary, Naaman returns home to his original land and position, changed only in his new-found health and his belief in the power of the God of Israel. Naaman may have brought home the soil of Israel along with an allegiance to Israel's God, but he has not become a member of the people Israel. Cohen writes about Naaman's conversion, "The national component is completely missing from this conversion...The link between God, land, and nation is still determinative in this story, and as long as that link remained intact, the institution of conversion could not develop."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Yevamot 22a, 48b, 62a (x2), 97b; Bechorot 47a.

<sup>36</sup> Robert L Cohn compares Naaman to a marrano Jew who is forced to feign allegiance to another God. *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, 2 Kings*. Liturgical Press: Minnesota, 2000, p39.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen (1983) 34.

**Esther 8:17 (*Mityahadim*)**

17 וּבְכָל-מְדִינָה וּבְכָל-עִיר וְעִיר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דְּבַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וָדָחוּ מִיָּד  
 שָׂמְחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן לַיְּהוּדִים מִשְׁתָּה וַיּוֹם טוֹב וַיְבִיטוּ מֵעַמִּי הָאָרֶץ מִתְּנַחֲמִים כִּי-נָפַל  
 פְּתוּרַיִהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם

17 And in every province and in every city, when the king's command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

This verse appears near the end of the book of Esther, after Haman has been impaled and King Ahasuerus approved a dispatch that the Jews could defend themselves and fight any attackers on 13 Adar, and just before that day and its battle occurred. Leaving the keyword in the verse untranslated, the second half of the verse reads, "and many of the people of the land *mityahadim*, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." The relevance of this text to our study turns completely on how *mityahadim*, a word that appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, is understood.

In uncovering the meaning of the text, the following three passages by Moore, Cohen and Beal are helpful. Moore writes in the Anchor Bible commentary:

The Hithpa'al denominative of *yehudi*, 'Jew'; a *hapax legomenon*...the term may mean the Gentiles identified themselves with the cause of the threatened Jews and pretended to be Jews...or actually and sincerely converted to Judaism. If the last interpretation be correct, one is hard pressed to find a historical point in either the Persian or the Greek period when such wholesale conversions to Judaism occurred. D. N. Freedman is probably correct in suspecting that it 'does not refer to a real conversion at all but is part of the enhancement of the story.'<sup>38</sup>

Moore offers two ways of reading the verb: either gentiles pretended to be Jews or they actually became Jews. The suggestion that 8:17 is a fanciful enhancement to the story is difficult in light of 9:27, "the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them (*kol ha-nilvim aleihem*), to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year."<sup>39</sup> Clearly, in the book of Esther,

<sup>38</sup> Moore, *Anchor Bible: Esther*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Esther 9:27 is analyzed below.

non-Jews were involved in the life of the Jews, but the question remains whether they retained their gentile identity or not.

Cohen argues against conversion and for pretending, saying that only in the Middle Ages does the verb *lehityahed* mean "to convert to Judaism."<sup>40</sup> He explains:

The simple meaning of the Hebrew... is not that many non-Jews converted to Judaism but that they pretended to be Jews: they professed themselves to be something they were not. They did so because they feared for their lives; the Jews had just been given carte blanche by the king to kill their enemies, and therefore many gentiles pretended to be Jews in order to protect themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Beal also argues against conversion and for pretending, or acting like Jews. He even speculates about what such behavior might look like:

But what precisely would these people be converting to? Where in the book of Esther is there a clear link between Jewish identity and religious practice? Moore and Fox rightly counter that this verb be understood as a reference to people *behaving* as Jews, that is, performing Jewish identity. Of course, that still leaves one wondering what this behavior might look like. Indeed, perhaps being Jewish is less a matter of acting or appearing a certain way (since Jewish identity is not known unless it is 'disclosed'; 2:10, 20; 3:4, 6; 7:3-6) and more a matter of *sounding* or *writing* a certain way, for the text has indicated that different peoples have different languages and different scripts (1:22; 3:12; 8:9).<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, because the word appears nowhere else in the Bible, its meaning must be primarily understood in the context of the book in which it appears. Here Cohen's argument that *mityahadim* means to pretend or act like a Jew is convincing, since the verse itself says that the many people *mityahadim* "because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." In addition, the text offers no description of any ritual or requirements for becoming a Jew, nor is there any mention of these people's identity as Jews continuing in the future, with the possible exception of those "who attached themselves" in 9:27. The gentiles in the book of

<sup>40</sup> Cohen (1999) 160ff.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen (1999) 181.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Ruth and Esther*, Liturgical Press, Minnesota 1999, p105-6.

Esther understood the political and military threat, and in fear for their lives, they acted like Jews in hopes of not getting killed on 13 Adar.<sup>43</sup>

### B. AN OUTSIDER LOOKING FOR A PEOPLE

#### **The Book of Ruth**

Despite the Rabbinic exegesis of the Book of Ruth as a conversionary text,<sup>44</sup> few modern scholars see in Ruth an example of rabbinic conversion. Kaufmann sees in the Book of Ruth an example of the ancient national/cultural understanding of conversion, and many scholars follow his approach.<sup>45</sup>

The conversion that appears here [in Ruth] has no universal basis, but rather a national basis... There is no religious motivation to this conversion. Ruth does not go with Naomi because she heard from her mouth about the great name of the God of Israel and about his strong hand, etc. On the contrary, Naomi speaks tenderly to her daughters-in-law to return to their gods (1:16). Even the idea expressed in 1 Sam. 26:19, that residing in a foreign land is a curse, is not hinted at here. Ruth goes with Naomi only because of her love for her (1:10, 14-17; 2:11). Because she clung to Naomi, she wants to cling also to her people and her God... Even after she settles in the land she is still called a foreigner (*nokhriyah*, 2:10). The conversion here is a nationalistic clinging that tugs after cultural assimilation.<sup>46</sup>

Scholars have suggested a wide range of intentions for the Book of Ruth, such as refuting the exclusion of foreign wives in Ezra and Nehemiah, establishing the genealogy of David, promoting proper conduct, and honoring good relations with foreigners, but they do not suggest the book was intended to describe a conversion process.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Alternatively, *mityahadim* can be understood as part of the humor of the book. Sperling comments, "Both Esther and Mordecai could pass as gentiles. Haman only finds out that Mordecai is Jewish because Mordecai had told his fellow courtiers [Est. 3:4]. Now, gentiles are trying to pass as Jews. But it's unlikely that Jews further from court-circles than our heroes were distinctive enough in clothing, observance and speech to be imitated by outsiders. The hitpa'el of a verb can refer to acting a part. In 1Sam 10:9-12 and elsewhere *mitnabbe* means 'act like a prophet.'" [personal correspondence].

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Rashi to 1:16 as well as midrashic material. See Rabbinic chapter for more detail.

<sup>45</sup> Cohen (1999) 122ff. See also Zlotowitz in Jacob and Zemer (eds.), *Conversion to Judaism and Jewish Law*, 79ff.

<sup>46</sup> Kaufmann (1955) 213-14.

<sup>47</sup> For a brief overview of the range of intentions that have been suggested see Hubbard, Jr., Robert. *The Book of Ruth*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1988, 35-42.

Ruth is a character with outstanding moral qualities who was left in a dangerous situation, husbandless and vulnerable. She has a choice between staying with her mother-in-law Naomi or returning to her people. She chooses Naomi. She does not choose the people Israel or their God as much as she chooses to be with Naomi's people and Naomi's God (1:16). If Naomi had been an Edomite or a Canaanite, the reader has the sense that Ruth would still have clung to Naomi.

Ruth may represent a voice of reform against earlier biblical texts. In his article on Ruth in the new *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Sperling, who ascribes a late date to the book, writes:

During the Persian period of Jewish history (539-331) when Ruth was written, the question of personal status had become acute. Late books of the Bible that stem from this period reflect differing attitudes about the possibility of a non-Jew becoming a Jew. In contrast to Ezra-Nehemiah, according to which there are no means for those not born to the "holy seed" (Ezra 9:3, legal midrash on Isaiah 6:13) to become Jews, the author of Ruth makes it possible for a foreigner to find protection under the wings of YHWH (Ruth 2:12). Ruth's author effectively repeals the exclusion of Moabites (Deut. 23:4) enforced in Neh. 13:23-27), which appeals to the precedent of how Solomon strayed by taking foreign wives. Instead, the Book of Ruth points to the precedent of the ancient worthies who built up the house of Israel by ignoring the letter of the law when the growth of the house of Israel was at stake.

If one intention of the book of Ruth is to contest the idea that gentiles – either generally, or specific groups like the Moabites – cannot become Israelites, then the book represents an important development in the biblical views of conversion. The Ruth narrative lacks the ritual elements of rabbinic conversion, and doesn't have a good idea of how a gentile should become a Jew except through marriage. However, the book does establish the possibility of a gentile becoming a Jew, and even argues that an outsider can participate in the lineage of a figure as important as King David. In short, the Book of Ruth is a strong voice for opening up membership into the people Israel to gentiles.

### C. RESPONSE TO EXILE: TOWARD A MORE UNIVERSAL GOD

In the two passages that follow, from Isaiah 56 and Zechariah 8, the exile emerges as a strong influence on Israelite theology, causing a shift toward a more universalistic approach.

#### **Isaiah 56:1-8 (esp. vv. 3, 6-7; Attached Foreigners may Sacrifice)**

3 וְאֵל־יֹאמַר בְּנֵי־הַנֶּחָר הַנִּלְוָה אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר הַבְּדֵל וּבְדִילְנִי יְהוָה מֵעַל עַמּוֹ  
וְאֵל־יֹאמַר הַפְּרִים הֵן אֲנִי עֵץ יָבֵשׁ  
6 וּבְנֵי הַנֶּחָר הַנִּלְוָה עַל־יְהוָה לְשָׁרְתוֹ וּלְאַהֲבָה אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה לִהְיוֹת לוֹ  
לְעֹבְדִים בְּלִי־שָׁמֶר שָׁבַת מַחֲלָלוֹ וּמַחֲזִיקִים בְּבְרִיתִי 7 וְהַבְּיֹאוֹתִים אֶל־הַר קָדְשִׁי  
וְשִׁמְחָתִים בְּבֵית תַּפְלִי עוֹלָתֵיהֶם וְזִבְחֵיהֶם לְרָצוֹן עַל־זִבְחֵי כִּי בֵיתִי  
בֵּית־תַּפְלָה יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים

3 Let not the foreigner say, who has attached himself to the LORD, "The LORD will keep me apart from His people"; and let not the eunuch say, "I am a withered tree." ...

6 As for the foreigners who attach themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants — all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, And who hold fast to My covenant — 7 I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

This post-exilic text from second Isaiah occupies an important place in the biblical development of conversion. In vv. 3-8, the prophet turns his attention to two groups of outsiders among the Israelites: eunuchs (*sarisim*) and foreigners who attach themselves to Yahweh (*ben hu-nekhar ha-nilvah el Yahweh*) [*"nilvim"*<sup>48</sup>]. The promise of redemption that is given to the Israelites in v2 is also given to these outsiders in vv. 5 and 7. The non-Israelite *nilvim* are of special interest here.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> The word *nilvim* means "those who attach themselves" or "those who join" and does not say anything about the identity of the person (Israelite or gentile), although the verses cited above and immediately below do refer to gentiles who are living closely with Israelites. Because of the awkwardness of translations (e.g. "joiners"), the Hebrew word *nilvim* will be used.

<sup>49</sup> While the juxtaposition of eunuchs and *nilvim* (see previous note) is worthy of investigation, it will be assumed here that both were classes of people who were not fully included in the Israelite community at the time, and thus attention will be focused on the *nilvim*.

*Nilvim*, gentiles who attach themselves to or desire to join the Israelite community, are not unique to Isaiah 56 and appear also in Is. 14:1, Zech. 2:15, Esther 9:27 and as *nivdalim* (those who separate themselves) in Ezra 6:21 and Neh. 10:29.<sup>50</sup> They represent individuals or nations who attach themselves in some way to God, Israel, or the Jews. Is. 56:3 shows the ambivalence and confusion in the Israelite community regarding the status of such foreigners: "Let not the foreigner say... 'The Lord will keep me apart from His people.'" During the exile foreigners had become an integral part of the Israelite community but their status vis-à-vis Yahweh needed to be clarified, which may have been the original purpose of this passage.

Is. 56:6 lists five ways in which the *nilvim* have distinguished themselves from other foreigners and attached themselves to Yahweh: they minister to God (*lesharto*), love Yahweh's name, are His servant (*'avdo*), keep the Sabbath, and hold fast to the covenant.<sup>51</sup> Three of these phrases are uniquely applied to non-Israelites in this verse.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to establish exactly what each phrase meant to the author. One of the phrases – loving Yahweh's name – may have religious overtones, since it has the connotation of trusting in God or being loyal to God.<sup>53</sup> But perhaps the best way to understand verse 6 is not to over-emphasize any single phrase. Instead, the extensive list of 'requirements' itself is the

<sup>50</sup> Is 14:1 (*nilvah hager aleihem*); Zech 2:15 (*nilvu goyim rabim el Yahweh*); Esther 9:27 (*kol ha-nilvim aleihem*); Ezra 6:21 (*v'kol ha-nivdal mi-tum'at goy ha-aretz*); Neh 10:29 (*v'khol ha-nivdal me-amei ha'aratot el torat ha-elohim*). Each of these passages is analyzed below.

<sup>51</sup> A sixth possible requirement exists, but the nominative phrase *ha-nilvim 'al yhw* probably refers to a certain category of foreigner rather than a requirement for the foreigner to fulfill.

<sup>52</sup> (1) Minister (*l'sharto*) can refer to a variety of behaviors, from serving idols (Ez 20:32) to making sacrifices to Yahweh (Ez 44:15-16) to serving someone's needs, like a master (Is 60:7, 10). (2) The phrase *ahavah et shem yhw* is unique in TNK, but the phrase "lovers of the name" (*ohavei sh'mekha, shemo*) does appear in three places (Ps. 5:12 – contrast to the enemies, parallel to the *tzadik*; Ps 69:37 parallel to 'offspring of his servants' = *zera' 'avadav* and also has an exilic context; and Ps 119:132. (3) *Machazikim bivriti* is also unique in TNK, except for its appearance in the same chapter of Isaiah (56:4) when it is applied to the eunuchs. Except for Is. 56, none of these three cases refer to non-Israelites.

<sup>53</sup> And thus less likely to refer to a specific cult practice or behavior. But see Ps 119:132, where the phrase is connected to *mishpat*.

message of the verse: certain foreigners, who are known as *ha-nilvim 'al YHWH*, who act toward Yahweh like Israelites in every respect – by ministering to God, loving God's name, being God's servant, keeping the Sabbath, and holding fast to the covenant – this special category of foreigners will receive the benefits listed in v7.

Notably missing from this description of (or set of requirements for) a special category of foreigners is circumcision. Blenkinsopp comments, "in contrast to the Priestly prescriptions in the Pentateuch (Gen. 17:9-14; Ex. 12:43-49), Sabbath observance and not circumcision is here the criterion of membership in the community."<sup>54</sup> Sperling also compares the passage to Gen. 17, but comes up with a different conclusion. He shows how that by incorporating both Sabbath observance and circumcision, Is. 56 develops a mechanism for conversion of foreigners:

As already suggested in Qimhi's commentary to 56:4, *briti* means the "covenant of circumcision." The background of Isaiah 56 is the controversy during the Persian period between the parties aptly designated by Smith as the "assimilationists" and the "segregationists." The segregationists refused both to obligate outsiders by the laws of the post-exilic Jewish community and to grant them its benefits of membership. In contrast, the assimilationists were in favor of intermarriage and the incorporation of outsiders. Isa 56:1-7 is a compromise between the competing positions. Gentiles who cleaved to Yahweh could be incorporated into the cult-community. The author of these lines, unlike the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, does not consider genealogy an insuperable barrier to membership in Yahweh's people (*amo*). Genealogical insufficiency may be overcome by righteous conduct (vv.1-2), and adherence to two specific ritual requirements: observance of the Sabbath, an ancient institution whose importance had increased during the exile, and circumcision...From the threat of excision, Isaiah 56 draws the legal inference that circumcision of the slave brings him into the people. He thus derives a mechanism of conversion: The foreigners (v3: *ben hanekhar*, v6: *benei hanekhar*) who are circumcised are considered keepers of the covenant (*mahaziqim bivriti*). They serve Yahweh as slaves (*avadim*) and are not to be considered separate from Yahweh's people (*amo*). The success of the compromise may be seen in a number of late pentateuchal passages in which the circumcised alien (*ger*) is permitted to participate in Israelite rituals after undergoing circumcision.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Anchor Bible: Isaiah 56-66*, 135. Fishbane notes that the emphasis on the Sabbath is typical of late prophecy (cf. Jer. 17:21-24; Ezek. 20:12, 20). "It was presumably the exilic situation, when the people were deprived of the Temple and its offerings, that led to the special prominence of the Sabbath in postexilic Israel." Fishbane, *Hafarot*, 460.

<sup>55</sup> David Sperling, "Rethinking Covenant in Late Biblical Books," *Biblica* 70 (1989) pp.71-72. Contained in the ellipses of the passage above is the comparison with Gen. 17, excised here for brevity.



Here Sperling argues compellingly that the author of Is. 56 wants to overcome the genealogical requirement for membership in the Israelite cult-community. Those who keep the Sabbath and get circumcised ("hold fast to My covenant") can become members (v7). Expected behavior of those who desire to join includes attaching to Yahweh, ministering to Yahweh, loving God's name, and being his servant/slave (v6). In return, God will bring them to the sacred mount, they will rejoice in the House of Prayer, and their offerings and sacrifices will be welcome on God's altar (v7). In this manner, outsiders join the community and are then allowed to participate in religious cult practice. If there was any doubt regarding the author's intention, the passage concludes with the oft-quoted words, "for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Kaufmann sees in Is. 56 the first mention of the "new conversion"<sup>56</sup> in which religion overtakes nationality as the defining character of biblical conversion:

The statement, therefore, in Isa. 56:3, 6-7, concerning those who have joined themselves is evidence of a completely new historical phenomenon, the fact of non-Israelites, dwelling outside the land of Israel, who believe in the Lord. These men have become joiners solely for religious reasons. These are not proselytes by reason of residence or of fear of lions, nor are they legendary proselytes, converts by reason of miracles. They are non-Israelites who have joined themselves in love to an Israel which is exiled and in bondage, by reason of the inner power of the religion of Israel. In this sense they are religious proselytes.<sup>57</sup>

Blenkinsopp also sees in Is. 56 an important shift to a more elective community:

[Is. 56:3, 6-7 signals] the shift from ascriptive membership in a national, ethnic group to an elective, voluntarist community, or, in other words, from a group based on ties of blood to a confessional community. In Is. 56-66 and other texts from the same period we can detect the beginnings of this process, but it was still basically a question of determining the *civil* status of different categories of people living in the province of Judah and in Jewish communities in other lands.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See Kaufmann (1929) 237 as well as the passage below from Kaufmann (1977).

<sup>57</sup> Kaufmann (1977) 45.

<sup>58</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Anchor Bible, Isaiah 56-66*, 136-7.

For both Kaufmann and Blenkinsopp, Is. 56 documents an important shift in the Israelite community's approach to foreigners. Kaufmann's analysis is more persuasive than Blenkinsopp's because he takes the exilic context of the passage into account. Kaufmann understands the text in the following way: non-Israelites were becoming part of the exiled Israelite community and wanted to join the Israelites in their worship, belief and cult practices regarding their God Yahweh. When the Israelites were in exile, their understanding of Yahweh as geographically limited began to give way to a new, more universal theology. Along with that new theology emerged new practices for dealing with foreigners who lived among the Israelites. But Kaufmann in no way equates the descriptions in Is. 56 with the religious conversion that would appear later:

And yet, it is an error to equate the fact of these joiners with the later Jewish institution of religious conversion. It is to be kept in mind that Judaism itself was at that time still in process of development. It had, as yet, no supranational symbolism, and the proselytism was beginning to evolve – it had begun to exist in fact; and it sought for itself real forms. It was a time of transition and confusion. The catastrophe marked the end of the earlier kind of conversion by reason of residence; but conversion by religious rite was still to come. There was, as yet, no recognized class of joiners in Israel, and this kind of proselytism still surely involved a process of gradual approachment [sic] to Israel's faith. The joiners abandoned idolatry; they began to follow Israelite practice, attended the tales of the exiles, and associated themselves in their aspirations. But to the questions: how when, and in what sense, did these aliens become "Israelites," there was no clear answer.<sup>59</sup>

Surely Kaufmann is right to distinguish between Jewish conversion and the embracing of *nilvim* by Israelites in exile and afterwards. Nevertheless, the Is. 56 passage shows that when the Israelites went into exile, their understanding of how foreigners could join their community shifted from an ethnic/national focus toward a religious focus. The new understanding was the product of a new theology: the discovery that God could influence Israelite lives beyond the borders of the kingdom necessarily led to a more

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<sup>59</sup> Kaufmann (1977) 45-46.

universalistic understanding of God. Thus the end of verse 7 and verse 8 read, "For My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus declares the Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel: 'I will gather still more to those already gathered.'" The foreigners who join Israel in their worship of Yahweh inspire a messianic vision: not only does God have a plan to gather in the exiles, God will also welcome others who recognize God's greatness into Israel.<sup>60</sup>

In summary, Is. 56 offers the first biblical image of conversion that is largely religious in nature and that attempts to overcome the genealogical requirement for membership in the Israelite community. Foreigners who join themselves to God, love God and uphold the religious obligations of an Israelite are allowed to celebrate at God's House of Prayer and make offerings and sacrifices to Yahweh. The influence that the exile had on this new theological understanding of how foreigners could join the Israelite community cannot be overstated.

**Zechariah 2:14-15 (On that day many nations will join)**

14 רְנִי וְשִׂמְחִי בַת־צִיּוֹן כִּי הִנְנִיָּבָא וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּחֻכְךָ וְאַמְדִּיחָהּ 15 וְנִלְווּ גוֹיִם  
רַבִּים אֶל־יְהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְהָיוּ לִי לְעָם וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּחֻכְךָ וְיָדַעְתָּ כִּי־יְהוָה  
בְּבָאוֹת שְׁלָחַנִי אֵלֶיךָ

Because the JPS translation takes liberties with v15, I have provided my own translation:

14 Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I come and will dwell in your midst – declares the Lord. 15 Many nations will join the Lord on that day, and they will become My people. I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of Hosts sent me to you.

These verses from Zechariah resemble Is. 2:2-3 in their prophecy that other nations will come under Yahweh's purview when God returns to Zion. Zechariah, writing after the Israelites' return from Babylonian exile, explains that when God returns to dwell among the

<sup>60</sup> See also Is. 14.1, analyzed below.

Israelites, other nations will also join (*nilvu*) Yahweh and become His people. "In essence, Yahweh states the intention to formulate a covenant with the nations much like that formed with Israel."<sup>61</sup> But God will still dwell in the midst of Israel, even though other nations have also become God's people (v15). The favored position of the Israelites is further described in v16, "And the Lord shall inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again."

This passage exhibits a somewhat universalistic theology as a result of the exile. Yahweh has influence over other peoples and has even incorporated them; nevertheless, Judah retains her special place of favor. In contrast to the Is. 56 text, Zechariah preserves the independence of other peoples and makes no suggestion of foreigners worshipping God using Israelite practices. One has the sense that Zechariah is referring to peoples that the Israelites encountered during exile and who did not return with the Israelites. For our purposes, this text further depicts the spectrum of theological relationships to other peoples that emerged as a result of the exile. Some foreigners attached themselves to Yahweh and took on Israelite practices with respect to worshipping Yahweh (Is. 56:3, 6-7). Other foreigners necessarily came under Yahweh's control now that Yahweh had influence beyond the borders of Israel, but did not worship in the Israelite temples (Zech 2).

#### D. GOD IS SO GREAT, EVEN GENTILES WILL COME TO JOIN US

In the two passages that follow, from Zechariah 8 and Isaiah 14, the image of foreigners joining Israel is used as evidence to show God's power. Biblical conversion becomes a sign that God is almighty.

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<sup>61</sup> Berit Olam, *Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, The Twelve Prophets* vol.2, Liturgical Press, Minn., 2000, 590-1. See this source for a list of parallel uses of the phrase 'they shall be my people' between Yahweh and Israel.

**Zechariah 8:20-23 (Other nations will grab a Judean's cloak)**

20 כה אמר יהוה צבאות עד אשר יבאו עמים וישיבי ערים רבות 21 והלכו  
 ישיבי אחת אל-אחת לאמר נלכה הלוך לחלוצת את-פני יהוה ולבקש  
 את-יהוה צבאות אלקה וס-אני 22 ובאו עמים רבים וגוים עצומים לבקש  
 את-יהוה צבאות בירושלם ולחלוצת את-פני יהוה כ 23 כה אמר יהוה  
 צבאות ביום ההוא אשר יחזיקו עשרה אנשים מכל לשונות הגוים והחזיקו  
 בכנף איש יהודי לאמר נלכה עמכם כי שמענו אלהים עמכם

20 Thus said the LORD of Hosts: Peoples and the inhabitants of many cities shall yet come —  
 21 the inhabitants of one shall go to the other and say, "Let us go and entreat the favor of the  
 LORD, let us seek the LORD of Hosts; I will go, too." 22 The many peoples and the multitude of  
 nations shall come to seek the LORD of Hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the  
 LORD. 23 Thus said the LORD of Hosts: In those days, ten men from nations of every tongue  
 will take hold — they will take hold of every Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, "Let us go with  
 you, for we have heard that God is with you."

These four verses are the culmination of part I of Zechariah, written around the time of the building of the second Temple (520 BCE).<sup>62</sup> Zechariah's visions often take the form of a narrative or parable,<sup>63</sup> as in the case of 8:20-23. In this passage Zechariah offers a narrative vision of a universal pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In Zechariah's vision, the inhabitants of many cities will go to one another to encourage each other to entreat and seek the favor of Yahweh (21, 22). Ten men from nations of every tongue will grab the cloak of a single Judite and say, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (23).

What could be a more redemptive text for those returning from exile than the striking image of a Judean surrounded by ten foreigners, each speaking a different language, each tugging on his cloak, asking to go with him because he has heard that Yahweh is with him? Imagining that the nations of the world will clamor to come to Jerusalem once Yahweh

<sup>62</sup> Following the scholarship that divides Zechariah into two large parts, chs. 1-8 and 9-14. See Fishbane, *Haftarot*, 568-573 for a brief overview. The initiation of the rebuilding of the Temple is credited to Haggai while the completion is credited to Zechariah.

<sup>63</sup> See F. Cashdan, "Zechariah: Introduction and Commentary" in *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. Cohen, Soncino 1994, pp. 267-269.

returns was a compelling vision indeed. One commentator describes how Zechariah's vision captures the overwhelming inferiority that the returners must have felt:

The tiny Yehudite community, symbolized by the single Yehudite of v23, provides the historical and functional contact between the future worldwide membership in Yahweh's domain and the past-present relationship of Yahweh with a tiny portion of the population of the world. The rest of the people in the world will eventually find their way to Yahweh through those who already stand in relationship to God.<sup>64</sup>

Zechariah's visionary image of men of many tongues encouraging each other to come to Jerusalem and tugging on the cloak of a Judite should be understood primarily as a narrative tool rather than an historical event.<sup>65</sup> It is possible, however, that Zechariah is capitalizing on the presence of foreigners among the returnees and interpreting their presence as a sign that Yahweh's return has been noticed around the world. The role these foreigners play in Zechariah's narrative is to convincingly show Judaites that Yahweh has returned: it must be true because men from nations of every tongue have heard about it and are clamoring to come to Jerusalem. Zechariah is unconcerned with details about how to deal with the presence of such foreigners (Are they allowed to use the Temple? Are they allowed to live among the Israelites?).

For our purposes, Zechariah's narrative vision is notable because it belies what might be called an attitude of inferiority among the community that has returned from exile: the community needs outsiders to be convinced that Yahweh has indeed returned. The text illustrates that one way Judites of the period interpreted the phenomenon of foreigners joining the community is that Yahweh is the greatest God (or has returned), and his reputation has spread far and wide.

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<sup>64</sup> Meyers and Meyers, *Anchor Bible: Haggai Zechariah 1-8*, vol. 25b, pp. 444-445.

<sup>65</sup> Hence the use of 'od (20) and *bayamim ha-heimah* (23).

**Isaiah 14:1-2 (Strangers shall join and cleave to the House of Jacob)**

1 כִּי יִרְחַם יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוּלָּב וְיָחַד עִיר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָהם עַל־אֲדָמָתָם וְנָלְחָה  
 הָעִיר עֲלֵיהֶם וְנִסְפְּתוּ עַל־בֵּית יַעֲקֹב 2 וְלָקְחוּם עַמִּים וְהָבִיאוּם אֶל־קִקְוָתָם  
 וְהִתְנַחְלוּם בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲדָמָתָם יְהוָה לַעֲבָדִים וְלַסְפָּחוֹת וְהָיוּ טָבִים  
 לַשְׂבִּיָּהִם וְרָדוּ בְּגִשְׁיָהֶם

1 But the LORD will pardon Jacob, and will again choose Israel, and will settle them on their own soil. And strangers shall join them and shall cleave to the House of Jacob. 2 For peoples shall take them and bring them to their homeland; and the House of Israel shall possess them as slaves and handmaids on the soil of the LORD. They shall be captors of their captors and masters to their taskmasters.

This text prophesies that strangers will join and cleave to the House of Jacob when Israel is returned from exile. Verse 2 assigns additional roles to other nations in the redemption of Israel: they shall take Israel and bring them to their homeland, and then they shall become slaves and handmaids to the Israelites. Presumably the strangers (*ger*) in v1 are different from the nations (*'amim*) in v2 because of the use of different words and noun forms.

The two verses seem self-sufficient without mentioning the *ger* who has joined Israel. "The Lord will pardon Jacob, and will again choose Israel, and will settle them on their own soil...For peoples shall take them..." Why add a line about the *ger* who has joined Israel? Two possible reasons are worth considering. First, if this text is post-exilic,<sup>66</sup> the presence of foreigners who had joined Israel may have been a historical reality that no author during that period could have ignored. Second, if the Israelites understood the joining and cleaving of foreigners to the House of Jacob as a theological sign that Yahweh has once again favored Israel, it would reinforce the message of v2, that Israel is preferred by Yahweh among the nations and will become their captors and masters (v2). In other words, v1b (strangers joining Israel) and v2 (nations becoming Israel's slaves) might both have been understood by

<sup>66</sup> Is. 14:1 is "dated by virtually all scholars to the post-exilic period." Cohen, *Beginnings*, 122.

the listener as the fulfillment of v1a (God has pardoned Jacob and will once again choose Israel).

#### E. A CONSEQUENCE OF LIVING WITH FOREIGNERS

The following passages show how the Israelites developed pragmatic responses to living with and among foreigners.

##### **Ezra and Nehemiah (Those who separate themselves from other nations)**

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the verb *nivdal* appears in a variety of contexts. Israelites separate themselves from the practices of various abhorrent peoples (Ezra 9:1) or from the peoples of the land and the foreign women they brought back with them (Ezra 10:11; Nehemiah 9:2, 13:3). Individual returning exiles may be excluded from the community of returning exiles (Ezra 10:8). Ezra and others sequester themselves (Ezra 10:16).

In two cases, Ezra 6:21 and Nehemiah 10:29, it appears that non-Israelites separate themselves from other nations. Here is the text of these two verses and the JPS translation:

21 וַיֹּאכְלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַשָּׁבִים מִהַגְלָה וְכָל הַנִּבְדָּל מִטְּמֵאֹת גִּוֵּי־הָאָרֶץ אֱלֹהִים  
לְדָרֵשׁ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

[Ezra 6:21] The children of Israel who had returned from the exile, *together with all who joined them in separating themselves from the uncleanness of the nations of the lands to worship the Lord God of Israel*, ate of [the Passover offering].

29 וְשָׂאֵר הָעָם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם הַשּׁוֹעָרִים הַמְשָׁרְרִים הַמְנַיִנִים וְכָל־הַנִּבְדָּל מֵעַמֵּי  
הָאֲרָצוֹת אֶל־תּוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים נִשְׁתָּחִים בְּנֵיהֶם וּבְנֹתֵיהֶם כָּל יוֹדֵעַ מִבֵּין

[Neh 10:29] And the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, *and all who separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to [follow] the Teaching of God*, their wives, sons and daughters, all who know enough to understand, [30] join with their noble brothers, and take an oath with sanctions to follow the Teaching of God, and to observe carefully all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, His rules and laws.



Each text identifies a group of people who have separated themselves (*nivdal*) from something and toward something else. In Ezra 6:21, a group has separated themselves from the impurity (*tum'at*) of the nations of the earth, toward the worship (*lidrosh*) of Yahweh. The context of this verse is who ate the Passover offering. It is worth noting that circumcision is not mentioned here as a requirement for those who eat of the Passover offering as it is in the parallel verses of Ex 12:44, 48. In Neh. 10:29, a group has separated themselves from the peoples of the earth, toward the instruction of God (*torat ha-elohim*). The context of this verse is who is pledging to abide by *torat ha-elohim* (v30).

In both cases, the Israelites (Ezra 6:21) or groups of Israelites (cf. Neh. 10:1-28) are separately listed, implying that the *nivdal* group are not Israelites, yet nevertheless are included. Scholars are divided as to whether the *nivdal* groups described in these two verses are made up of Israelite or non-Israelites.<sup>67</sup> Cohen cites three verses as evidence that the *nivdal* groups are indeed Israelites,<sup>68</sup> in which Israelites are separated from the peoples of the land and from the foreign women (Ezra 10:11), from all foreigners (Neh. 9:2) and from the alien admixture in the context of hearing the teaching (*khol 'erev*, Neh 13:3). We could add to this list Ezra 9:1, in which Israelites separate themselves from the peoples of the land who have abhorrent practices.

But our survey of the use of *nivdal* in Ezra and Nehemiah shows that the verb is not used exclusively to mean that Israelites are separating themselves from non-Israelites. In Ezra 10:8, returning exiles who miss a three-day deadline to come to Jerusalem may be excluded (*yibadel*) from the rest of the community of returning exiles, and in Ezra 10:16, Ezra and others sequester themselves (*vayibadlu*) in order to study the issue of foreign wives.

<sup>67</sup> Probably are Israelites: Cohen (1999) 122ff. Probably not Israelites: Williamson, WORD Biblical Commentary, v 16 (1985) p85 and Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (1982) p96.

<sup>68</sup> Cohen (1999) 122ff.

To summarize: it is difficult to ascertain for certain whether the *nivdal* groups mentioned in Ezra 6:21 and Neh. 10:29 represent non-Israelites who have been included among the Israelite people for the significant acts of sharing the Pesach offering and pledging to live by God's instruction, or whether these groups represent sub-groups of Israelites that are listed separately.

Nevertheless, the analysis of various *nivdal* groups in Ezra and Nehemiah does support the following claim: the use of the verb *nivdal* in these two books does not by itself connote any act resembling non-Israelites joining or becoming Israelites. Additionally, because Ezra and Nehemiah repeatedly engage the issue of foreign wives (*nashim hanokhriot*<sup>69</sup>), one would expect that the authors had no need to use euphemistic constructions with the verb *nivdal* when writing about non-Israelites and would have simply used a word like *nekher*.<sup>70</sup>

For these reasons, there is not sufficient evidence in these two books to meaningfully add to our understanding of the biblical idea of conversion. Yet the strong need of the returnees from exile to separate themselves from foreign wives and other foreign elements that (or whom) they brought back with them from Babylonia is of paramount theological and historical relevance to the post-exilic development of biblical conversion. Israelite identity had shifted from an uncontested ethnic or tribal label toward a commitment to God's teaching. All those who "take an oath with sanctions to follow the Teaching of God, and to

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Ezra 10:2, 10, 11, 14, 17, 18, 44; Neh. 13:26, 27.

<sup>70</sup> The only time *nekher* appears in the two books, not directly referring to foreign women, is in the penultimate verse of Nehemiah, "I purged them of every foreign element" (Neh. 13:30).

observe carefully all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, His rules and laws" (Neh. 10:29) are included in the new post-exile Israelite community.<sup>71</sup>

### The *Ger* and the *Ezrach*

A variety of passages in Torah deal with the treatment of the *ger* who resides among the Israelites. In many of these texts the *ger* is paralleled in some way to the native Israelite, or *ezrach*. Consider the following passages:

#### Ex 12:49 (One *torah* for both)

49 תורה אחת יהיה לאזרח ולגר הגר בתוכם

There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.

#### Leviticus 19:34 (Stranger shall be as a native)

34 כאזרח מכם יהיה לכם הגר הגר אתכם ואהבת לו כמוך כיהודים היותם  
בארץ מצרים אני יהוה אלהיכם

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

#### Leviticus 24:22 (One *mishpat* for both)

22 משפט אחד יהיה לכם פגר כאזרח יהיה כי אני יהוה אלהיכם

You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God.

#### Numbers 15:29-31 (One *torah* for both; stranger can be cut off)

29 האזרח בבני ישראל ולגר הגר בתוכם תורה אחת יהיה לכם לעשה בשגגה  
30 והנפש אשר תעשה ביד רמה כן האזרח וכן הגר אתיהוה הוא קגדף ונקרחה  
הנפש ההוא בקרב עמה 31 כי דבריהוה בזה ואחמכנתו הפך הפכה תפכה  
הנפש ההוא עונה בזה

29 For the citizen among the Israelites and for the stranger who resides among them – you shall have one ritual for anyone who acts in errors. 30 But the person, be he citizen or stranger who acts defiantly reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut off from among his people. 31 Because he has spurned the word of the Lord and violated His commandment, that person shall be cut off – he bears his guilt.

If these passages regarding the *ger* and the *ezrach* are pre-exilic, they show that there were many non-Israelites living among the pre-exilic Israelite community. These strangers,

<sup>71</sup> One scholar uses the texts in this section to show how the Israelite community had moved toward a more religious self-definition: Williamson, *WORD Biblical Commentary* (1985), v16, p85 ("Judaism was taking on increasingly the character of a religious community").

or *gerim*, are subject to the same *torah* (Ex. 12:49; Num. 15:29) and the same *mishpat* (Lev. 24:22) as the Israelite. Additional passages show how the *ger* is also subject to the same *chukah*.<sup>72</sup> The justification for such equal treatment is variously "for I the Lord am your God" (Lev. 19:34, 24:22) and "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Lev. 19:34).

How should such equal treatment under the law for the *ger* be interpreted? Is the *ger* becoming an Israelite, or is this a pragmatic attempt to govern a mixed community? It is tempting to read a verse like Lev. 19:34 as saying that the *ger* who lives among the Israelites becomes a native, a citizen, even an Israelite. Two arguments make such a claim very difficult. First, the *ger* is *ke-ezrach* (like a citizen, native); the presence of the *kaf* at the beginning of the word makes it almost impossible to argue that the *ger* actually becomes an Israelite native. Second, the other passages show that the more likely meaning is simply that the *ger* remains a *ger* living among Israelites, but receives fair and equal treatment. Taken as a group, these passages seem to have been written to teach Israelites that God does not like the practice of having one set of rules for the native Israelites and a different set of rules for the non-natives who are living in the tent next door.

Milgrom's thesis regarding the *ger* and the *ezrach*, mentioned in the introduction, holds true for these passages. He explains that the underlying principle behind the treatment of the *ger* is that "the violation of all prohibitive commandments creates impurity and consequently pollutes God's sanctuary and land...It therefore makes no difference whether the polluter is Israelite or non-Israelite. Anyone in residence on the Lord's land is capable of polluting it or His sanctuary."<sup>73</sup> Both *ger* and *ezrach* are prohibited from breaking negative commandments, but since the nonobservance of a positive commandment does not bring

<sup>72</sup> Num. 9:14, 15:15.

<sup>73</sup> Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, Excursus 34, p.399 (1990). See this excursus for a detailed analysis of the *ger* and *ezrach* in Torah.

impurity to the land, only the Israelite, and not the *ger*, is bound by positive commandments.<sup>74</sup>

Num. 15:30 has an additional component worthy of attention: the *ger*, like the native, who acts defiantly against God can be cut off from his people (*v'nikhretah hanefesh hahu mikerev amah*). Ezek. 14:6-8 also explains that a *ger* will be cut off from the people Israel for sinning against God. The question arises, how can a *ger* can be cut off from the Israelite people if he is not already member of the people Israel?<sup>75</sup> In Torah, *karet* is always connected to sins against God, not against man, and thus fall within the category of religious law and not civil law.<sup>76</sup> Such a sin would bring impurity, and thus be forbidden to all who dwell in the land, Israelite and resident non-Israelite alike. The *ger* who lives among the Israelites risks being cut off from his fellow Israelites for breaking the prohibitive commandments of Num 15:30 and Ezek 14:6-8 and polluting the land with impurity. To be cut off from the people among whom you live does not mean that you have already become one of them.

#### Deuteronomy 29:9-12 (Ger included in Covenant of the Lord)

9 אַתֶּם נֹכְדִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִבְכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רֹאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבָטֵיכֶם וְקִנְיֹנֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם  
 כָּל אִישׁ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל 10 טַפְכֶם גִּשְׁיֵיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֹטֵב עֵצִיד עַד שֹׂאֵב  
 מִיַּעַר 11 לְעִבְרְךָ בְּבֵרִית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְאֻלְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם  
 12 לְשֹׁנֵן הַקִּים־אֹתָךְ הַיּוֹם לֹא לָעַם זֶה וְהוּא יְהוָה־לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־לְךָ וְכֹאֲשֶׁר  
 נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלַיִצְחָק

You stand here this day, all of you, before the Lord your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, which the Lord your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions; to the end that He may

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p.399-400.

<sup>75</sup> It would seem to be a forced reading to assume that the Israelite who violates is cut off from the Israelite people, and the *ger* who violates is cut off from a different people. The simple reading of the text is that the *ger* who violates is cut off from the Israelites.

<sup>76</sup> For a categorized list of the 19 instances, and an analysis of the possible meanings of *karet*, see Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, Excursus 36, p.406 (1990).

establish you this day as His people and be your God, as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In this passage the stranger in the Israelite camp (*gerkha asher b'kerev mahanecha*) is included among those who enter into a covenant with God that establishes the Israelites as God's people. The list of groups included in the covenant begins with the elite male Israelites (tribal heads, elders and officials), adds all the Israelite men, and then adds three classes of people who are attached to the Israelite men: children, women, and "your *ger* who is in your camp." The *ger* in Deut. 29 may be a worker of some sort, hence the phrase "from woodchopper to waterdrawer" which modifies *gerkha* and thus ensures the widest possible inclusion, as if to say *every ger* who lives among you is included in this covenant. The possessive suffix attached to the stranger in the Hebrew (*gerkha*) also supports the reading that the *ger* was some kind of laborer.<sup>77</sup>

Whether the *ger* in Deut. 29 should be understood as a laborer non-Israelite or simply as a resident non-Israelite, his inclusion in the list of classes of Israelites who are making a covenant with God – a covenant that defines exactly who constitutes God's people – is remarkable. Similarly, the *ger* is included in the list of those who must hear the reading of God's *torah* (Deut. 31:12, Josh. 8:35). Elsewhere in Deuteronomy the *ger* is included in such religious events as the Sabbath (5:14), Shavuot (16:11) and Sukkot (16:14).<sup>78</sup> And in Exodus 12:48, the *ger* who is willing to be circumcised can participate in Passover by eating the Passover offering.

The inclusion of the *ger* in God's covenant and the labeling of the *ger* as a defined part of God's people in Deut. 29, combined with the inclusion of the *ger* in the major festivals – these passages suggest that the *ger* was a constitutive part of the Israelite

<sup>77</sup> But not a slave. Cf. Deut. 16:11, which lists the *ger* and the slave separately in the same list.

<sup>78</sup> Yet Deut. 14:12 prohibits the Israelite from eating *neveilah* (carion) and instructs him to give it to the *ger*.

community in daily and cultic life. Whether the Israelites among whom the *ger* lived recognized him as a part of God's people is perhaps impossible to know, but the intention of the author of these verses from Deuteronomy is clear: when God makes rules or prescribes rituals for God's people, the *ger* is included.

There is nothing in these passages that predicts the rabbinic understanding of conversion. Yet the consequences of the religious inclusion of the *ger* in Deuteronomy and the conversion of a non-Jew in rabbinic texts are much the same: the person lives among community as a member of the community (as an Israelite or Jew), celebrating the Sabbath and festivals, hearing the Teaching when it is read.

One major exception to such reasoning is Deut. 14:21, which instructs the Israelite not to eat carrion and instead give it to the *ger* or sell it to the foreigner, "for you [Israelites] are a people consecrated to the Lord your God." Thus Deuteronomy does not offer a uniform message regarding the status of the *ger* living among the Israelites. But these Deuteronomic passages do challenge the thesis that the *ger* cannot be understood as converts in any sense.

If Deuteronomy does have a message about conversion, it may be this: that when outsiders come to live among the Israelite community and become resident non-Israelites, they should be treated as residents in God's land since they are also part of God's people. As co-signers to God's covenant, they participate in the religious festivals and are bound by many of the religious prohibitions. These pre-exilic *gerim* who became members of the Israelite community show that the inclusion of non-Israelites among God's people is not a consequence of the exile, nor an invention of the rabbinic period, but rather a result of living closely with minority groups who had decided to join their lot with the Israelite people.

**Ezekiel 47:21-23: *Ger* receives share of land in Israel**

21 וְחִלְקֶתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לָכֶם לְשִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 22 וְהָיָה תַּפְלוֹ אוֹתָהּ בְּנִחְלָה לָכֶם  
וּלְהַגְרִים הַגָּרִים בְּתוֹכְכֶם אֲשֶׁר-הוֹלִדוּ בָנִים בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהָיוּ לָכֶם כְּאֻזְרַח בְּבִנִי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם יַפְלוּ בְּנִחְלָה בְּתוֹךְ שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 23 וְהָיָה בְּשִׁבְטֵי אֲשֶׁר-יָגֵר הַגֵּר אִתּוֹ  
שָׁם תִּתְּנוּ נַחֲלָתוֹ נָאֻם אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה

21 This land you shall divide for yourselves among the tribes of Israel. 22 You shall allot it as a heritage for yourselves and for the strangers who reside among you, who have begotten children among you. You shall treat them as Israelite citizens; they shall receive allotments along with you among the tribes of Israel. 23 You shall give the stranger an allotment within the tribe where he resides – declares the Lord God.

Ezekiel writes around the time of the exile and return. As the exiles return, they need to know who will receive a portion of the land and what the borders will be. Ezekiel chapter 47 answers both questions: vv.13-20 establishes the borders, and vv. 21-23 determines who receives an allotment. That the *ger* receives an allotment (*yiplu v'nachalah*) along with the Israelites is startling. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible does the *ger* receive a portion of the holy land of Israel.

Scholars have proposed various explanations for how the *ger* came to receive a portion of the land after the exile, attributing the innovation to the “sacral concept of the Land which is so prominent in the priestly theology”<sup>79</sup> or to “the context of the reconsideration of good order in the land, the return to which is being prepared on the basis of new realities.”<sup>80</sup>

What these scholars miss is the importance of the qualifying phrase *asher holidu vanim b'tokhekhem* (who have begotten children among you, v22). An allotment of land is not given to every *ger*; rather, it is given to the *ger* who has begotten children<sup>81</sup> among the Israelites (22). This verse has much to teach. First, the mixing of the Israelites with non-

<sup>79</sup> Levenson, Jon Douglas. *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48*. Scholars Press, Montana 1976 pp.123.

<sup>80</sup> Zimmerli, Walther (trans. by James Martin). *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*. Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1983, p532.

<sup>81</sup> Perhaps male children is intended – see below.



Israelites during the exile produced substantial numbers of mixed families – enough mixed families to warrant particular mention in the rules regarding land distribution upon their return. Second, these families had produced children, and the appearance of children became a boundary criterion for inclusion of the mixed families among the landowner class of Israelites. These families had followed Jeremiah's instruction to the exiled Israelites in Jer. 29:6: "Take wives and beget sons and daughters (*v'holidu banim uvanot*)...multiply there, do not decrease." In light of Jer. 29:6, Ezek. 47:22 may refer specifically to male children, since Jeremiah specifically mentions male and female children and Ezekiel does not. Furthermore, since men would have been the ones to receive an allotment of land, and since the construction *holidu banim* in Jeremiah refers to males, the use of *holidu vanim* in Ezekiel is most likely referring to male *gerim* who have fathered male children with Israelite women.

This Ezekiel passage suggests the following reconstruction: during the exile, non-Israelite men had fathered (male) children with Israelite women, and many of these mixed families came to Israel with other returners. (We learned above from Ezra-Nehemiah that many mixed families composed of Israelite men and non-Israelite women also returned from Babylon, but these families seem to have received different treatment.) The non-Israelite male was considered a *ger* who had fathered children among the Israelites and he was given a portion of the land of Israel upon his arrival, just like the Israelite men.

While the Ezekiel passage does not offer much of a modern understanding of conversion, it does offer a pragmatic response to the reality of mixed families. Non-Israelite men (*gerim*) who had fathered children with Israelite women were treated just as Israelite men were treated, at least with respect to the distribution of land. Given the sanctified status and economic importance of the land of Israel to the returners, this welcoming of non-

Israelite men into the tribal structure of Israel (23) is an important step towards bringing non-Israelites into the fold. It even predicts the early rabbinic approach toward converts, which holds that only the children or grandchildren of converts can truly become part of Israel.<sup>82</sup>

**Esther 9:27 (And all those who might join them)**

27 קָיָמוּ וְקָבְלוּ [וְ]קָבְלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים עָלֵיהֶם וְעַל-זָרָעָם וְעַל כָּל-הַנִּלְוִים עִלֵּיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר לְהַזִּיחַ עֲשִׂים אֶחָ שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּכֻתְבָם וּבְזִמְנָם בְּכָל-שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה

The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

This verse from Esther is being analyzed separately from the Ezra and Nehemiah passages above that use similar “joining” (*nilvim, nilvu*) language because of the emphasis that Cohen puts on the verse. Of all the verses in the Tanakh, Cohen sees this verse as a presage to the rabbinic understanding of conversion:

The first and only passage in the Tanakh that would seem to refer clearly to the social integration of the gentile in the historical present is Esther 9:27...Here we have Judaeans (*yehudim*), and gentiles who attach themselves (*nilvim aleihem*) to them; all alike constitute the community of those bound by the law of the Purim festival...These passages<sup>83</sup> show that in the Persian period, with the destruction of the temple, the disappearance of the tribal system, the emergence of a diaspora, the weakening of the connection between the people and the land, and the gradual elaboration of non-temple-oriented forms of religiosity comes the beginning of the idea that gentiles could somehow attach themselves to the people of Israel by attaching themselves to Israel's God. Here then are harbingers of the idea of conversion, in both its religious and its social sense, but the idea itself is not yet in evidence.<sup>84</sup>

As an historian Cohen argues persuasively for dating the early emergence of conversion as we know it to the Persian period. For our purposes, Esther 9:27 is yet another example –

<sup>82</sup> Ezekiel's use of children from mixed families as a boundary for inclusion suggests an ambivalent or perhaps even restrictive view toward *gerim* who have not had children with an Israelite. In other words, a *ger* cannot by himself become an Israelite, but by living among the Israelites and making an Israelite family, a *ger* can join a tribe. For the rabbinic approach, see next chapter, first theology “Lineage.”

<sup>83</sup> While not entirely clear, the phrase “these passages” appears to refer to Esther 9:27, Is. 14, 56, and Zech. 8. Cohen's main point is that conversion as a religious and social phenomenon appears at earliest in the Persian era.

<sup>84</sup> Cohen (1999) 122.

in a long list of examples – of non-Jews who were living among Jews and who began observing some of their ritual or religious practices.<sup>85</sup>

### 3

## Conclusions

Our review of the biblical material reinforces the claim that there is no solid biblical parallel to the rabbinic or modern understanding of conversion to Judaism, even though some of the texts challenge Milgrom's thesis that the foreigner is not bound by positive commandments.<sup>86</sup> However, gentiles in the Bible do engage in a wide variety of Israelite or Jewish behaviors:

- Declare God's greatness (*lehagid*): bless God (Ex. 18:10); declare God's dominion (Josh. 2:10-11) and greatness (2K 5:15).
- Worship, pray and serve God (*la'avod*): offer sacrifices (Ex. 18:12 and 2K 5:17); pray at the Temple and have requests granted (1K 8:43); pledge to serve only God (2K 5:17); minister to God, love God's name, and be God's servant (Is. 56:6).
- Travel to find God (*lalekhet*): come from a distant land for the sake of God's name (1K 8:41-42); grab the cloak of a Jew and say "let us go with you!" (Zech. 8:21-22).
- Observe the Sabbath and festivals (*lishmor*): keep the Sabbath (Is. 56:6); observe Shavuot (Dt. 16:11) and Sukkot (Dt. 16:14); allowed to observe Passover (if circumcised, Ex. 12:44,48); celebrate Purim (Esther 9:27).

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<sup>85</sup> Like many passages in Esther, this verse is written in a somewhat hyperbolic style. In the Hebrew, it reads as an attempt to be as inclusive as possible – that the Jews, and their descendants, and anyone else who would join them, would irrevocably obligate themselves to observe these two days, year after year.

<sup>86</sup> The most relevant examples are the inclusion of resident foreigners in the celebration of Shavuot (Dt. 16:11) and Sukkot (Dt. 16:14). Other challenges to Milgrom's thesis are the inclusion of Jews in the covenant (Dt. 29:9-12), hearing the Teaching of God (Dt. 31:12, Josh. 8:35), and receiving an allotment of land in Israel (Ezek. 47:22).

- Enter the covenant (*karet brit*): enter the covenant of God to become part of God's people (Dt. 29:9-12); hold fast to the covenant (Is. 56:6); other nations will become God's people (Zech. 2:15); be cut off from Israel for acting defiantly against God (Num. 15:31, Ezek. 14:6-8).
- Receive a portion of the land of Israel (*nachalah*, Ezek. 47:22).

These behaviors can be understood as occupying unique places on Cohen's spectrum of Judaizing behavior.<sup>87</sup> Taken as a group, this list would be impressive for any Israelite or Jew, let alone a gentile. The list is misleading in that these behaviors spanned many centuries. Nevertheless, it shows how gentiles were engaged in a vast array of Israelite behaviors throughout the biblical period. The reason there was no rabbinic-style conversion in this period is not for lack of interest, but rather because the concept that someone could change to "become" an Israelite had not yet emerged.

Our aim is to understand the theologies related to conversion that emerge from the biblical texts. These theologies are:

- A. When foreigners acknowledge God, it is a sign of God's greatness. This suggests that God can have influence and dominion over peoples and lands outside of Israel, which leads to a more universalistic view of God.
- B. God welcomes foreigners who join the Israelite community through marriage or residence and will answer their prayer requests.
- C. God wants us to treat foreigners who live among Israel fairly. Foreigners in the land are part of God's covenant with Israel and they should celebrate the festivals. Strangers who disobey God's law will be cut off. Foreigners should even be granted a portion of the land.
- D. There will be a messianic time when all nations will recognize God.

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<sup>87</sup> Cohen (1999) ch. 5. See part I of this chapter.

These theologies show the high degree of influence that Israel's interaction with foreigners and strangers – in their own land and in exile – had on the religion of Israel.

## II. Four Theologies of Conversion in Classic Rabbinic Literature

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This chapter presents four theologies of conversion that emerged from a detailed study of texts related to conversion in the classic rabbinic corpus.<sup>88</sup> These theologies are:

1. Lineage: conversion is an inferior way to become part of an ethnic people that can only be born into;
2. Faith: converts have an exceptional relationship to God;
3. Ritual: conversion is a re-enactment of the covenant God made at Sinai;
4. Mitzvot: converts must follow the written and oral Torah.

Each of these four rabbinic theologies is developed through the presentation of primary texts and subsequent analysis. Because of the relationship between conversion and definitions of Jewish identity, each of the four theologies are also tested for a corresponding rabbinic understanding of what it means to be Jewish. A single appendix presents a critique of a theology of conversion presented in Zohar and Sagi's *Giur v'Zehut Yehudit* (1995).

### 1

#### Lineage

*Conversion is an inferior way to become part of  
an ethnic people that can only be born into.*

One of the first theologies of conversion evident in classic rabbinic texts is that Israel is an ethnic people stratified by genealogy. The Mishnah provides ample evidence for this lineage-focused view. Consider the following passage, which sets down the rules for how a

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<sup>88</sup> Whenever possible, preference is given to texts from the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmuds, and early midrash (Sifra, Mekhilta, Sifre Numbers and Sifre Deuteronomy). Some texts from the later works Tanhuma and Yalkut Shimoni are used. The responsa and codes literature are referenced only in passing and was not the primary focus of this chapter.

convert should carry out the mitzvah of first fruits. The procedure, outlined in Deut. 26:1-11, was to bring the first fruit of the season, take it to the priest at the Temple, and make a declaration. The rabbis are concerned about whether a convert can make a declaration that includes words like *avoteinu* (our fathers) because the convert's forefathers are not the same as a born-Jew's. The passage also mentions the rules about what language a convert should use in prayer.

#### **M. Bikkurim 1:4**

The following people bring but do not recite: the convert brings but does not recite, since he cannot say (Dt. 26:3) "[the land] which God has sworn to *our* fathers to give to *us*." But if his mother was of Israel, he brings and recites. When he prays by himself, he says, "God of the fathers of Israel." When he is in synagogue he says, "God of *your* fathers." But if his mother was of Israel, he says, "God of *our* fathers" [emphasis added].

This mishnah raises a number of interesting and complex issues, some of which are not relevant to this study.<sup>89</sup> For our purposes, there are two important ideas embedded in this mishnah. The first idea is that a convert was not allowed to recite words that indicated he himself was included in the covenant that was made with *avot* (the Jewish fathers). The second and more complex idea is that 'convert status' can be passed on to a convert's offspring.

The rabbinic injunction against a convert reciting the words "which God has sworn to our fathers to give to us" when he brings the first fruits is worthy of attention. But since that first statement refers only to a hypothetical situation – the Temple and its sacrificial system had been destroyed for over a century by the time the Mishnah was edited – the second injunction about a convert's prayers carries even more force. In private prayer the convert should say "*elohei avot yisrael*" (God of the fathers of Israel), and in public prayer the convert should say "*elohei avoteikhem*" (God of your fathers). The reason for the separate instructions for private and public prayer may have been two-fold. First, the convert's public prayer should reference *your* fathers, referring to the born-Jews praying beside him. Second, *elohei avoteikhem* would fit better with *elohei avoteinu* (God of our fathers), which is what the nearby born-Jews would be praying.

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<sup>89</sup> See Cohen, Ch. 10 for a discussion of M. Bikkurim 1:4-5, including a detailed outline of how a convert could have a Jewish mother and how the passage relates to the matrilineal principle and Jewish identity in the early rabbinic period. In the discussion below, I have followed my own understanding of this passage and related mishnayot, a view that closely follows Cohen's preferred reading from Ch. 10.

Theologically, the message to the convert could hardly be clearer. Even though the convert has joined the people Israel, his lineage is not the lineage of the rest of Israel. The covenant that God established with the Jews is passed down through birth. A convert could choose to become a part of that covenant, but such a choice did not give him personal access to the genealogical relationship that binds Israel to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their God. That level of inclusion would only be granted to his offspring, if he married a born-Jew.

This brings us to the second important idea in the mishnah above: 'convert status' can be passed on to a convert's offspring. Specifically, 'convert status' was passed down through the father, just as the status of Kohen or Levite was passed on by the father to his children. In an attempt to make clear a complex set of issues, the following chart may help to explain the practice of passing along 'convert status' in the early rabbinic period:

Mother's Status	Fathers's Status	=> Child's status
Convert	Convert	Convert
Convert	Israel	Israel
Israel	Convert	Convert Israel

The child of two converts definitely retained the 'convert status.' The child of a convert mother and Israelite father followed the father's status: Israel. Normally, the child of an Israelite mother and a convert father would have 'convert status,' but M. Bikkurim 1:4 explains that in such a case – when a child's father is a convert and his mother is a born-Jew – he can indeed recite 'our fathers' because he now has a genealogical link to the *avot* through his mother. In other words, the child of two converts has impaired 'convert status,' but as long as one parent is a born-Jew, the impairment is released.<sup>90</sup>

Further evidence for this approach appears in the following mishnah:

**M. Qiddushin 4:7**

R. Eliezer b. Jacob says: the daughter of a male Israel and a female convert is permitted to [marry into] the priesthood. The daughter of a male convert and a female Israel is permitted to [marry into] the priesthood. But the daughter of a male convert and a female convert is not permitted to [marry into] the priesthood. [This applies to both] convert and freed slave – even to ten generations – until his mother is from Israel.

<sup>90</sup> M. Bikkurim 1:4 does not actually say that the child of an Israelite mother and convert father loses his convert status, but rather than the impairment is released. M. Qiddushin 4:7 (immediately below) takes the same approach.



This mishnah makes clear the rabbinic discomfort with converts marrying each other and having children. They have a strong preference towards converts marrying born-Jews – not enough to forbid convert-convert unions, but enough to give their offspring a separate lineage status. The offspring of two converts retain ‘convert status’ for up to ten generations or until one of them marries a born-Jew.

It would be tempting to explain the negative view towards convert-convert families as a rabbinic response to the challenges of socialization and acculturation that face any convert: a convert who marries a born-Jew would have a much easier time of integrating into Jewish society. But such reasoning is probably anachronistic. Instead, this rabbinic view is dominated by a genealogical understanding of Jewish identity. As Cohen writes, the Mishnah assumes that “converts constitute a ‘caste’ or genealogical status within the community of Israel, so that these legal impairments might affect even people who were born as Jews but who inherited their status as ‘converts’ from their parents.”<sup>91</sup>

The rabbinic class system was not limited to Kohen, Levite, Israel and convert. Consider this list of lineages in this mishnah:

**M. Qiddushin 4:1**

Ten lineages<sup>92</sup> went up from Babylon. Kohen, Levite, Israel, *halali*, converts, *haruri*, mamzer, *netini*, *shetuki*, and *asufi*. Kohen, Levite and Israel are permitted to marry each other. Levite, Israel, *halali*, convert and *haruri* are permitted to marry each other. Convert, *haruri*, mamzer, *netini*, *shetuki*, and *asufi* are permitted to marry each other.

Similar lists of lineages, some of them even clearly ranked, appear in a variety of places in the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmuds.<sup>93</sup> On the one hand these texts make clear the lineage-based approach of the early rabbinic period; on the other hand they show that such thinking was not limited to converts. Many others endured legal impairments because of accidents of birth or unverifiable parentage.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Cohen 338.

<sup>92</sup> Heb *yochasin*. “Classes of Jews of traced genealogy” according to Jastrow.

<sup>93</sup> Some lists have minor order differences. C.f. M. Horayot 3:8 (includes ranking); Tosefta Horayot 2:10; Y. Qiddushin 4.1; Yevamot 37a (statement by Hillel); Yevamot 85a; and Qiddushin 75a.

<sup>94</sup> See Kehati commentary to the Mishnah. *Halali* were priests born to women whom a priest is forbidden to wed, such as from the union of a widow and a High Priest or from that of a divorced woman and a common priest. *Haruri* were freed servants. *Netini* were descended from the Gibeonites who converted during the time of Joshua. *Shetuki* were those who knew his mother identity but not his father, and *Asufi* were those who did not know the identity of either parent, both of which therefore had questionable lineages.

Furthermore, the rabbis sometimes felt the need to express the superiority of the born-Jews over and above converts. Consider the following passage from the *gemara*:

**Qiddushin 70b**

R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: When the holy Blessed One rests His divine presence, he rests it only on families from pure lineages (*yuhasot*) among Israel, as it is written (Jer. 31:1), "At that time — declares the Lord — I will be God to all the families of Israel, and they will be My people. It does not say, "to all Israel." Rather, "to all the families [of Israel], and they will be My people." Rabbah b. R. Huna said: this is an advantage that [born] Jews (*yisrael*) enjoy over converts: regarding [born] Jews, it is written (Ezek. 37:27), "I will be their God and they shall be My people." But regarding converts it is written (Jer. 30:21-22), "Who is he that has pledged his heart to draw near to me — declares the Lord — you will be my people, and I will be your God."

The force of this passage turns on the reverse wording of a similar phrase in Ezek. 37:27 and Jer. 30:22. For born-Jews, God promises to be their God even before they act as God's people ("I will be their God and they shall be My people"), but converts must first act like God's people, and only then will God act as their God ("You will be My people and I will be your God.") This argument sounds like an older sibling teasing a younger sibling: "Mommy loves me more than you." But it shows a rabbinic tendency to emphasize the genealogical superiority of born-Jews over converts.

To this growing list of texts could be added a number of early midrashic texts that discuss whether the term 'Israel' includes converts.<sup>95</sup> Cohen writes that "the standard rhetorical pattern is: 'I might have thought that 'Israel' excludes converts, but Scripture adds some other phrase to imply their inclusion.'"<sup>96</sup> This pattern in the midrash not only confirms that converts were understood to be genealogically different, it also shows the rabbinic desire to include converts as full members of the Jewish people. In other words, the rabbis did believe that converts were genealogically/ethnically different, but they also wanted to find a way to overcome the lineage handicap.

One halakhic approach that shows the rabbinic desire to help converts overcome their genealogical inferiority is to establish that a convert is like a newborn infant. *Ger she-*

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Porton, Ch. 4, for a detailed review of Sifra, Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael, Sifre Numbers and Sifre Deuteronomy. Another text that could be listed, without adding much depth to the discussion, is R. Helbo's statement, occasionally repeated in the Talmud, that converts are as harmful to Israel as the skin-condition *sapahat* (Niddah 13b; Yevamot 47b, 109b; Qiddushin 70b.)

<sup>96</sup> Cohen 337. On 338 Cohen adds, "In only three passages in the tannaitic midrashim does the exegete conclude that the scriptural references to 'Israel' definitively exclude converts from the law."

*nitgayer kekatan she-nolad dami*: a convert who converts is like a newborn baby.<sup>97</sup> This halakhic approach allowed the convert to sever his genealogical connection to his gentile family and join the Jewish people as a clean slate.

That the rabbis took the principle of "convert as newborn" seriously is evident from the impact that it has on halakhah toward the convert. The range of halakhic implications is wide, and includes the severing of ties with regard to caring for non-Jewish family, witnessing against family members, inheritance, mourning family members, the mitzvah of having children, and the requirement to honor parents.<sup>98</sup> In theory, when a convert converts, every relationship he is involved in, either by birth or marriage, is severed, and he is like a newborn with no family ties.<sup>99</sup> Some sages even use the "convert as newborn" principle to exonerate converts from sins they committed before they converted.<sup>100</sup>

There are a variety of reasons that the rabbis may have had for wanting to strictly sever the ties between a convert and his earlier gentile life. Porton finds two reasons: first, the severing of ties with idolaters aided the convert in his new attachment to Adonai and the Jewish community; and second, the rabbis were uncomfortable with transferring property upon the death of the convert from the Jewish community to the non-Jewish family members.<sup>101</sup> The severing of ties may also have been directed at born-Jews to encourage them to treat converts respectfully. Reminding a convert of his gentile past and taunting him when he comes to learn Torah is halakhically prohibited. "Do not say, The mouth that ate *nevelot* and creeping things now comes to learn Torah, which was given from the mouth of the Almighty?!"<sup>102</sup>

The halakhic practice of severing ties also has a useful theological purpose, to the extent that the rabbis were looking for a way to help the convert overcome the challenge of not being born into the restrictive genealogical system. It was easier to take on a new

<sup>97</sup> Yevamot 22a, 48b, 62a (x2), 97b; Behorot 47a.

<sup>98</sup> For a discussion of each issue, with detailed references, see *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, entry "Ger," § 3 (*Yachso l'kerovav*), columns 259-262.

<sup>99</sup> The rabbis also understood the risks of over-emphasizing the severing of ties. They were concerned that the incoming convert might think Judaism was more licentious than his birth religion, since he was now permitted to enter relationships that were previously incestuous, and that born-Jews might try to copy the practice. Cf. Braude 122-124 for a discussion and references.

<sup>100</sup> See Porton 210 for a list of both specific and general cases in which pre-conversion offenses were dismissed because after converting the convert "was not the same person."

<sup>101</sup> Porton 208-209.

<sup>102</sup> Bava Metzia 58b.

identity as a *tabula rasa* than as a person with a recent history of idolatry and with idolaters in his family. The genealogical transformation – severing the old lineage and taking on a new status as part of the people Israel – takes place the moment the convert emerges from the *mikveh*. A Baraita states: *taval ve'alah harey hu k'yisrael l'khol devarav* (“once he has immersed and come up, he is treated as a Jew in every respect”). Like a newborn coming out of the womb, the convert emerges with a new identity.<sup>103</sup>

Later, in his letter to Obadiah the Convert, Maimonides would present a more philosophical understanding of conversion and cancel the prayer restrictions that were established in M. Bikkurim 1:4. “Since you have come under the wings of the divine presence and confessed the Lord, no difference exists between you and us,” he wrote.<sup>104</sup> But for the early rabbis, the theology that Israel is an *ethnos* that can only be born into was widely held. They believed there was a real difference between born-Jews and converts, a difference that was rooted in genealogy. This theology influenced their understanding of and their approach to the relationship between God, Israel, and converts.

## 2

### Faith

*Converts have an exceptional relationship to God.*

A second theology of conversion deals with the special relationship between God and Israel, seen through the lens of a candidate's motive for conversion. Many rabbinic texts emphasize the un-coerced nature of conversion; it is with free will that the convert comes to the God of Israel to become a Jew. In the following two *midrashim*, the sages explain that the convert is dear to God because he came without witnessing the signs and portents that Israel saw; he recognized God on his own without the miracles of the Sinai experience. In

<sup>103</sup> One is left wondering whether the Baraita is also limited by lineage theology: *harey hu k'yisrael* – he is like a Jew. Why not simply say that, upon emerging from the *mikveh*, the convert is a Jew in every respect? Perhaps the rabbis could not go that far – even their own conversion process could not completely transform a gentile into Jew.

<sup>104</sup> For an English version of the Letter, see Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (1972) 475-476. Cohen 331-332 also translates a large section of the letter. Maimonides roots his ruling on a different theology, which connects the convert to Abraham, who is the first convert and/or “father of converts.” There are rabbinic sources for this view: c.f. Cohen 335 note 57.

the first midrash, the convert is actually judged to be dearer to God than Israel, and focuses on the theatrics of the Sinai experience:

**Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 6**

Said R. Shimon b. Lakish: The convert is dearer to the holy Blessed One than the hordes who stood at Mount Sinai. Why? Because every member of the hordes – had they not seen the voices, the thunder and the lightning, and the mountains quaking and the sound of the shofars – they would not have accepted the Kingdom of Heaven. But this one – who saw none of these things – came, handed himself over (*mashlim atzmo*) to the holy Blessed One, and accepted upon himself the Kingdom of Heaven. Could any be dearer than he?

The force of the text is that the convert, unlike the Israelite, was under no coercion or even persuasion to obey God and accept the Torah. Without experiencing any awe-inducing miracles, the convert ‘accepted upon himself’ the Kingdom of Heaven, and is therefore beloved by God. A second midrash expresses the same idea, using the metaphor of a gazelle that grew up in the wilderness:

[God] said to [Moses], “Great is the one who converts for My name.” He is like a gazelle that grew up in the wilderness and came on his own to join the flock. The shepherd fed him, gave him water and cherished him more than his flock. They said to him, “You cherish this gazelle more than the flock?” He said to them, “I have gone to so much toil and trouble for my flock, taking them out in the morning and bringing them back in the evening until they grew up, and this one, which grew up in the wilderness and forests, came on his own into my flock – that is why I cherish him.” In the same way the holy Blessed One, who toiled greatly on behalf of Israel, took them out of Egypt: “I appeared before them, I brought down the manna, I brought them the quail, I raised up the spring for them, I surrounded them with the cloud of glory until they received my Torah, and this one comes on his own! Therefore he is as worthy to me as Israel.”<sup>105</sup>

Here the sages emphasize how God performed a litany of miracles for Israel – sustaining them throughout their wanderings in the wilderness – of which the convert had no part. Yet somehow the convert recognizes God’s name “on his own” (*‘atzmo*) and converts. God rewards this act of independent discovery of faith by judging the convert to be as “worthy as Israel.”

Embedded in both of these *midrashim* is a concern regarding the motivation of a convert. They give a positive answer to the question, “Why did the convert decide to convert and become part of Israel?” He converted for the sake of heaven, for the sake of God’s

<sup>105</sup> This version appears in Yalkut Shimoni on Ex 12:48, remez 213. An extended version appears in Numbers Rabbah 8.2. c.f. Bamberger 170 (note 29) for additional versions. The aggadic passages presented in this section (Tanhuma, Numbers R., Ruth Zuta) are probably later than the classical halakhic passages below.

name. But most rabbinic texts take a more cynical view<sup>106</sup> and reveal a deep concern with the candidate's internal motivation for becoming a Jew. Consider the following midrash, an interpretation of Naomi's double refusal of her daughters-in-law in the first chapter of Ruth:

**Ruth Zuta 1:12**

"Turn back, my daughters" (Ruth 1:12) and "Turn back" (Ruth 1:8). From this you learn to refuse a convert two times [because Naomi twice told her daughters-in-law to turn back]. Rav Hiyya said, "Don't trust a convert until 24 generations, since he retains his evil inclination (*se'oro*). But the moment that he accepts upon him the yoke of God out of love and fear and converts for the sake of heaven, the holy Blessed One will not [send him away again and] make him come back,<sup>107</sup> as it is written (Dt. 10:18), "love the *ger*, provide him with food and clothing..."<sup>108</sup>

This short text is rich with ideas worthy of exploration.<sup>109</sup> What is most relevant to this discussion is the fullness of the acceptance of the convert who converts for the sake of heaven, over and against the convert who converts for other (presumably mundane or dubious) reasons. The one who "accepts the yoke of God out of love and fear and converts for the sake of heaven" – this is the ideal convert, the true convert.

What is the meaning behind this emphasis on the internal motivation of the convert? What is the theology behind the rabbinic admiration for the convert who converts "for the sake of heaven?" The answer requires further exploration of related texts. Having used aggadah to introduce the rabbinic concern regarding a convert's motives, let us now explore the theme of 'motive for conversion' in halakhic texts.

**Motive in halakhic texts**

Motive is a common theme in halakhic discussion of conversion. The following two Talmudic texts, one from the Bavli and one from the Yerushalmi, best illustrate the rabbinic thinking regarding the motive of the convert.

<sup>106</sup> In fact, the context of the midrash of the gazelle is a larger discussion of three types of converts, two of which are not for the sake of heaven.

<sup>107</sup> Heb: *mahziro*. Bamberger translates "let him backslide." My sense of the text is that one should be cautious with converts, testing their motivation and resolve by denying them twice, and not trusting them for 24 generations. But if he converts for the sake of Heaven, he should not be denied and should be accepted at once. However the word *mahziro* is translated, the force of the text is clear: the convert who comes for the sake of heaven is the ideal, and all candidates with different motivations are spurned.

<sup>108</sup> C.f. Bamberger 173 (note 67) for similar texts.

<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately the aspects of R. Hiyya's statement – the racial notion of *ger* extending for multiple generations, and the idea that the convert retains some impurity or evil inclination even after converting – will not be analyzed here.

**Y. Quiddushin 4.1.3**

He who converts for the sake of love, whether a man because of a woman, or a woman because of a man, and so too those who converted in order to enter Israelite royal service, and so too those who converted out of fear of the lions, and so too the converts in the time of Mordecai and Esther – they do not accept them. Rab said, "In law they are converts, and they do not repel them as they repel converts at the outset, but they accept them and must welcome them kindly, in the possibility that it was for the sake of heaven."<sup>110</sup>

**Yevamot 24b**

A man converted for the sake of a woman, a woman converted for the sake of a man, likewise he who converts for the sake of [eating at] the king's table, or for the sake of [becoming one of] Solomon's servants: they are not [legitimate] converts, these are the words of R. Nehemiah. For R. Nehemiah says: lion-inspired converts, dream-inspired converts, and Mordecai and Esther-inspired converts are not [legitimate] converts, until they convert in the present time. Can it enter your mind [that only in] the present time [converts are legitimate]? Rather, say as in the present time [i.e. they convert with no ulterior motive]. Behold, it was stated: R. Yitzchak b. Shmuel b. Marta in the name of Rav: the halakhah follows the one who says they are all [legitimate] converts. ... Our Rabbis taught in a Baraita: we do not accept converts in the days of the Messiah. Similarly, they did not accept converts in the days of David nor in the days of Solomon.

These two passages record the opinion that proper motivation is a critical aspect of a legitimate conversion, as well as the opinion that ulterior or improper motives are sufficient to invalidate a conversion.

The following types of motives are considered illegitimate: romantic/sexual motives (for the sake of love of another person); covetous/envious motives (to enter royal service, eat at the king's table, or become one of Solomon's servants); and fear for one's life (fear of the lions, and in the time of Mordecai and Esther<sup>111</sup>). The Baraita that converts were not accepted in the days of David or Solomon, nor would they be accepted in the days of the Messiah, is probably based on a covetous/envious or fear-based motive: when Jews rule the land, the motive of converts must be called into question because it is likely they are converting in order to achieve better status or to avoid persecution by the rulers. These two passages decry all ulterior motives.<sup>112</sup>

So what is a legitimate motive for conversion? The second text (Yevamot 24b) explains that only converts who convert "(as) in the present time" are legitimate. From

<sup>110</sup> Neusner translation, comments removed. Neusner comments that 'fear of the lions' refers to the Samaritans.

<sup>111</sup> See Esther 8:17 for context of why this was a time of fear.

<sup>112</sup> In the Yevamot 24b text above, R. Nehemiah mentions another ulterior motive which is unclear to this author: *geirey-halomot*: dream-inspired converts. Rashi suggests these are people ordered to convert by the Master of Dreams.

context, the plain meaning of the statement is that one who converts during a time when Jews are persecuted, or at least when Jews are not the rulers, has fewer reasons to have his motives questioned, and is less likely to be harboring an ulterior motive.<sup>113</sup>

Such a situation – a convert who comes in “in the present time” – appears later in the tractate. What follows is an excerpt from the extended *sugya* that underpins the halakhic approach toward conversion:<sup>114</sup>

**Yevamot 47a**

Our Rabbis taught in a Baraita: a convert comes to convert in the present time – we say to him, “What did you see, that you come to convert? Don’t you know that nowadays Israel is broken down, pushed about, swept [from place to place], and tossed about? And that hardships come upon them?!” If he responds, “I know and I am not deserving,” we accept him immediately.

Once again the rabbis show how important a candidate’s internal motive is to them. Instead of greeting a prospective convert with an initial welcome or words of support, the candidate is attacked with the probing question: what in the world are you thinking?! Why would you want to convert? Don’t you know how bad things are for the Jews? If he is aware of the present deleterious situation of the Jews and responds with humility, he is accepted.

Unfortunately, the *gemara* does not tell us what happens if he responds differently.<sup>115</sup>

We have now seen texts that anticipate conversion candidates in a wide variety of historical situations. Taken as a whole, the approach is ironic. When Jews are the rulers, candidates should not be accepted, since they probably have an ulterior motive. When Jews are being ruled over and persecuted, candidates should be discouraged and their motive should be investigated. But why discourage a candidate who comes during the present time? Later in the *sugya* we get an answer: “What is the reason [for discouraging him]? If he abandons [his attempt to convert], let him abandon!”<sup>116</sup> While such a statement can easily be

<sup>113</sup> The romantic/sexual motive still survives, but perhaps even love is dampened when faced with the prospect of joining the ranks of a persecuted people.

<sup>114</sup> This passage and the passages that surround it (Yevamot 45-48) form the basis of how the rabbis carry out the conversion process. See section on conversion as a commitment to fulfill *mitzvot* in this chapter for further theological analysis of this material.

<sup>115</sup> I am led to believe by the text that there is only one acceptable answer to the question of why the candidate has come to convert: he must be converting for the sake of heaven (*I’shem shamaim*). If the candidate speaks of any ulterior motive, such as those described above, he would be rejected. But see below, in this section, for texts that critique such a view.

<sup>116</sup> Yevamot 47b. The passage continues with R. Chelbo’s oft-quoted anti-convert statement: As R. Helbo said: converts are as difficult for Israel as *sapahat* [a skin affliction], as it is written (Is. 14:1), ‘And the *ger* shall join



understood as part of a negative attitude towards converts,<sup>117</sup> it should also be understood in the context of the rabbinic attitude towards a candidate's motivation. *Parish nifrosh* (if he abandons, let him abandon) is a way a saying that the most effective way to test a candidate's motivation is to discourage him upfront. If we discourage a candidate whose motives are pure, i.e. *l'shem shamaim*, he will likely return. If we discourage a candidate with ulterior motives, he will either disclose those motives or he will be turned off and not return. In essence, the initial discouraging response is a litmus test for proper motive.<sup>118</sup>

Before turning to the theology that girds the rabbinic emphasis on internal motive, a second area of halakhah deserves exploration: the conversion of a minor. For adults, conversion is a one-way street; a convert who reverts to his earlier ways or disregards Jewish practice is considered an apostate Jew.<sup>119</sup> But a minor who converts, whether at the behest of a parent or the *bet din*, has the option to renounce the conversion upon reaching the age of majority.<sup>120</sup> The rabbis explain that the reason a minor may be converted is that conversion is a benefit for the minor, and a benefit may be conferred upon someone in their absence (or in this case, if they are not of legal standing). But the rabbis do not explain why a minor has the option to renounce the conversion upon reaching the age of majority.

It is reasonable to suggest that the escape clause for a converted minor is intimately related to the rabbinic concern with the integrity of a convert's motive. By definition, a minor does not have full awareness or understanding of what conversion is or will require of him; only a legal adult can make such a decision. Conversion requires acceptance, and

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them and shall cleave to the House of Jacob.' This statement was not included above because it was not pertinent to the discussion of motives for conversion.

<sup>117</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>118</sup> There may be another reason for the rabbinic emphasis on pure motive. The sages may have believed that true faith and pure motive "converts" immediately, and that the presence of an ulterior motive prevented the candidate's gentile past from being erased completely, leaving him with residual "filth" or evil inclination. For textual support of this notion, see Shabbat 146a (presented in the third theology below), which teaches that the impurity of Israel was removed at Sinai. This line of reasoning was pointed out to me by Alyssa Gray.

<sup>119</sup> Behorot 30b. See third and fourth theologies ("Ritual" and "Mitzvot") in this chapter for further discussion of this text.

<sup>120</sup> Ketubot 11a. See also Yoreh Deah 268 (6-7).

cannot be forced upon an adult.<sup>121</sup> Or as Rashi comments, "we do not convert a sane person (*ben da'at*) unless it is his desire."<sup>122</sup>

Because conversion requires acceptance by an adult, the motive of one who converts while a minor must be tested upon reaching adulthood. In this case the test is a momentary, one-time, penalty-free option to renounce the conversion and revert to his original state as a non-Jew. By choosing to remain a Jew at the liminal moment of becoming a Jewish adult, the converted minor declares his agreement with the earlier choice that others made for him. Only after passing such a test can the integrity of the convert's motive be indisputable.

### Theology behind pure motives

The Rabbinic preoccupation with the internal motives of the candidate for conversion can be summarized in the following ways. The ideal motive for conversion is to recognize the God of Israel, variously described as 'for the sake of God's name,'<sup>123</sup> and 'for the sake of heaven.'<sup>124</sup> A candidate who harbors any ulterior motive, whether romantic, covetous, or fear-based, should be turned away. Candidates should initially be discouraged when they inquire about conversion in order to test the purity of their motives. In addition, a candidate cannot be coerced in any way, and a candidate must be of an adult age to make the choice of his own free will. Thus a minor must accept his conversion upon reaching the age of majority.

Why did the rabbis engage in so much discussion about the motives of a convert, especially when the motives of an individual can be difficult to discern?<sup>125</sup> Why does it matter whether this one converts to marry a pretty girl, or that one because she likes latkes? What is at stake, theologically?

Theologically, the rabbinic emphasis on the purity of a candidate's motive has two major implications: the first is the role of faith, and the second is the verification of God's

<sup>121</sup> A glaring exception to this rule is the conversion of and remission of a Canaanite slave. In such a case, a non-Jew may be coerced to become obligated to some mitzvot when he becomes a slave, and then coerced into becoming obligated to the rest of the mitzvot upon his remission, at which time he becomes a full Jew. See Yevamot 47b and commentaries.

<sup>122</sup> Yev 48a, s.v. "*kakh i-atah maf*"

<sup>123</sup> See, e.g., midrash of the gazelle, above.

<sup>124</sup> See, e.g., Y. Qiddushin 4.1.3, cited above, and Mekhilta Ishmael Amalek/Yitro 1:1 on Ex 18:7.

<sup>125</sup> The pragmatic problems that arise when trying to determine a candidate's motives did not go unnoticed by the rabbis and will be addressed at the end of this section.

continued role in the world. By defining proper motive for conversion exclusively as 'for the sake of heaven,' the rabbis emphasize the role that faith and belief take on in their own understanding of and definition of Jewishness. This sounds ironic for a group that created such an intricate mitzvah-based behavior system that emphasized performance and action. But the message is clear: faith matters. If faith was not a crucial aspect of the rabbinic understanding of Jewishness, the rabbis would have only emphasized behavior and performance of mitzvot and would not have been so concerned about the motives of candidates. Surely the rabbinic emphasis on faith has historical underpinnings, but these will not be addressed here.

The second theological implication of the emphasis on motive has to do with the status of the convert as an independent verification of God's continued role in the affairs of the world. The rabbinic world is by and large a world in which God's signs and miracles have faded away into the past.<sup>126</sup> It is a world in which the Jews have little control over their historical situation and are subject to the ruling whims of others. "Haven't you heard how bad it is for the Jews?" is our first response to a candidate. But if a non-Jew recognizes God's existence *on his own*, if he independently comes to the realization that the God of Israel is the only god deserving of worship, then what his conversion means is nothing short of living proof that God is still kicking. Each person who converts *l'shem shamaim* is another reminder that God has not abandoned Israel.<sup>127</sup>

### Limits of uncovering motive

A rabbinic belief that a convert who comes with a pure motive is evidence that God still loves Israel would do much to explain their preoccupation with the motives of conversion candidates. Yet the rabbis were pragmatic enough to realize that it is quite difficult to properly ascertain the internal motivations of a convert. They probably also understood that candidates may not be fully aware of their own motives. For these reasons,

<sup>126</sup> Thus Sinai becomes the quintessential miracle that God performed. C.f. the two midrashic texts at the opening of this section.

<sup>127</sup> Even 'in our own time' modern Rabbis recount how meaningful it is to work with conversion candidates. I am suggesting that one of the reasons it is so meaningful is that each *ger tzedeq* gives us permission to renew our faith in God. This also explains why a modern Jew might dismiss a convert and accuse him of having ulterior motives – because the Jew would rather not believe that God works in the world in that way. I have explored these themes in a separate sermon entitled "*V'ahavta et ha-ger*."

many of the same texts that emphasize the importance of a candidate's internal motive also back away from establishing proper motive as a critical requirement for a legitimate conversion. This appears both in halakhic and aggadic texts.

For instance, immediately after the Y. Qiddushin passage cited above, which outlines a series of motives that are not considered legitimate, we read the following statement by Rav: "In law they are converts, and they do not repel them as they repel converts at the outset, but they accept them and must welcome them kindly, in the possibility that it was for the sake of heaven."<sup>128</sup> Rav is uncomfortable with the practice of discouraging converts at the outset.<sup>129</sup> He also dismisses the idea that certain motives disqualify a candidate, because it is always possible that "it was for the sake of heaven." Perhaps Rav saw how candidates were transformed in the conversion process, and felt that an improper motive at the outset might evolve into a proper motive later on.

Similarly, immediately after the Yevamot 24b passage, which also outlines motives that disqualify a candidate, we read the following statement: "Behold, it was stated: R. Yitzchak b. Shmuel b. Marta in the name of Rav: the halakhah follows the one who says they are all [legitimate] converts."<sup>130</sup> Once again Rav is the voice of reason; the halakhah will accept such candidates *b'diavad* (after the fact) and will not reject them because of improper motive.

We can also find an aggadic critique of the emphasis on a candidate's internal motive. In Shabbat 31a, we read the stories of three different conversion candidates with illegitimate motives. Each candidate comes to Shammai first, is spurned by him, and then approaches Hillel, who accepts him as a candidate. Using his legendary humility and teaching prowess, Hillel transforms each candidate's initial improper motive into a proper one.

The first candidate demands, "convert me on condition that you will teach me only the written Torah [and not the oral Torah]." Shammai berates him and sends him away. Hillel teaches the candidate the *alef-bet* properly one day, then switches the names of the letters on the next day. The candidate confronts Hillel about the inconsistency. When Hillel replies, "Are you not relying upon me [to recognize the letters of the alphabet]? Rely on me also, about the oral law." The second candidate demands, "Convert me on condition that you

<sup>128</sup> Y. Qiddushin 4.1.3.

<sup>129</sup> So is Hillel. See aggadic texts that follow.

<sup>130</sup> Yevamot 24b.

will teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai uses his ruler to push the candidate away. Hillel famously responds, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." The third candidate was walking by a *beit midrash* when he heard the teacher describing the vestments that are made for the High Priest. He comes to Shammai and demands, "Convert me on condition that you have me appointed as *kohen gadol* (High Priest). Shammai gets out his ruler again. Hillel teaches the candidate: "the stranger (*zar*) who approaches shall die."<sup>131</sup> The candidate realizes<sup>132</sup> that if an ordinary Israelite could not perform the duties of the High Priest without dying, surely he would not either.

All three candidates complete their conversion under the tutelage of Hillel, and at the end of the three stories, the three candidates declare, "The sternness of Shammai sought to banish us from the world, but the humble manner of Hillel brought us under the wings of the Shekhinah."<sup>133</sup>

This story of the three candidates for conversion with improper motives is a striking critique of the rabbinic emphasis on the importance of motive. The critique is not that a candidate's motive is irrelevant to the legitimacy of a conversion, but rather that an improper motive can be transformed. Shammai sees a candidate with an improper motive, but Hillel sees a candidate who needs a chance to learn. Hillel's embrace shows that behind every candidate with an improper motivation is a candidate with a proper motivation waiting to be discovered.

Remarkably, the rabbinic critique of its own emphasis on proper motive strengthens the theological argument. In the halakhic texts, candidates with an improper motive should be accepted, according to Rav, because they might actually have proper motive. In the aggadic texts, candidates with improper motive should be accepted because they will be found to have a proper motive if only we give them a chance. The critique disagrees with those who say that a candidate should be turned away for improper motive, and agrees with those who praise a convert who comes *l'shem shamaim*. The point the critique is trying to make is that lurking in every candidate is a potential convert *l'shem shamaim*.

<sup>131</sup> Numbers 3:10 and 18:7.

<sup>132</sup> The text tells us that the candidate formed a *kal v'homer* argument concerning himself.

<sup>133</sup> Shabbat 31a.

Having reviewed the rabbinic emphasis on the importance of motive in conversion, as well as the internal critique of that position, we can now say that a major concern of the rabbis was that candidates have proper faith in God. Ensuring that outsiders who come to join the people Israel have proper faith in God is a way of ensuring that each convert represents the action of the holy Blessed One in their world. When converts have proper motive, the rabbis could believe that God had a role in the convert's path to becoming a Jew. Each candidate *l'shem shamaim* was another invitation to reaffirm that God had not abandoned the Jews. By drawing boundaries around proper motive for conversion, the rabbis constructed an influential role for faith in Jewish identity. In this theology, Israel is a people with a special relationship to God, and only those who recognize that relationship can join.

### 3

#### Ritual

*Conversion is a re-enactment of the covenant God made at Sinai.*

Not surprisingly, another theology that permeates the rabbinic tradition is that conversion is somehow connected to the covenant experience at Sinai. In one version of this theology, the experiences of the Israelites surrounding the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai become the model for the process of becoming a Jew. In a slightly different version, converts are imagined to have actually been present in some way at the Sinai experience itself.

#### Conversion as re-enactment of Sinai

Rabbi<sup>134</sup> is credited with making the statement, "Just as your forefathers entered the covenant through circumcision, immersion, and the dashing of blood, so too converts enter the covenant through circumcision, immersion and the sprinkling of blood." The earliest appearance of his statement is in Sifre Numbers, and the statement itself is repeated

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<sup>134</sup> Yehuda haNasi, Tanna, late 2<sup>nd</sup> c.

throughout rabbinic literature.<sup>135</sup> Kritot 9a includes his statement as well as additional material:

#### Kritot 9a

Scripture says (Num 15:15): You and the stranger shall be alike. He [the *ger*] is compared to you, not to your offerings. Rabbi says: "like you" – like your forefathers. Just as your forefathers entered the covenant through circumcision (*milah*), immersion (*tevilah*), and the dashing of blood (*hartzat dam*), so they enter the covenant through circumcision, immersion and the sprinkling of blood... Master said: 'Just as your forefathers entered the covenant:' granted circumcision, as it is written (Ezek 16:6), "When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: 'Live in spite of your blood;'" and the dashing of blood, as it is written (Ex 24:5) "He designated some young men among the Israelites;"<sup>136</sup> but where is immersion mentioned? As it is written (Ex 24:8), "Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people,"<sup>137</sup> and dashing [blood] always includes immersion (*tevilah*). However, nowadays, when there is no sacrifice, we cannot accept converts.<sup>138</sup> Rav Aha b. Jacob said (Num 15:14), "And when a stranger who has taken up residence with you."<sup>139</sup> The sages taught: a convert in this day needs to set aside a quarter-laqa. <sup>140</sup> Rabbi Shimon said: Raban Yohanan b. Zakkai already disposed of [the sacrifice requirement] and nullified it because it was a stumbling block (*hataqala*). Rav Idi b. Gershom said in the name of Rav Ada b. Ahava: the *halakhah* follows Rabbi Shimon.

This attempt to connect the ritual of conversion to the Sinai experience borders on humorous. The search for scriptural justification of each of the three rites, circumcision, immersion and sacrifice, suggests that it was not obvious to the rabbis how the Israelites engaged in those three acts when the Torah was given. Indeed, each of the scriptural proofs that they offer is indirect and unconvincing. The justification for immersion – that the dashing of blood always includes immersion – is particularly tenuous. Certainly this is a case of theology following after reality. Circumcision is a well-established Israelite rite and is generally associated with the Exodus from Egypt, but not particularly associated with the

<sup>135</sup> Sifre Bemidbar Shelakh 108 on 15:14. The statement, with little or no additional development, appears in the following texts: Mekhilta de R. Shimon b. Yohai 12; Sifra Vayikra, Parashah 2 (*Korban Nedavah*); Pesikta Zutarta (Shlakh lekha); Yaikut Shimoni (Kedoshim, Shalakh); various Talmud commentaries; and Yoreh Deah 268.

<sup>136</sup> The second half of the verse reads, "and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord," which would have included the action of the dashing of blood – indeed it is mentioned a few verses later, in verse Ex. 24:8.

<sup>137</sup> The latter part of the verse includes the phrase *dam ha-brit*. The Kritot text mis-quotes the verse, substituting the word *hetzi* (half of) for *et*, making the verse read, 'Moses took half the blood and dashed it on the people.'

<sup>138</sup> Because one of the three requirements, the dashing of sacrificial blood, cannot be fulfilled without the Temple.

<sup>139</sup> The verse continues, "or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord – as you do, so shall it be done by 15 the rest of the congregation."

<sup>140</sup> A laqa is a small copper coin. This monetary offering replaced the sacrifice. This practice was later disposed of, either because of concerns regarding the misuse of the funds, or as stated here, because it was a financial stumbling block for candidates.

giving of the Torah at Sinai. Neither immersion nor sacrifice (other than the golden calf) makes an appearance in the Torah-giving narrative. It is assumed in this passage that conversion only occurs through these three rites, so the rabbis use exegesis to connect each one to the Sinai experience. That the rabbis went to great pains to connect the rituals of conversion to Sinai gives this theology all the more credence. For the rabbis, the quintessential process of turning non-Jews into Jews is the Sinai experience. In order to become a Jew, one must experience Sinai.

The Kritot passage also teaches us that the rite of sacrifice as a constitutive part of conversion had fallen out of use, surely because of the collapse of the Temple and its associated system of ritual sacrifice. For a while, the practice of setting aside a small monetary contribution had replaced the requirement of sacrifice, but this practice was also discarded,<sup>141</sup> so that the halakhah required only two of the three original rites: circumcision and immersion. It is worth noting that *kabbalat 'ol mitzvot*, the acceptance of the yoke of the mitzvot, does not appear anywhere in this passage or its sister texts.<sup>142</sup>

### **Actually, they were there that day**

An alternative version of the conversion via Sinai theology takes the form of showing how the convert was included in the original Sinai experience in some way. In Shevuot 39a, Dt. 29:13-14 ("I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day") is interpreted to mean that future converts were included in the original covenant.

#### **Shevuot 39a<sup>143</sup>**

As it is written (Dt. 29:13), "not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day." This refers to those who [actually] stood at Mount Sinai. But which scripture [teaches] that the coming generations [of born-Jews] and the future converts that will convert [are also included in the covenant]? (Dt. 29:14) "and with those who are not with us."

<sup>141</sup> C.f. Porton, 267, note 18 and 293, note 69 for additional references and scholarship on the suspension of this rite.

<sup>142</sup> But see fourth theology ("Mitzvot") in this chapter.

<sup>143</sup> An earlier source of this exact same interpretation appears in Tosefta Sotah 7:5.



The context of this passage is a broader discussion about how to resolve the original covenant made with the Israelites with the contemporary covenant that includes Jews who were not present at Sinai and stipulations that were not yet enacted (i.e. oral Torah). The passage puts post-Sinai born-Jews and converts in the same predicament; neither group was at Sinai, so how can they be obligated by the covenant? The answer is that the original covenant was made also "with those who are not with us." In other words, all Jews, whether Jewish by birth or by conversion, were included as parties to the original covenant at Sinai. Once again, the path to Jewishness begins at Mount Sinai.

A more creative, even mystical, solution appears in Shabbat 146a. R. Ashi interprets the same verse from Deuteronomy to mean that the *mazal* of each convert was present at Sinai.

#### **Shabbat 146a**

[R. Yochanan said] Why are idolaters impure? Because they did not stand at Mount Sinai. The moment that the serpent seduced Eve, he cast impurity into her. Israel, who stood at Mount Sinai, their impurity was removed.<sup>144</sup> The idolaters, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, their impurity was not removed. R. Acha b. R. Rava said to R. Ashi: What about converts? [How is their impurity removed, since they did not stand at Sinai?] He said to him: Even though they themselves were not [present at Sinai], their *mazals*<sup>145</sup> were. For it is written (Dt. 29:14), "[I make this covenant...not with you alone] but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day."

This passage is an important antecedent to the mystical views on conversion that will emerge in the Zohar and through its expounders.<sup>146</sup> In this worldview, Jews are pure and non-Jews are impure. The Sinai experience is the moment that Israel became purified. R. Acha asks the difficult question: how are members of the impure nations able to convert to become members of the pure Jews? The solution is that the *mazal*, or guardian angel, of each convert, was present at Sinai. By being present at Sinai, his *mazal* is able to remove the impurity that lingered in him from the serpent's seduction of Eve. By attributing purifying

<sup>144</sup> Avodah Zarah 22b notes that Sinai purified Israel from improper sexual desire at Sinai.

<sup>145</sup> The best understanding of the use of *mazal* in this passage is as 'guardian angel' or fate/destiny. Guardian angel seems better, since the force of the passage is that one's presence is required for the purification to take place. See Rashi to Shabbat 53b s.v. *mazleiha*.

<sup>146</sup> See chapter on the Mystical Views of Conversion.

powers to the Sinai experience, this passage retains Sinai as a central theological moment to which all Jews, including converts, must be linked.<sup>147</sup>

### **Just as the covenant is irrevocable, so is conversion**

God's covenant with Abraham and Israel is described in the *Tanakh* as an eternal, irrevocable covenant (*brit l'olam*).<sup>148</sup> Similarly, a convert's entry into that covenant is like passing through a one-way valve into the Jewish people. Even if a convert reverts to his former gentile ways, he is still considered a Jew; the entry into the covenant is irrevocable. The following two texts will serve as examples of this view.

#### **Behorot 30b**

A convert who accepts upon himself the Torah: if he becomes suspect of [not upholding] even one matter [of Torah], he is suspect regarding the entire Torah. He is like an apostate Jew (*yisrael mumar*): the distinction being that if he betroths [a Jewish woman], his marriage is valid.

#### **Yevamot 47b**

If [a convert] reverts [to his former gentile ways] and betroths a Jewish woman, we call him an apostate Jew (*yisrael mumar*), and his marriage is valid.

These two passages show that the rabbis saw conversion as a point of no return. Just as God's covenant with Israel is irrevocable,<sup>149</sup> so too a convert's entry into the Jewish people is irrevocable.

### **Blessings over circumcision**

Three glimpses of the theology 'conversion via Sinai' have now been explored: conversion as a re-enactment of the Sinai experience, converts as parties to the original Sinai covenant, and conversion as an irrevocable entry into the eternal covenant. A fourth glimpse of this theology appears in the text of the blessing over the circumcision of a convert. Shabbat 137b records the *berakhot* that are recited for circumcision, first for an infant born-Jew, then for a convert, then for a non-Jewish slave. The blessings over the circumcision of a

<sup>147</sup> The midrash from Tanhuma (Lekh Lekha 6), quoted and discussed above in the section on a convert's motive, explains how a convert is dear to God because he was *not* at Sinai and did not experience the awe-inspiring thunder, lightning, etc., yet still came to convert. This is a good example of competing theologies and "*eilu v'eilu*" in the rabbinic tradition.

<sup>148</sup> Gen 17:13 and Ps. 105:8-10.

<sup>149</sup> This argument is weakened by the fact that the Scriptural prooftexts for the covenant being irrevocable (*l'olam*) are not related to the Sinai narrative (see previous note).

convert and slave are exactly the same except for one word.<sup>150</sup> A comparison of the *berakhot* for the circumcision of a newborn and the circumcision of a convert is helpful to this discussion. Below, the two blessings appear side by side. Passages that are exactly the same for both cases are printed in the middle of the page.

INFANT BOY	(BOTH)	MALE CONVERT
<p>[Circumciser says]            Blessed are you Adonai, our God, Ruler of the            Universe, who has sanctified us with <i>mitzvot</i>,            and commanded us regarding circumcision.</p>		
<p>[Afterwards, father says] ...And            commanded us to bring him into the            covenant (<i>brit</i>) of Abraham our forefather.</p>		
<p>[Congregation responds, then blessing says]            ...who has sanctified the beloved one from            the womb, placed a mark in his flesh, and            sealed his offspring with a sign of the holy            covenant. Therefore, as a reward for this,            O living God, our portion, give the            command to save the beloved of our flesh            from destruction, for the sake of his            covenant that he has placed in our flesh.</p>		
<p>[afterwards, the blessing says]            ...who commands us to circumcise            converts, and draw from them blood of the            covenant (<i>dam brit</i>). For without the blood            of the covenant, heaven and earth would            not endure, as it is written (Jer. 33:25),            "without my covenant of day and night, I            would not have set the laws of heaven and            earth."</p>		
<p>Blessed are you Adonai, who establishes            the covenant (<i>koret ha-brit</i>).<sup>151</sup></p>		

The first thing to notice about these two *berakhot* is that the opening and closing blessings are exactly the same. Second, the closing blessing (*hatimah*) clearly connects

<sup>150</sup> The word "converts" (*gerim*) is replaced with "slaves" (*'avadim*). See text below. The association of conversion with the taking and manumission of slaves in rabbinic literature deserves further exploration. See Ch. 5, "*Eved Kana'ani v'gioro*" in Finkelstein, *HaGiur: Halakhah u-Ma'aseh*.

<sup>151</sup> Text for both blessings from Shabbat 137b (they appear one right after the other). Yoreh Deah 268(5) takes the wording for the blessing over the convert's circumcision exactly from the *gemara*, except that the final *hatima* is missing.

circumcision to the covenant – for both the newborn and the convert. Circumcision does not lose its connection to the covenant when it is being performed on a convert. If there were any doubt, the blessing over the convert circumcision specifically identifies the blood that is drawn as *dam brit*.

A reasonable case can be made that these two blessings were formulated along side, or perhaps in opposition to, each other. The blessing for the newborn includes the phrase “who has sanctified the beloved one [i.e. the infant] *from the womb*,” as if to emphasize that the holiness of the born-Jew began from the moment of conception. Unlike the convert, the infant was not only born in, but conceived in, holiness.

The use of Jeremiah 33:25 in the blessing for the convert circumcision deserves explication. The rabbis take the verse out of context<sup>152</sup> and interpret it to mean that without the “covenant of day and night” the world would not exist. Mishnah Nedarim helps to explain the rabbinic view:

**Nedarim 3:11**

Great is circumcision, for without it, the holy Blessed One would not have created the world, as it is written, “Thus says the Lord: without my covenant of day and night, I would not have set the laws of heaven and earth.”

In the rabbinic mind, the ‘covenant of day and night’ is circumcision.<sup>153</sup> Circumcision is so important that it actually holds together the heavens and the earth. No explanation is offered as to why this passage is included in the convert circumcision but not included in the infant circumcision.<sup>154</sup> Perhaps the anticipation of circumcision was so dreadful to the conversion candidate that the rabbis wanted to reassure him by telling him that by removing his foreskin he was actually keeping together the fabric of the universe. In any case, the blessing over the circumcision of a convert reinforces the rabbinic connection of conversion with God’s covenant with Israel and thus with the Sinai experience.

In this theology, the rabbis argue that the only way to become a Jew is to go through the same mythic experience that the Israelites went through at Sinai. By connecting the three

<sup>152</sup> Jeremiah 33:23-26. V.25 is grammatically connected to v.26. Together the verses connect the surety of God’s covenant of day and night to the surety of God’s covenant with the offspring of Jacob and David. Jeremiah is trying to reassure the exiled. See Walter Brueggeman’s *4 Commentary on Jeremiah*, 321-2 for further discussion.

<sup>153</sup> See also Tos. Yom Tov to this Mishnah.

<sup>154</sup> Neither Rashi nor Tosafot comment on the use of the verse.

rites of conversion with the Israelite Sinai experience, the rabbis write converts into the eternal covenant. For safe measure, the rabbis suggest that converts were somehow actually present at Sinai. When they constructed the blessing for a convert's circumcision, they made sure to mention that the blood that was drawn is the blood of the covenant. In these ways, the rabbis defined Jews as the people who experienced Sinai. Just as we are taught each year by the Passover *haggadah* that we should imagine that we ourselves were at Sinai, so too the convert should experience his conversion as a re-enactment of the covenant at Sinai.

## 4

### Mitzvot

*Converts must follow the written and oral Torah.*

A fourth theology that emerges from the classic rabbinical texts is that to be a Jew is to follow the system of mitzvot. According to this view, Israel is a people who follow both the written and oral Torah as set out by the rabbis, and anyone who joins the people Israel must follow that halakhah. This view, which is nascent in the classic sources, takes on new prominence and strictness in the later responsa literature.<sup>155</sup>

The view that Jewishness is defined by mitzvot emerges directly from the extended Baraita in Yevamot that describes how to deal with a conversion candidate. Just before this passage begins, a candidate presents himself and is asked why in the world he wants to convert, since history has not been kind to the Jewish people.<sup>156</sup>

#### Yevamot 47a/b

If he says, "I know and I am unworthy," we accept him immediately. We tell him about some of the minor mitzvot and about some of the major mitzvot. We tell him about the sin of [not observing the mitzvot of] gleanings, forgotten produce, corner [of the field], and tithing for the poor. We tell him about the punishment for [one who does not observe the] mitzvot: we say to him, "Know that until you reached this level, if you ate *helev* [certain animal fats] you would not have been punished by *karet* [divinely ordained premature death]. If you desecrated Shabbat, you would not have been punished by stoning. But now, if you eat *helev*, you will be punished by *karet*. If you desecrate Shabbat, you will be punished by stoning." Just as we tell him about the

<sup>155</sup> Because of the limits of this study, the classic sources are presented here, and only brief mention of the future development of this theology is made, generally by reference to secondary collections.

<sup>156</sup> For the text of the passage, see the second theology ("Faith") in this chapter.

punishment of the mitzvot, we tell him about their reward as well. We say to him, "Know that the world to come is made only for the righteous, and in this day and age, the Jewish people are unable to receive an abundance of goodness or an abundance of retribution." We do not overwhelm him, and we are not too strict with him. If he accepts (*qibel*), circumcise him immediately.

When a candidate comes to the rabbis, the first thing they do is inquire about his motive. The second thing they do is tell him what he is getting into. They describe to him the mitzvot system, including the punishment and reward that accompanies that system. They inform him of some of the mitzvot, but not all of them; they are careful not to overwhelm him (*marbin 'alav*) nor be too strict with him (*medaqdeqin 'alav*).

One has the sense that a typical candidate who came to the rabbis and who experienced this process would believe in the mitzvah system and its punishments and rewards, and would take it seriously. Put differently, the process described here in Yevamot does not seem to be overly influenced by a concern that candidates would not take the process seriously. Once the candidate hears the brief presentation, he says "OK" (*qibel*) to indicate his acceptance and he is circumcised immediately.<sup>157</sup> There is no promise, oath, or document to be signed; there is no rebutting inquiry by the rabbis, "Are you *sure* you *really* understand what you are agreeing to?" Perhaps they trusted the specter of circumcision to ensure his sincerity. Or perhaps in the period that this process was developed, the typical candidate conformed to the expected standard of mitzvot observance.

Soon after the passage above, another example of the rabbinic emphasis on mitzvot appears in Yevamot. This discussion is about the 'beautiful captive,' a situation in which an Israelite soldier takes a non-Jewish woman as booty and wants to marry her. Dt. 21:12-13 reads, "You shall bring her into your house, and she shall shave her head, pare her nails, and discard her captive's garb. She shall spend a month's time in your house lamenting her father and mother; after that you may come to her and possess her, and she shall be your wife." This biblical rule is often understood to discourage the Israelite soldier from marrying the foreign woman by making her unattractive and circumventing his immediate desire with a waiting period.<sup>158</sup> But the rabbis have a different explanation:

<sup>157</sup> In the later responsa literature, much ink is spilled about the meaning of the word *qibel* and how it relates to *qabbalat mitzvot*. See Finkelstein 32-37 for some discussion.

<sup>158</sup> C.f. Rashi to Qiddushin 21b.

**Yevamot 47b**

It was taught in a Baraita: (Deut. 21:12-13) "lamenting her father and mother, etc." To what [circumstances] do these words apply? When she did not accept upon herself [the mitzvot]. But if she did accept [the mitzvot], immerse her and he is permitted to marry her immediately.

Here the rabbis argue that the Biblical rules about taking a captive as a wife only apply if she did not accept the mitzvot. If she did accept the mitzvot, then she can be converted through immersion and she is immediately permitted. Only if she did not accept the mitzvot do the rules about cutting her hair and nails and the month-long mourning apply. This creative, anachronistic interpretation shows that for the rabbis, the acceptance of mitzvot is a critical and defining aspect of what conversion means.

[It is worth noting the following 'aside' related to conversion and the Biblical rules around the beautiful captive.<sup>159</sup> The three ritual requirements for male conversion are acceptance of the Torah/mitzvot, circumcision, and immersion; for female conversion they are acceptance and immersion. There is no modern parallel for circumcision for a woman, and according to scholars, there never was.<sup>160</sup> But the following geniza fragment suggests that there once may have been such a parallel, adopted from the ancient practice regarding the 'beautiful captive.'<sup>161</sup> It is a story about two sisters who lived in Europe around the year 1000 CE and were unfamiliar with Jews. They met a group of Jewish traders, probably from Egypt, and the sisters asked the traders to convert them. The traders tried to dissuade them, but the sisters were adamant.<sup>162</sup> The traders agreed to convert them, and this is their description of what happened:

And when we saw [that the sisters were determined], this is what we instructed: they shaved their head with a razor and cut [asu] their fingernails, and mourned what they had lost from [their past] idolatry (*avodah ha-zarah u-me'avodat pesilim*). They declared, "Falsehood and vanity were what our forefathers inherited – they are impotent (*ein bam mo'il*)" ... Then they immersed according to faith (*dat*) and halakhah.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>159</sup> This aside appears in Zohar and Sagi 241-242.

<sup>160</sup> See Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* University of California Press: 2005, esp. Ch. 2, "Were Jewish Women Ever Circumcised?"

<sup>161</sup> Deut. 21:12-13.

<sup>162</sup> See Zohar and Sagi 241 for the text of the sister's response to being dissuaded.

<sup>163</sup> Reprinted in Zohar and Sagi 242 (Heb). Taken from Friedman (1986) *Ribui Nashim b'Yisrael*, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv, 338. The ellipses appear in the Zohar and Sagi text.

This fascinating text suggests a multi-stage process for the conversion of a woman: acceptance, cutting of hair and nails, mourning the loss of her past idolatry, renunciation of past beliefs, and immersion. It suggests a parallel to the physical ritual of circumcision – the shaving of the head and cutting of nails. Such a ritual constitutes the removal of a part of the body, albeit a part of the body that will grow back. From the passage it is difficult to determine if the meaning of the shaving and cutting was related to mourning or to removing impurity from past idolatry. In any case, this parallel practice did not become widespread enough to enter the later legal codes.<sup>164</sup>

In addition to emphasizing the mitzvot at the beginning of the conversion process, the rabbis also show concern about how carefully converts keep the mitzvot in their daily lives. Generally they complain that converts are not observant enough, but in at least one case they complain that converts are too observant. The following two passages show a rabbinic concern that converts are not observant enough:

**Yevamot 48b**

R. Jose said: A convert who converts is like a newborn child. So why are converts oppressed? Because they are not as well acquainted with the details of the commandments as the Israelites.

**Behorot 30b**

A convert who accepts the code of Torah: if he becomes suspected [of not upholding] even one matter [of the mitzvot], he is suspect regarding the entire Torah, and he is considered as an apostate Jew.

The first passage shows a rabbinic view that converts are not as conversant in the mitzvot as born-Jews. The second passage shows a stricter view, that a convert who is suspect regarding even one mitzvah should be suspect about all of the mitzvot. The Behorot passage hints at a culture of deep suspicion that some rabbis must have had about converts following the mitzvot.<sup>165</sup>

And yet other rabbis have the opposite concern – that converts are too strict.

<sup>164</sup> The procedure of dealing with the beautiful captive is discussed in Yevamot 48a, in a discussion of the conversion of slaves. The text does not draw a parallel between the haircutting and circumcision. Akiba argues that "doing" nails actually meant letting them grow, as the purpose was disfigurement.

<sup>165</sup> For another example of rabbinic concern about the laxity of converts, see Qiddushin 70b.



**Pesachim 91b**

R. Jacob said in the name of R. Yohanan: we do not form a group (*havurah*) composed entirely of converts, lest they overly scrutinize [the offering] and invalidate it.

Whether the rabbis were worried that converts would be too lax or too strict regarding the mitzvot, this series of texts shows that they were often preoccupied with how converts would carry out the mitzvot, even after they converted. For the rabbis, the mitzvot system was a critical and central aspect of becoming a member of the people Israel.<sup>166</sup>

This fourth theology is rooted in the rabbinic understanding of written and oral Torah and the commitment to the mitzvot system and its associated reward and punishment. This theology defines conversion as the acceptance of the mitzvot (*qabbalat mitzvot*) and is based on the description of the mitzvot system and the convert's acceptance thereof (*qibul*) as described in Yevamot 47a/b. A convert is a person who agrees to take on (all of) the mitzvot. Rejection of any mitzvah is grounds for apostate status. Behind this theology is a belief that Jews are the people of mitzvot – that Jewishness is defined by an embrace of the rabbinic mitzvah system.

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<sup>166</sup> Zohar and Sagi 219-221 critique the theology of the role of mitzvot and argue that the thrust of the tradition does not see mitzvot as *ikar* (central, critical) to the conversion process. They suggest that later responsa that take this idea even further are misreading the tradition, and that the original intent was not to overly emphasize the mitzvot. This critique appears to suffer from a bias to defend the modern Israeli *hiloni* perspective over and against the *dati* position. Indeed, their bias is revealed somewhat at the end of the book (247) when they claim that "there is halakhic legitimacy to a secular Jewish life..."

## Conclusions

This chapter is based on an assumption that the rabbinic corpus contains a variety of theologies toward conversion, and these four theologies could in no way be exhaustive. Each of the theologies presented in this chapter show a different window into the rabbinic worldview which spanned many centuries and cultures. Each of the four theologies of conversion has a corresponding theology of the Jewishness:

<b>Theology of Conversion</b>	<b>Corresponding Theology of Jewishness</b>
<b>Lineage:</b> Conversion is an inferior way to become part of an ethnic people that can only be born into.	Jews are a people connected by genealogy and equal membership is reserved to people who are born into the people.
<b>Faith:</b> Converts have an exceptional relationship to God.	Judaism is a faith-based religion. Israel is a people with a special relationship to God. When converts convert, it means that God has not abandoned the Jews.
<b>Ritual:</b> Conversion is a re-enactment of the covenant God made at Sinai.	Jews are the people who experienced Sinai and have an eternal covenant with God.
<b>Mitzvot:</b> Converts must follow the written and oral Torah.	Jews are the people of mitzvot. Jewishness is defined by an embrace of the written and oral Torah, and the rabbinic mitzvah system.

These theologies, which emerged from a study of the texts of conversion, are surprisingly resonant for today's understandings of Jewishness. These views are not mutually exclusive, and are generally complimentary. While each theology may be more or less emphasized at a given time in a given community or by a particular Jew, each one is a critical part of our collective Jewish self-identity today.

### III. Mystical Views of Conversion from the Kabbalah

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Zoharic symbolism is rooted in the belief that Israel is a holy people distinguished from the rest of the people of the earth. The difference between Israel and the other nations is ontological: Israel is holy and the other nations are impure. Conversion to Judaism, which involves the crossing of the boundary from an unholy nation into the holy one, presents a significant challenge to this worldview. Wolfson writes that the phenomenon of conversion demands explanation because it “involves the trespassing of the boundary of identities in a manner that problematizes the ontological categories that inform the general anthropological orientation of the zoharic text.”<sup>167</sup> Conversion to Judaism represents a boundary condition. How, exactly, can one cross over? The mystical understanding of conversion is a ripe area for uncovering attitudes toward both Jews and the Other.

Two major themes regarding converts emerge in the kabbalistic tradition: ethnocentrism and ‘ensouling.’ The following two texts will serve to introduce the themes. The first passage, from Moshe de Leon’s *Sefer Shoshan ‘Edut*, presents the ethnocentric approach:

#### **Sefer Shoshan ‘Edut**

Whoever has no lineage (*geza*) or root to strike root in the mystery of faith, for instance those who come to convert and take refuge in the wings of *Shekhinah*, cannot be planted like the faithful ones except below, underneath the wings of *Shekhinah*. He is attached there and ascends only as far as the spreading of the wings to each side; therefore he is called a righteous convert (*ger tsedek*) and no more.<sup>168</sup>

The convert is associated with the lowest *sefira*, *Mulkhut/Shekhinah*, and is not permitted to rise any further. Kabbalists used ethnocentrism to show that even though outsiders can enter the Jewish people, Jews are inherently holier than non-Jews, who have their roots in the impure Other Side. The ethnocentric attitude towards converts invites select outsiders to knock on the door and peek inside, but no more.

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<sup>167</sup> Wolfson (2006) 166.

<sup>168</sup> R. Moshe de Leon, *Sefer Shoshan ‘Edut*. Quoted in M. Hallamish 56 (Heb). Moshe de Leon was a 13<sup>th</sup> c Spanish mystic, thought to have been a primary author of the Zohar.

The next passage, from R. Isaac of Acre's *Me'irat 'Einayim*, presents the theme of ensouling, the assigning of a Jewish soul to the convert:

**Me'irat 'Einayim**

All the people from the nations of the world who convert, their soul was a Jewish soul, thus God brought them under his wings so that no one may be kept banished (2 Sam 14:14). This stimulates me to say that the souls of apostates were actually wicked souls of other nations. God throws out the thorns from among his vineyard, and rejects them with both hands, and they will return to their original side, the side of Samael.<sup>169</sup>

R. Isaac of Acre explains that outsiders from the other nations who come to Judaism to convert are not fully outsiders. They have the body of an outsider, but their soul is actually Jewish. It is not that they receive a Jewish soul when they convert; rather, they were originally ensouled with a Jewish soul and that soul longs to return to its root, which explains why they come to convert. For R. Isaac, the corollary to this worldview is that Jewish apostates must actually have souls from the Other Side who were born into Jewish bodies, and they too must follow their soul back to the side of Samael.

These two themes, ethnocentrism and ensouling, do not receive equal attention in the zoharic corpus. The dominant theme in the Zohar is ethnocentrism; ensouling appears briefly as a nascent, creative vision. In the hands of the sixteenth century mystics Cordovero and Vital, however, these two seemingly divergent ideas are brought together and integrated into the complex kabbalistic doctrines of the soul and reincarnation. This study chronicles the development of the mystical attitudes toward converts, from deep ethnocentrism to radical ensouling.

# 1

## Demeaning Ethnocentrism in the Zohar

Of the attitudes toward converts found in the Zohar, the most conspicuous one is ethnocentrism. This attitude is based on two premises: first, only Israel is holy; no other nation can be holy.<sup>170</sup> Converts are not born of Israel; they are ontologically different.

<sup>169</sup> R. Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat 'Einayim* (Goldreich critical edition) p. 31, *Bereshit* 41a,b. R. Isaac of Acre was a 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> c. mystic in Palestine and Spain and contemporary of Moshe de Leon.

<sup>170</sup> Zohar I:167b.

Second, the conversion process does not fully overcome this difference. The convert brings an unholy pedigree across the boundary into the people Israel, presenting a challenge to the zoharic worldview. How can an *unholy* person become part of the holiest people? This is the quandary that the Zohar's ethnocentrism toward converts seeks to unravel.

To respond to the challenge of conversion, the propounders of the ethnocentric view take the following two-step approach: (1) vociferously maintain the ontological difference between Israel and the other nations, and (2) find a way to incorporate unholy converts into the holy people Israel without compromising the first view.

The first step, maintaining the difference between the convert and Israel, is accomplished by assigning a lesser place for the convert in the sefirotic system. In a passage from the Zohar's introduction that interprets the commandment to love the convert (Deut. 10:19), we read that the convert comes from the *Sitra Ahra*, the impure Other Side. The rabbinic name given to a convert to Judaism, which generally carries a positive valence, is *ger tsedek*, or righteous convert. In kabbalistic symbolism, *tsedek* refers to *Malchut/Shekhinah*, the lowest sefirah at the very base of the sefirotic tree. A linguistic spin, repeated often in the Zohar,<sup>171</sup> reverses the fortune of the convert: rather than resting under the wings of *Shekhinah*, the comforting presence of God in the world, the convert travels from the Other Side only as far as the wings of *Shekhinah*, the outer portion of the lowest sefirah, kept at a distance from the holy seed (i.e., Israel, born-Jews) who emerge from deep within the intimate world of God:

#### **Zohar 1:13a/b**

The eighth commandment: to love the convert coming to circumcise himself, to enter beneath the wings of the *Shekhinah*. Under Her wings She brings those separating themselves from the impure Other Side... They all enter beneath the wings of *Shekhinah*, no further. But as for Israel, their soul emerges from the trunk of that tree, whence souls fly into earth, into Her womb, deep within. The secret is: *You shall be an earth of delight* (Malachi 3:12). So Israel is a precious son, for whom Her innards yearn, and they are called *borne from the womb* (Isaiah 46:3), not from the wings, outside. Furthermore, converts have no share in the celestial tree, certainly not its trunk; rather, their share is in the wings, no higher. A convert is beneath the wings of *Shekhinah*, no higher. They are converts of Righteousness [*gerei tsedek*], for there they dwell, uniting, not within, as explained.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>171</sup> 1:96b; 2:87a; 2:98a; 3:14a-b; 3:168a.

<sup>172</sup> 1:13a-b (*Hakdamah*), trans. Matt.

The phrases 'no further,' 'no higher,' and 'not within' which appear throughout this passage are characteristic of the ethnocentric attitude. So is the formula, 'Israel is X, converts are Y.' Israel is a precious son who comes from the womb of God (deep within the sefirotic system), the convert remains under the wings, outside and below. Israel's share is the trunk of the celestial tree (*gufa*, referring to *Tiferet*), but the convert's share is confined to the wings of *Shekhinah*. Repetition in the passage builds the case that the convert's standing in the ethnocentric view is decidedly inferior to Israel. It is also striking that the passage is an interpretation of the commandment to 'love the convert.' Instead of expounding upon the mystical meaning behind the commandment, the author of the text impresses upon the reader how different the convert is from Israel.

Not surprisingly, circumcision is another important topic that the zoharic authors use to articulate their ethnocentric views on conversion. The circumcision of the convert becomes the actual moment at which the convert's soul escapes from the *Sitra Ahra* to the wings of *Shekhinah*, although if the convert has not truly given up idol worship at the time of circumcision, the act of removing the foreskin has no actual affect.<sup>173</sup> But circumcision also becomes important evidence for the ontological difference between Israel and the convert. The reason is not because the born-Jew is circumcised at birth and the convert is circumcised at the moment of conversion, but rather because the *father* of the convert was not circumcised when the convert was conceived. "A convert who is circumcised is called 'convert of Righteousness' for he does not issue from holy stock who have been circumcised."<sup>174</sup> There is an important distinction between the semen from an *uncircumcised* penis (that of a convert's father) and the semen of a circumcised penis (that of a born-Jew's father). Using this reasoning, the born-Jew is holy because the seed that produced him came from a circumcised penis. The convert can never achieve the same status because he cannot change the fact that he was created by semen from an uncircumcised penis.<sup>175</sup>

If the source of the ontological difference between the born-Jew and the convert is the uncircumcised penis, the unholy convert can be incorporated into the holy people Israel without compromising the ethnocentric view. The convert himself cannot be as holy as

<sup>173</sup> 1:95a-b (*Lekh-lekha*).

<sup>174</sup> 1:96a (*Lekh-lekha*).

<sup>175</sup> Did the author of this passage notice the implications of this reasoning on the debates of matrilineal and patrilineal descent?

Israel, since he was created of seed from an uncircumcised member. But his offspring, if they are conceived after his circumcision, would be created of seed from a circumcised member, and thus would not suffer from the same unholy origins.

The argument that a convert's offspring, but not the convert himself, can become fully incorporated into Israel is based in rabbinic sources,<sup>176</sup> and it solves the dilemma created by the ethnocentric, dualistic view that dominates most of the zoharic passages regarding converts. In the following passage (also about circumcision) all of the themes that have been mentioned reappear, but with more acrimonious language. Note the mention of the removal of filth from the convert's stock over three generations:

**Zohar 3:14a/b**

Rabbi Elazar said, We learned that when the convert is circumcised and brought under the wings of *Shekhinah*, he is called a righteous convert, but nothing more. He is a *ger tsedeq* because he is worthy of entering the *sefirah tsedeq* [*Malkhut/Shekhinah*]... Rabbi Shimon said to him: Elazar my son, he who comes from a holy root, a scion of truth, is not like he who comes of an evil stock, from the root of hard and evil dirt. It is written of Israel *and I planted you with noble vines, all with choicest seed* (Jeremiah 2:21). Of the heathen nations, it is written *whose members were like those of asses, and whose issue was like that of horses* (Ezekiel 23:20). Therefore, Israel are holy, a seed of truth, a stock which was perfumed on Mount Sinai, from which every filth was stopped...(but) it is difficult to remove the filth from the heathen nations, even up to three generations.<sup>177</sup>

The convert comes from filthy stock (like that of an ass and horse), but over three generations, that filth can be removed in the convert's offspring. Why three generations? Because of the three generations of the patriarchs. Converts are associated with Abraham, whose father was uncircumcised. In the next passage, which discusses why Abraham and Sarah's names were changed with an extra letter after entering the covenant, the Zohar explains that the reason converts take the Hebrew name *ben Avraham*<sup>178</sup> is because converts are literally considered to be Abraham's offspring.

<sup>176</sup> M. Kiddushin 4:7; M. Bikkurim 1:5.

<sup>177</sup> 3:14a-b (*Vayikra*). For a rabbinic source on the purifying role that Mt. Sinai played for Israel, see Shabbat 146a (quoted in the Rabbinic chapter, third theology, "Ritual").

<sup>178</sup> This practice does not appear in rabbinic texts, according to Porton (7), but the association of converts with Abraham is a theme developed in the rabbinic tradition. C.f. Tanhuma *Lekh lekha* 6 (Abraham as the father of converts) and Seder Eliyahu Rabbah (29) 27.

**Zohar 1:96a**

Here one should contemplate. For Sarah, *he* [the Hebrew letter] is appropriate, but for Abraham why *he* and not *yod*? It should be *yod*, for he was male. However, it is a supernal mystery concealed among us: Abraham ascended, obtaining a mystery from supernal *he*, World of the Male. Higher *he* and lower *he* – one dependent on male, the other female, indeed! So Abraham ascended with higher *he*, Sarah descended with lower *he*, for it is written: *So (koh) shall your seed be* (Genesis 15:5), and it has been taught: *your seed* – your seed literally, for he began entering this covenant, and whoever begins enters. Consequently a convert who is circumcised is called 'convert of Righteousness,' for he does not issue from holy stock who have been circumcised. So one entering this is called thus: Abraham. Therefore it is written: *so shall your seed be – your seed*, literally! *He* was transmitted to him, and if *he* had not been transmitted to Sarah, then he would have had to engender below, as this *So* engenders below. Once *he* was transmitted to Sarah, the two *he*'s joined as one, engendering above. What issued from them is *yod*, so *yod* is the first letter of *Yitshaq* (Isaac) – male. From here the male begins to expand, so it is written: *Because through Isaac seed will be named for you* (Genesis 21:12) – *through Isaac*, not through you [Abraham]. Isaac engendered above, as it is written: *You give truth to Jacob* (Micah 7:20). Jacob consummated all.<sup>179</sup>

There is much going on in this passage, and only that which is relevant to our topic will be discussed. In Kabbalah, *Koh* is a name of *Shekhinah*. Here the kabbalists are interpreting the word *koh* in Genesis 15:5, when God tells Abraham that his offspring shall be as numerous as the stars he sees in the sky, as the lowest sefirah *Shekhinah*. "Through circumcision the prototypical convert, Abraham, entered the covenant of *Shekhinah*."<sup>180</sup> And when God says to Abraham *your seed* – this is referring to all future converts who also enter under the covenant through *Shekhinah* and thus become children of Abraham.<sup>181</sup> This text explains that Abraham's offspring, at least the ones mentioned in Genesis 15:5, are not all of Israel, but rather all converts.<sup>182</sup> The holy people of Israel must be engendered by someone of more purified stock than Abraham, since Abraham's father was not circumcised. Thus Abraham and Sarah give birth to Isaac ('through Isaac seed will be named for you') and Isaac gives birth to Jacob, who becomes Israel, and who 'consummated all,'<sup>183</sup> all of Israel, but not converts. Abraham is the prototypical convert and Jacob is the namesake and father of Israel.

<sup>179</sup> 1:96a (*Lekh lekha*) trans. Matt.

<sup>180</sup> Matt's commentary to 1:96a, note 833.

<sup>181</sup> Following Matt's commentary to 1:96a, note 833.

<sup>182</sup> The author of the text seems unaware of or unconcerned with the implication of this argument that there would be as many converts coming to join Israel as there are stars in the sky.

<sup>183</sup> The justification in the text for Jacob consummating 'all' is with the word 'truth' (*emet*) in Micah 7:20. *Emet* is spelled with the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph, mem, taf*) and thus represents 'all.'



Following the model of the patriarchs, it takes three generations for a convert's stock to be purified enough to fully be incorporated into Israel.<sup>184</sup>

In the ethnocentric worldview, Israel is associated with Jacob and converts are associated with Abraham.<sup>185</sup> Israel and converts have distinct lineages. Abraham, through Ishmael and Esau, sires other nations as well, but it is Jacob who sires the Jewish people. Using the patriarchal model, only the grandchildren of converts should be considered fully Jewish.

The ethnocentric attitude and the negative portrayal of converts found in the Zohar extends into Tikkunei Zohar as well.<sup>186</sup> In one such passage, the kabbalists repeat many of the themes discussed above and also introduce the rabbinic teaching that converts will not be received in the Messianic period:<sup>187</sup>

**Tikkunei Zohar §15, 30b**

*Bere'shit*, this is Israel, as it is written, *Israel is holy unto the Lord, the first fruits of his harvest* (Jer. 2:3), without admixture of the other. He who is holy has no combination of another kind. Since he who is holy has no combination, he must be careful in relation to his spouse...therefore, the masters of the Mishnah established, 'Honor your wives for as a consequence you shall become wealthy' (B. Bava Metsia 59a). Their honor consists of guarding the first drop so no pollution is made from it, for the pollution of Abraham and Isaac caused the nations of Esau and Ishmael to subjugate their children in exile, and their being tested by fire and by knife saved them from their burning and murder. Since Jacob had no pollution it says regarding his progeny in exile *Thus Israel dwells securely, alone is Jacob's fountain* (Deut. 33:28). It says here 'securely' and 'alone,' and it says there with respect to their going out of exile *The Lord alone will guide them, no alien god will be with him* (Deut 32:12). His children will not have the admixture of converts and on account of this converts are not received in the days of the messiah. Concerning the seed of Jacob it says *Your plucked up a vine from Egypt* (Ps. 80:9), just as a vine does not receive the combination of any other species, so his would guard the sign of the covenant and they would not receive the combination of another kind.<sup>188</sup>

This passage from *Tikkunei Zohar* is concerned with the purity of Israel, which is threatened by the pollution of others, including converts. (As a historical note, it is likely that development of the ethnocentric view in *Tikkunei Zohar* was influenced by the situation of

<sup>184</sup> For a related approach, see the view found in the Mishnah that the offspring of converts are not fully Israel until at least one parent is a born-Jew. C.f. Rabbinic chapter, first theology ("Lineage").

<sup>185</sup> The Zohar contains other passages which associate converts with Abraham, following *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:14, noting that the souls that Abraham and Sarah 'made' in Haran (Gen 12:5) were the souls of converts: 1:79b (*Lekh lekha*); 2:147a,b (*Terumah*); 3:168a (*Sh'lakh lekha*).

<sup>186</sup> Wolfson (2006) 171. See pp. 171-174 for a related discussion and textual analysis.

<sup>187</sup> B. Yevamot 24b; Avodah Zarah 3b.

<sup>188</sup> *Tikkunei Zohar* §15, 30b, trans. Wolfson.

conversos.<sup>189</sup>) Once again the impurity of Abraham and Isaac is compared to the purity of Jacob. Since converts have brought pollution into Israel, Israel has become impure. The text suggests that only in the messianic time will the purity of Israel again be realized, for in that time converts will not be received anymore.<sup>190</sup> Finally, the passage mentions Egypt, and introduces a biological metaphor of a vine that does not combine with other species.

The ethnocentric attitude toward converts and the desire to establish the ontological difference between Israel and converts is so strong in the zoharic corpus that the difference is maintained even when it favors the convert. Consider the following passage from the Zohar, regarding the limitations of prophecy and the uniqueness of Obadiah:

**Zohar 1:171a**

None of those prophets could comprehend what the blessed Holy One intends to do to Esau except for Obadiah, who was a convert, deriving from the side of Esau. He comprehended Esau firmly, his potency unweakened, whereas the power of all those other prophets faded and they could not endure, receiving the word clearly, fittingly. Why? *Because he touched Jacob's hip socket at the sinew of the thigh* (Gen 32:33), drawing all the power of the thigh; so its power was broken and he was left *limping on his hip* (ibid, v.32). Therefore it must not be consumed at all. For all prophets of the world could only grasp until the arrival of King Messiah; from here on they could neither grasp nor comprehend.<sup>191</sup>

This passage is curious because it seems to go out of its way to explain Obadiah's unique prophetic powers. Obadiah, author of the one-chapter biblical book and an Edomite convert,<sup>192</sup> has the power to prophesy about the future of Edom (Esau), presumably *not* because he was descended from Esau, but because his prophetic power was 'unweakened.' The power of all other non-converted, born-Israelite prophets was weakened when Jacob's thigh, which symbolizes the source of prophecy, was wrenched. In this weakened state they

<sup>189</sup> For an analysis of the influence that the historical situation of conversos may have had on Vital's work, see Magid article in the bibliography.

<sup>190</sup> The verses from Deuteronomy used as a proof-text do not have messianic overtones, and it is unclear to this author how the line of reasoning in this passage moves from those verses, which are interpreted to suggest that Israel will be an ethnically pure people, to the claim that converts will not be received in the messianic time. Perhaps the authors of the Zohar simply saw that converts had been and continued to be accepted into the community, and they are simply arguing that only in the messianic time will that purity be re-established. One problem this text does not answer is why any converts (after Abraham) are accepted at all. Indeed, the proof-texts used in the passage (from Deuteronomy and Psalms) each suggest, in the kabbalistic interpretation, that the pollution from converts and others should be stopped, if not removed. Why wait until the messianic period to stop accepting converts? Would it have been too radical to suggest that converts are currently a source of pollution and they no longer should be accepted? Later kabbalists will answer this question by offering a different explanation as to why converts are accepted; see final section below.

<sup>191</sup> 1:171a (*Va-Yishlakh*), trans. Matt.

<sup>192</sup> B. Sanhedrin 39b.

can prophesy about the messianic time but not about the pre-messianic future. Obadiah, who descended from Edom and not from Jacob, did not suffer from this ancestral defect, and thus his prophetic abilities were unimpaired. This passage hints that there is another attitude in the Zohar towards converts, an alternative to negativity of extreme ethnocentrism, to which we now turn.

## 2

### Aspiring Ethnocentrism in the Zohar (Yitro)

In its interpretation of the narrative of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and a Midianite priest (Ex. 18:1), the Zohar presents a different kind of ethnocentrism. Rather than characterizing the other nations as impure, unholy and filthy, this brand of ethnocentrism emphasizes the potential in all peoples to worship God. It is an ethnocentrism characterized by pride, hope and aspiration rather than disgust, anger and fear.

#### Zohar 2:69a

*When Jethro heard (Ex. 18:1). He opened by saying For this I sing your praise among the nations, YHVH, and hymn your name (Ps. 18:50). King David said this, in a spirit of holiness, in the moment he observed that the blessed Holy One is not exalted and glorified in the world except by the other nations. But if you say the blessed Holy One exalts himself in the world only for the sake of Israel, this is certainly so, for Israel is base of the light of the candle. But when other nations come forth to serve Him by worshipping the glory of the blessed Holy One, then the base of the light is increased and all its rays are strengthened. And the blessed Holy One rules alone, above and below.*

This passage uses the metaphor of a candle and its light to show the positive results that occur when other nations come and worship God. The metaphor simultaneously establishes the superiority of the Jews ('Israel is the base of the light of the candle') while giving power and encouragement to other nations to worship God. The candle/light metaphor suggests that the other nations can join the Jews on a unified project of exalting God: 'The base of the light is increased and all its rays are strengthened.' The second part of this sentence makes sense – that the other nations (the rays) are strengthened when they come to worship God. But what is meant by 'the base of the light is increased'? Israel is the base of the light; is the author saying that the other nations will convert and become Jews, thus increasing the base of the

light? The answer is probably yes, based on the next passage which appears on the following page of the Zohar:

**Zohar 2:69b**

*And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came (Ex. 18:5). He opened by saying, And the many peoples shall go and say, 'Come, let us go up to the Mount of the Lord...' (Is. 2:3) This verse is explained in many places. However, there will be a time when the other nations will wear their feet out to ascend under the wings of Shekhinah.*

There is an expectation of a time, perhaps a messianic time, when other nations will desire to ascend under the wings of *Shekhinah* to convert and join the Jewish people like Jethro did. It is a brief but striking counterpoint to the messianic vision presented in the ethnocentrism of the rest of the Zohar – that converts will no longer be accepted at the end of times.

Further evidence of this more hopeful ethnocentrism comes in the following passage which appears earlier in the Zohar's discussion of Jethro. By interpreting a verse from Psalm 119, the author forgoes the use of metaphor and speaks directly to the power that conversion has in the symbolism of kabbalah: when non-Jews enter under the wings of *Shekhinah* to convert and become Jews, the *Sitra Ahra* is actually weakened.

**Zohar 2:68a**

*He sent redemption to his people (Ps. 111:9): this is when the blessed Holy One redeemed Israel from the exile of Egypt and performed for them miracles and mighty deeds. He ordained his covenant for all time (ibid): this is when Jethro came and the blessed Holy One received him and brought him close to His worship. From then on, all the converts were brought close, under the wings of Shekhinah; from then onward, his name is holy and awesome (ibid.). For then the name of the blessed Holy One was hallowed, as the holy name is hallowed when the Sitra Ahra becomes broken and overturned, as it was with Jethro.*

Converts, as stated earlier, come from the *Sitra Ahra* – the impure Other Side. According to the predominant ethnocentrism of the Zohar, when converts convert, they bring with them impurity and filth of the Other Side; the negative aspects of the Other Side are attached to the convert and can only be removed through successive procreation. But in this more hopeful ethnocentrism, when converts convert, their actions have power over the Other Side; they actually break and subdue the forces of the *Sitra Ahra*.

The aspiring ethnocentrism towards converts in *parashat Yitro* is exceptional when it is compared to the demeaning ethnocentrism that appears in a wide variety of places throughout the zoharic corpus. But there is another important text from the Zohar that also

suggests that the convert has an important, positive role in the theosophic system of kabbalah. The text appears in the literary unit known as *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, an extended interpretation of chapters 21-24 of Exodus, presented as a teaching by a mysterious elder known as *Sabba*.

### 3

#### The Role of the Convert in *Sabba de-Mishpatim*

Beyond the texts that illustrate the ethnocentric view and the exceptions to that view mentioned earlier, there is an additional zoharic text that bears more detailed analysis for a variety of reasons: the text offers a more sustained discussion about conversion; the text is interesting (yet confusing and unclear<sup>193</sup>); and the text receives significant attention by later mystical figures.<sup>194</sup> The text does not lend itself to straightforward analysis. It is rather like a treasure of mystical ideas, mostly about the nature and life of the soul.

The text in question, *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,<sup>195</sup> is framed as a discussion between the elderly donkey driver (*Sabba*) and two of his friends. The sections of the *Sabba* text that relate to converts appear in two extended passages.<sup>196</sup> In the first of these passages, we learn the secret meaning behind a few verses from Leviticus: a Jewish soul is sometimes delivered to a non-Jewish body

#### Zohar 2:95a/b

Saba wrapped himself [in a cloak] and spoke: *If a priest's daughter marries a strange man (ish zar), she may not eat of the sacred gifts* (Lev. 22:12). This verse is followed by another (v. 13): *but if the priest's daughter is widowed or divorced and without offspring, and is back in her father's house as in her youth, she may eat of her father's food. No stranger may eat of it.* These verses may be understood literally, yet the words of Torah are secret words, and many are the words of wisdom hidden in each and every word of scripture...

<sup>193</sup> Wolfson identifies this text as "arguably one of the most intricate and convoluted sections of the zoharic text." (1999) 126.

<sup>194</sup> See following section.

<sup>195</sup> For Scholem's brief summary of this text, see *Major Trends* p.161. Discussions of this passage as it relates to converts can be found in Wijnhoven 130-131 and in Wolfson (2006) 167-171.

<sup>196</sup> 2:95a,b and 2:98b-99a (*Mishpatim*). In this analysis I have chosen to exclude the text of the divine scales (*tikla*) that immediately follows the first passage because the *tikla* passage does not reference converts. Instead, the *tikla* passage explains how other non-Jews, or not-full-Jews, (the pious of the nations and *mamzer* scholars) receive a holy *neshamah*.

Now, we should say 'a priest's daughter' is the supernal *neshamah*,<sup>197</sup> daughter of our patriarch Abraham, the first of converts. He draws this *neshamah* from a supernal place. What is the difference between the verse that reads *the daughter of any priest (bat ish cohen)* (Lev 21:9) and the verse that reads *the daughter of a priest (bat cohen)* (Lev 22:12), in which the word *ish* is not written? Some priests are called *ish cohen* and are not real priests. In this manner there is an *ish cohen*, a *sagan* (deputy), a *cohen gadol* (high priest), and a *cohen* that is not high. A *cohen* is higher and more supernal than an *ish cohen*. Similarly, there is *neshamah*, *ruach*, and *nefesh*.<sup>198</sup>

*If a priest's daughter (bat cohen) marries a strange man (ish zar)*: this is the holy *neshamah* that is drawn from a supernal place... Woe to those in the world who do not know to be cautious when drawing [a soul, during intercourse] with the evil inclination, which is a stranger (*ish zar*). That priest's daughter flies down and finds an edifice (*binyana*) in a stranger (*ish zar*). Because this is the will of its master, it enters there to be overtaken without having control, and it is not perfected when it leaves this world. *She may not eat of the sacred gifts* like the *neshamot* that were perfected in this world.

There is more to this verse *If a priest's daughter marries a strange man*. The holy *neshamah* is ashamed to be married to a strange man, since it was drawn by a convert who converts, and flies to him from the Garden of Eden along a secret path, to an edifice built from impure foreskin. This is the strange man (*ish zar*).

This passage focuses on the biblical verse from Lev. 22:12, *if a priest's daughter (bat cohen) marries a strange man (ish zar)*. In the zoharic interpretation of the verse, a *bat cohen* is a holy, supernal *neshamah*, the highest aspect of a Jewish soul. The *ish zar* is identified with a variety of things, each with its own negative connotation: the evil inclination, a non-Jew, and a convert who converts. Despite the equivocation as to whom exactly the *ish zar* represents, the gist of the passage is that sometimes a holy *neshamah* (i.e. Jewish soul) is drawn from the supernal realm into a foreign, non-Jewish body, and becomes entrapped. The metaphor can be interpreted in this way: the priest's daughter (read *neshamah*) flies down and finds an edifice in an *ish zar*, i.e. gentile. The holy *neshamah* is "ashamed" to reside in a gentile body. This odd combination of a foreign body (*ish zar*) and Jewish soul (*neshamah*), either because its soul is Jewish or because of the shame associated with residing in a gentile body, becomes a "convert who converts."

In certain ways this passage embraces the ethnocentric view towards converts that appears throughout the Zohar: "The holy *neshamah* is ashamed to be married to a strange

<sup>197</sup> I have left the three words *nefesh* (sing., *nefashot* pl.), *ruach*, and *neshamah* untranslated because of the limited words in English for the concept of 'soul' and because the parts of the soul are relevant to the understanding and meaning of this and the following passage.

<sup>198</sup> The text underscores the hierarchy of the three parts of the soul, with *neshamah* as the highest aspect and *nefesh* as the lowest. Later mystics will introduce five aspects of the human soul. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 677-722 for an extensive discussion of the zoharic treatment of the soul.

man, since it was drawn by a convert who converts.” But underneath the ethnocentrism is a striking explanation for the phenomenon of conversion, an explanation that transforms the ethnocentric attitude that converts are wholly Other and cannot be fully welcomed into the Jewish people into a radically different idea. According to this passage from the *Sabba* text, the highest aspect of the convert’s being, his holy *neshamah*, is actually Jewish. Like Abraham, the first of converts, he drew down a Jewish soul. Unlike Abraham, he received this holy *neshamah* not because he merited it, but because of the sexual transgressions of others.<sup>199</sup> This theosophic understanding relocates the shame associated with conversion. The convert’s *neshamah*, which is Jewish, is ashamed to be in a non-Jewish body, but neither the *neshamah* nor the convert’s impure body is to blame for the situation; they are only reminders of another’s transgression. Because the convert has a Jewish *neshamah*, he should not be ashamed when he comes to convert, since his entry into the Jewish people is more like a re-entry: his holy *neshamah* is returning to its source.

There are difficulties with this passage, and it stirs up more questions than it answers. The understanding of the soul of the convert that the passage presents – a convert has a holy, Jewish *neshamah* – leaves the reader wondering about the rest of the convert’s soul, his *ruach* and *nefesh*.<sup>200</sup> The next passage in the *Sabba* text relating to converts, is also convoluted. It presents additional explanations regarding the soul of the convert, some of which conflict with the earlier passage. One important theme in this next passage might be called vestimentary mediation, ‘garments as intermediary.’ Holy *neshamot* dress themselves in aspects of the soul of a convert, and experience the world through this spiritual garment.

#### **Zohar 2:98b-99a**

...All the *neshamot* of converts fly out from the Garden of Eden via a secret path. When these *neshamot*, which [the converts] merited from the Garden of Eden, depart from this world, to where do they return? It has been taught that whoever seizes and first takes the property of a convert merits it.<sup>201</sup> Similarly, all these holy, supernal *neshamot* that the blessed Holy One prepares below, as we said, they all go out at appointed times in order to play in the Garden of Eden, and

<sup>199</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the role that sexual transgression plays in this text, see Wolfson (2006) 167-8.

<sup>200</sup> Wijnhoven (131) wrote about the passages relating to converts in the *Sabba* texts: “One has the feeling that the Zohar fails in its *tour de force* to reconcile the many traditions concerning the soul and to lead them all into kabbalistic channels.”

<sup>201</sup> Family ties are broken when a convert converts, which affects inheritance law. If a convert dies without Jewish heirs, his property can be seized on a “first come” basis. See B. Baba Batra 52b, but also *Mishneh Torah*, *zechia u'matanah* 2:1.

meet these *neshamot* of converts. Whoever takes one of these *neshamot* [of converts], takes it and merits it, dresses in it and ascends. All of them exist in this garment and descend to the Garden of Eden in this garment, because in the Garden of Eden nothing exists there except in the garment of all those that exist there.

If you say that this garment [of a convert's *neshamah*] diminishes the delight that these *neshamot* had at first,<sup>202</sup> behold it is written *If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights* (Ex. 21:10). In the Garden they exist in this garment that they previously took and merited...

When all the holy *neshamot* descend to this world to rest in a human being, each one to a place that is fit for them, they all descend dressed in the *neshamot* [of converts] of which we spoke, and thus enter into the holy seed. Through this garment they exist and become part of this world. When these garments draw desired things from this world, the holy *neshamot* are nourished from the scent emitted by their garments

In several places the blessed Holy One cautioned the holy seed about the convert, to be careful with him, and afterward the concealed matter comes out of its covering. When it is revealed, it is immediately re-covered and is garbed. In every place he cautioned about the convert, the matter peeks out from its covering and is revealed, as it says: *You know the nefesh of the convert (ger)* (Ex. 23:9). Immediately it is re-inserted into its covering, enclosed by its garment and is hidden, as it is written [in the rest of the verse]: *for you were converts (gerim) in the land of Egypt*. The verse thought that since it was immediately garbed, no one would notice it. Through the *nefesh* of the convert the holy *neshamah* knows matters of this world and delights in them.

Sabba opened by saying, *Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain* (Ex. 24:18). What is this cloud? It is as written: *I have set my rainbow in the cloud* (Gen. 9:13). We have learned that this rainbow stripped off her garments and gave them to Moses. In this garment Moses ascended the mountain, and through it<sup>203</sup> saw what he saw and delighted in it all. When he reached this place, his friends came to him, prostrated before this Sabba and cried. They said 'Had we come into this world to hear only these words, it would have sufficed for us.'

One major difference between this passage and the previous passage in the *Sabba* text is that this one refers to two different *neshamot*, a holy, supernal *neshamah* of a Jew, and a *neshamah* of a convert. In the sefirotic system, the holy *neshamah* resides in a higher, supernal place, and the *neshamah* of a convert resides in the lower Garden of Eden. The holy *neshamah* wraps itself with the *neshamah* of a convert as a garment, and then descends into this world, experiencing the world in a mediated way. The second *neshama*, that of the convert, which the holy *neshamah* wears, does not diminish its experience of the world; the holy *neshamah* is sustained by the sweet smells (the most ethereal of senses) that are emitted by its garment, the *neshamah* of the convert. In this manner, the passage appears to go out of

<sup>202</sup> One might think that the first holy, supernal *neshamah* would be diminished in some way by garbing itself in a second *neshamah*, especially a *neshamah* of a convert.

<sup>203</sup> I.e., through the garment of the rainbow.



its way to show that the taking and wearing of a convert's *neshamah*-garment by the holy *neshamah* does not have negative consequences.<sup>204</sup>

The middle of the passage shifts to a discussion of a secret that is very briefly revealed in Scripture when God cautions the Israelites about the convert. In this paragraph, the garment of mediation worn by the holy *neshamah* is called *nefesh* of a convert rather than *neshamah* of a convert, taking the word *nefesh* from Ex. 23:9. While the text plays loosely here with the language of the tri-partite soul, it is consistent regarding the notion of a positive, mediated experience for the holy *neshamah* in a non-Jewish body, the body of a convert. The final paragraph of the passage above, which opens another discussion by *Sabba* but is clearly connected to our passage, describes how Moses (himself an outsider-like figure, similar to the convert) needed a mediating garment when he went up the mountain to converse with God. His garment is made of the colors of the rainbow, and through that colored garment he was able to see and delight in what he saw. Moses' garment, which acted like colored glasses, was a necessary interface to be able to experience the divine, just as the holy *neshamah* needs the garment of a convert's *neshamah* (or *nefesh*) to experience the world in a convert's body.

What is the 'concealed matter' that momentarily peeks out from its covering and immediately returns (from the middle of the passage)? Wolfson suggests that "the Torah seeks to hide the fact that the ancient Israelites were converts."<sup>205</sup> Later kabbalists will indeed focus on this interpretation, making the radical suggestion that the Israelites who were in Egypt and experienced Sinai were mostly converts, a fact that will be discussed in the following section. Another candidate for the 'concealed matter' is that the non-Jewish body of a convert has a holy, Jewish *neshamah* inside. The passage explains that the secret is revealed when God 'cautions' regarding the convert, as in Ex 23:9, *You know the nefesh of the convert*, and that the secret is immediately concealed in the same verse, *for you were converts in the land of Egypt*. If the second half of the verse conceals the secret, then the secret may not be 'the Israelites were converts in Egypt;' it might be found instead in the first part of the verse, *you know the nefesh of the convert*. Perhaps God cautions the Israelites to take care with the converts because the convert is not as much of an outsider as one might

<sup>204</sup> God's 'cautioning' regarding the convert, which may or may not have a negative valence, will be discussed below.

<sup>205</sup> Wolfson (2006) 169.

think. The convert has a holy *neshamah* within, thus the Israelite should take care to realize that there is a holy *neshamah* inside the non-Jewish body of the convert, a Jewish *neshamah* that the Israelite can recognize.<sup>206</sup> Mystical exegesis regarding the nature of the soul includes the idea that the various levels of soul are merited over time, and not every soul merits all levels. Thus it is possible to read this passage in a way that the highest *souls*, those with a *neshamah*, descend into the world dressed in the garment of a convert's soul.

The two passages from the *Sabba* text regarding the convert introduce a radically different approach to converts than the ethnocentric view. These passages suggest that the convert has a holy, Jewish *neshamah* residing inside his non-Jewish body. Thus the reason a convert converts, becoming part of the holy people Israel, is because his holy *neshamah* is trying to return to its source. This theology encourages Jews to treat converts with open arms, since the converts have some form of a Jewish soul. It also mitigates the 'otherness' of the convert by implanting within the Other a holy, supernal soul that is actually part of the holy seed itself. Cordovero and Vital pick up these ideas and develop them richly, to which we now turn.

#### 4

### Convert Soul Doctrines in the Work of Vital and Cordovero

The mystical understanding of the convert is further developed in the thought of both Vital and Cordovero.<sup>207</sup> Both of these kabbalists take the two major themes regarding converts in the Zohar, ethnocentrism and ensouling, and ingeniously integrate them. Vital integrates the themes by giving converts an important and unique role in the doctrine of the soul and the laws of reincarnation; Cordovero integrates them by creating two types of converts.

For Vital, the desire to bring converts near is a sin that has a long history and has caused significant evil in the world starting with primal Adam:

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<sup>206</sup> Cordovero follows this reasoning in his interpretation of the commandment to love the convert (see next section, below).

<sup>207</sup> Cordovero (d. 1570) and Vital (d. 1620) were both 16<sup>th</sup> c mystics who spent time in Safed. Cordovero founded a kabbalistic academy there and was one of the most influential expounders of kabbalistic literature. Vital was a student of Rabbi Isaac Luria in the years just before Luria's death and became one of the most influential expounders of Lurianic Kabbalah.

**Sefer Ha-Liqqutim 47a**

Primal Adam sinned, for he wanted to bring near all the nations under the wings of *Shekhinah*, which caused all the evil that came to him and to us in this exile. Moses our master, peace be upon him, also failed regarding this and died in the wilderness. Even King Solomon, peace be upon him, sinned by bringing the converts near.<sup>208</sup>

**Sefer Ha-Liqqutim 88c**

The essence of the sin of primal Adam was that he wanted to draw close to him all the fusion of heaven, the mixed multitude, and the seventy nations, and in this pattern was also the sin of Moses our master, peace be upon him, when he drew close the mixed multitude and they destroyed and degraded the yoke by making the calf, and we are still in this lengthy exile, for the redeemer will not come to redeem us until we are cleansed and purified from them. This too, was the sin of King Solomon, peace be upon him, in his desire to draw close converts and as a consequence two women prostitutes arrived.<sup>209</sup>

In these passages, Vital explains that 'bringing converts near' is a sin that brings impurity into the holy seed. This impurity is a problem because redemption cannot happen until Israel is 'cleansed and purified' from the impurity that came from the converts. Here Vital equates the impurity of the mixed multitude and the seventy nations – the impurity of non-Jews from the Other Side – with those individuals who convert. The convert, who by definition starts off as a non-Jew, is inherently impure.

But elsewhere in Vital's writing, different attitudes toward converts emerge. In one such passage, Vital gives credence and further explanation to the rabbinic statement that the reason Israel was exiled among the nations was to gather converts.

**Sha'ar Ha-Pesuqim**

*A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph...*(Ex 1:8). Here we need to elucidate the matter of the exile in Egypt, and through it many, varied verses will become clear. We have already elucidated in *parashat Re'eh*, regarding the commandment to remember the exodus from Egypt, matters pertaining to the reason for Israel's exile among the nations. We said that primal Adam comprised all the *neshamot* and all the worlds. When he sinned, all the *neshamot* fell from him into the shells that were divided into the seventy nations. Israel needed to be exiled among each and every nation in order to gather the sprouts of the holy *neshamot* that were scattered amongst the thorns. As the sages, may their memory be for a blessing, said,<sup>210</sup> 'Why was Israel exiled among the nations? In order to add converts to them, etc. Understand this well.'<sup>211</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Vital, *Sefer ha-Liqqutim* 47a, (*Achrei Mot*).

<sup>209</sup> Vital, *Sefer ha-Liqqutim* 88c, trans. Wolfson (2006) 174.

<sup>210</sup> B. Pesachim 87b (although the text itself points to Midrash Rabbah).

<sup>211</sup> Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim*, p.101, (*Shemot*, to Ex. 1:8).

Vital explains that when primal Adam sinned, the holy *neshamot* that were contained in him flew out and were dispersed among the seventy nations. For this reason, Israel needs to be exiled among every nation in order to gather back those lost *neshamot*. Presumably, as Israel lives in exile with each nation, the *neshamot* that were scattered into each nation will recognize their roots in Israel and then convert, thus returning to the holy seed where they belong. But implied in this line of reasoning is the notion that converts have a Jewish *neshamah*, and thus are required to return. This is the converse of Vital's first perspective. In the first perspective, converts represent impurity from members of the seventy nations that enters the holy seed when they convert; in the second, converts represent holy *neshamot* that were scattered among the impurity of the seventy nations and that must be gathered and returned to their source.

Vital's writings contain yet another perspective regarding converts. This 'functionary' perspective is based on the *Sabba de-Mishpatim* texts and emerges when Vital discusses the doctrine of the soul and especially the rectification of the soul through reincarnation.

#### **Sha'ar Ha-Gilgulim**

Sometimes the *nefesh*, when it is being rectified, is perfected and cleansed through a substantial process, and then it does not need to return to reincarnate with the *ruach* while the *ruach* is being rectified. The *nefesh* remains above in an appropriate place in the knot of life, and only the *ruach* descends in a reincarnation to rectify itself. Since it cannot go by itself, but must dress itself with a *nefesh*, it puts on the garment of a convert's *nefesh*, as was mentioned in *Sabba de-Mishpatim*. The two of them reincarnate together until this *ruach* is rectified, which then passes away from the world, and returns to reincarnate, and joins its original *nefesh*.<sup>212</sup>

When a man merits a *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*, and later blemishes them, the three of them will not return together when he reincarnates. Rather, each one of them returns in a separate reincarnation (*gilgul*). We need to know what the law will be regarding these *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*. When a *nefesh* is reincarnated in another body to be rectified, and becomes rectified, then the *ruach* cannot enter there, as we have said, for how could a blemished *ruach* garb itself in a rectified *nefesh*? If we say that the blemished *ruach* will garb itself in the *nefesh* before it is rectified, this is also impossible, since the *ruach* cannot enter until the *nefesh* is completely rectified, since [the *nefesh*] is on a lower level. Thus the *ruach* needs to reincarnate by itself, conjoined to the *nefesh* of a convert in exchange for his own *nefesh*, and there it will be rectified. In the same manner, the *neshamah* comes in one body alone, conjoined to a *nefesh* of a convert. This is the secret of what is written in *Sabba de-Mishpatim* 98b, "the *neshamot* encounter the

<sup>212</sup> Vital, *Sha'ar Ha-Gilgulim*, *Hakdamah* 2.

*nefesh* of converts and merit it."<sup>213</sup> A *ruach* alone, or *neshamah* alone, is not able to garb itself in a body without a *nefesh*. Therefore they take the *nefesh* of a convert in exchange for it, and through it they are rectified.<sup>214</sup>

Vital's description of the rules regarding the rectification of the three parts of the soul is intricate and complex. What is relevant to this discussion is the role that the *nefesh* of a convert plays in the rectification system. Generally, the rectification of the three parts of the soul must take place in order: first the *nefesh* must be rectified, then the *ruach*, and finally the *neshamah*. If one's *nefesh* has already been rectified, Vital explains that it does not have to reincarnate again while its *ruach* is being rectified. But a *ruach* cannot reincarnate without a *nefesh*, and presumably a *ruach* cannot take the *nefesh* of another Jew (since that Jewish *nefesh* is busy acquiring its own *ruach* and *nefesh*). So the *ruach* must reincarnate in the *nefesh* of a convert in order to have the opportunity it needs to rectify itself. Similar rules govern a *neshamah* that requires rectification.

In these passages Vital constructs a 'functionary' role for converts: they become important vessels to be used by the holy but blemished souls of Jews in need of rectification. Vital does not explain why the *nefesh* of a convert is the ideal vessel for a blemished *ruach* or *neshamah* to attach to for purposes of rectification, but a reasonable guess is that a convert's *nefesh* cannot merit the higher levels of soul (*ruach*, *neshamah*) that a Jew's *nefesh* can merit, and thus the *nefesh* of a convert is available for the taking. This assumption contradicts language in the *Sabba* text which discusses the role not only of the convert's *nefesh* but also his *neshamah*. To avoid the problem Vital exclusively uses the phrase '*nefesh* of a convert' even when the text from *Sabba* that he is quoting uses the phrase '*neshamah* of a convert.'

Is the perspective of the convert ever considered in this dramatic reincarnation process? Vital explains the reward for the *nefesh* of a convert who helps to rectify a blemished *ruach* or *neshamah*:

#### **Sefer Ha-Gilgulim**

When the *nefesh* of the convert is joined with the *nefesh*, *ruach* or *neshamah*, and through it rectifies his *nefesh*, *ruach* or *neshamah*, then the *nefesh* of the convert will ascend in the rising of the *nefesh* itself, and they will be residents forever in the world to come.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>213</sup> This quoted passage from the Zohar replaces the phrase '*neshama* of a convert' with '*nefesh* of a convert.'

<sup>214</sup> Vital, *Sha'ar Ha-Gilgulim*, *Hakdamah*: 4.

### Sha'ar Ha-Gilgulim

The *nefesh* of a convert, when it joins with the *ruach* in this world, and helps to improve [God's] works, with God's help the chariot [will come] for him, and through its hand it will merit this *ruach* to be rectified. Thus this *nefesh* of a convert will also ascend with the original *nefesh* of this *ruach*, and the two of them will be at one level in the world to come, dwelling together, and it will not be separated from it.<sup>216</sup>

Vital explains that converts can achieve some measure of equality with their Jewish brethren in the world to come. By helping a Jewish soul achieve rectification, the *nefesh* of a convert earns a place in eternity. The convert does not appear to be able to merit higher levels of soul, as a born-Jew can, but his *nefesh* does earn a place in the world to come that is equal to that of the *nefesh* of the born-Jew he aided.

In the next passage, Vital goes one step further to explain his views on the phenomenon of conversion by commenting on the Israelites' exile in Egypt, specifically the verses, *A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us"* (Ex 1:8-9). In the text Vital uses the word *bechinah*, which has been translated here as 'lineage.'

### Sha'ar Ha-Pesugim

Know that there were two lineages (*bechinot*); there are *neshamot* that were rectified entirely, and reincarnated as the Israelites in this generation after they descended into Egypt. And there are *neshamot* that were not rectified and were reincarnated as the Egyptians themselves, those that Joseph circumcised,<sup>217</sup> as mentioned above in the verse *Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do* (Gen 41:55). This is what is written, *And he said to his people, here are the Israelite people* (Ex. 1:9). This is the beginning of their being called 'the Israelite people,' and later [the Egyptians] were sick of the Israelites, and the word 'people' is not mentioned. This question is asked in the Zohar in *parashat Shemot*.<sup>218</sup> The matter is that Joseph decreed circumcision for the Egyptians, as mentioned. Also Jacob his father, as the sages, may their memory be for a blessing, said,<sup>219</sup> even he was converting converts in Egypt, and they were from the lineage of *neshamot* that was mentioned. These people were not mixed up with the rest of the Egyptians; they were in their own towns practicing the customs of the Israelites, as it is written in the verse, *He removed the population, town by town* (Gen 47:21). These are the same converts that fulfilled the *mitzvah* of circumcision. They were set aside in special towns and were distinguished from the rest of the Egyptians, and were not mixed with them.<sup>220</sup>

<sup>215</sup> Vital, *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim*, Ch 35, p.99. For a passage with almost the same language, see *Zohar ha-Ra'ia* 72b.

<sup>216</sup> Vital, *Sha'ar Ha-Gilgulim*, *Hakdamah* 2.

<sup>217</sup> See Rashi to Gen. 41:55.

<sup>218</sup> 2:17a.

<sup>219</sup> *Bereshit Rabbah* 84. This may be an interpretation of Gen 37:1.

<sup>220</sup> Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Pesugim*, p.103, *Parashat Shemot*, to Ex. 1:8-9.

Vital explains that there were different lineages of holy *neshamot* in the exile in Egypt. One lineage was comprised of *neshamot* that had achieved full rectification, and thus they were reincarnated as full Israelites. A second lineage was comprised of *neshamot* that needed additional rectification. These *neshamot* were reincarnated as Egyptians, but they were set off from the other Egyptians in their own towns, and (following Rashi) they were circumcised by Joseph. As circumcised Egyptians, or perhaps as Egyptian converts, they practiced the customs of the Israelites, which gave them the necessary opportunity to rectify their *neshamot* during that lifetime. For Vital, converts are people with a non-Jewish *nefesh* and a blemished Jewish *neshamah* seeking rectification. In most of his writing, their holy *neshamah*, and not their impure *nefesh*, dominates their identity.

Vital integrates ethnocentrism and ensoulment by constructing a reincarnation pathway for blemished souls that requires the *nefesh* of a convert. In the writing of Vital, a mysterious teaching by *Sabba* regarding converts grows into a vital, functionary role for converts to play in the doctrine of the Jewish soul. Vital's ethnocentrism constrains the soul of the convert to a *nefesh*, yet provides for him an equal place in the world to come. Cordovero's understanding of conversion, while it shares some aspects of Vital's attitudes toward converts, is also unique in many ways.

For Cordovero, ethnocentrism and ensouling will combine in a different way. To begin, his understanding of ethnocentrism appears to be quite similar to the ethnocentrism in the Zohar and in Vital's writing.

### Or Yaqar

The convert will ascend from the valley of shells and will crush and break through all the levels and rise above this shell, crossing all types of foreskin, and enter the secret of circumcision and the taking on of the yoke of the *mitzvot*. Since he is from outside, he can only enter as far as *Malchut*, meriting a *nefesh* and no more. "My honor is that I am a righteous convert (*ger tsedek*)."<sup>221</sup> He is a convert who [merits] only the level of *tsedek*.<sup>222</sup>

Cordovero's understanding of the process of conversion is more violent; as the convert ascends toward *Shekhinah* he breaks and crashes through the levels. But the convert's place in the *sefirot* is still limited to *Malkhut/Shekhinah*. In another passage, commenting on the

<sup>221</sup> Zohar 1:96a (*Lech lecha*).

<sup>222</sup> Cordovero, *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* 9(145) to Zohar 1:38b (*Bereshit*).

commandment to love the convert. Cordovero describes a more elaborate ethnocentric view based on the concept of lineage (*bechinah*).<sup>223</sup> He explains that every nation has its own lineage, and that most converts have their own, unique lineage, even though they may be members of the seventy nations.

### Or Yaqar

*You shall love the convert (ger), since you were converts in the land of Egypt. You shall revere the Lord your God: only him shall you worship, to him you shall hold fast, and by his name shall you swear* (Deut 10:19-20). Five positive *mitzvot* are included in these verses. The first is that we will love the convert: we should not cause them any grief, rather the opposite, we should do good for them to the very best of our abilities. Converts are any person from the other nations who joins us and enters our faith (*dateinu*)... The reason for the *mitzvah* 'you shall love the convert' was well-explained in *Sabba*, the secret of the convert's *nefesh*. There I explained the entire verse according to the wisdom of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, peace be upon him. The convert can only grasp [a place in the *sefirot*] at *Malchut*, and no farther inward, for farther inward they are Israel, and called sons of the place (*banim la-makom*).

The converts have the lineage called 'ownerless, wilderness,'<sup>224</sup> that anyone who comes to enter her may enter. There is entry even for the outsiders [*chitzonim*] who desire to be purified. They are the secret of the converts, that they are impure bodies, but through their desire to be purified and to cling to holiness, they have openings. It is known that there are 70 nations, and for them 70 openings, conduits that the rest follow. This opening draws the emanation from the holiness. Every single ruler from among the 70 outside rulers of the nations, they hang down from above, level after level, a chain of being downwards. This is the path of emanation that comes to them, given to them from the holiness for his first purpose, to cling to holiness, and from there to the second and third, level after level until their exit outside. Based on this, the purity of the convert is understood to enter, for as he is found outside, through the same ruler he will enter and ascend, level after level, until he is settled inside via the path of progression. As he exited so he enters.

On this path there are 70 lineages, from the lineage of *Malkhut*, to receive the 70 nations. However, there are lineages in it that when they are purified and ascend, they are able to approach the real inward inwardness, towards the brain in the center, and thus come immediately to the congregation, that is the congregation of Israel... There are some lineages that will never [enter], for example the Ammonite and Moabite, and there are lineages that will enter at the third generation, for example the Egyptian and Edomite. It all depends on the lineage of their inner reality of holiness: there are some that hang from a lineage that is able to cling [to God] and there are others from a lineage that cannot cling... Generally, converts are from the lineage of *Malchut*, which is called ownerless mountain, like the wilderness, the one who desires to enter will enter. It is known that the being of this lineage is the lineage of Abraham our patriarch, for without doubt Abraham was a convert, since he was not born in holiness like Isaac and Jacob, as explained in

<sup>223</sup> Cordovero's use of this term is unclear. The English translation "lineage" has been chosen because it fits with the phrase *bechinah... 'emoni u' moavi* found in the passage and because it connects thematically to the chain/level metaphor.

<sup>224</sup> *Bemidbar Rabbah* 1:7. See following discussion.



the Zohar. Therefore one loves converts, and his quality in *Malkhut* is from the lineage of mountain, as it is written *On the mountain of the Lord there is vision* (Gen 22:14).<sup>225</sup>

In this striking passage, Cordovero explains that how near to holiness one can come “all depends on the lineage of their inner reality of holiness.” Jews come from a lineage of holiness with full access to the divine, but the other nations have different lineages. Converts, “generally,” come from a unique lineage variously called ownerless, wilderness, *Malkhut*, or mountain. Here Cordovero seems to be interpreting *Bemidbar Rabbah* 1:7: “Whoever does not make himself like the wilderness, ownerless, cannot acquire wisdom or Torah.” This is the lineage of Abraham, and is characterized by the ability to enter the divine if the desire is there. Cordovero implies that most converts, even though they are members of other nations, have their own unique lineage. He is unclear about how others who are not from this unique lineage, but instead are from the lineage of one of the seventy nations, are able to convert.

Near the opening of the passage, Cordovero defines a convert as a member of the other nations who joins the Jewish faith (*dat*). In a passage focused on lineage and ethnicity, it is noteworthy that he does not use the word people (*'am*) in that sentence. By using the word *dat* (faith / belief), Vital describes Judaism in a way that is more open to outsiders – at least to outsiders who have the faith and desire to enter. For Cordovero, two criteria must be met for someone to convert. First, the person must be of a lineage that allows him to draw near to the divine. Second, the person must have the desire to do so.

In the following passage, which is a continuation of the passage above, Cordovero makes a distinction between those souls who are outside because of the sin of primal Adam, whom he calls “returners,” and those souls from the lineage of “transgression” who previously sinned. Both of these groups came together in Egypt during the Exodus.

### Or Yaqar

It is known that the secret of the returners (*shavim*) is the secret of the converts, that they are the *neshamot* that exited outside for two reasons... In the sin of primal Adam the vessel of *neshamot* was wronged and the holy sparks of primal Adam were dispersed, as was explained in the *tikunim*. Impurities also entered inside, and the blessed Holy One rectified all of this via the patriarchs. Through them there was rectification of the sin of primal Adam, as explained in the *tikunim*: the three patriarchs joined together, and the impurity exited outside. Abraham and Isaac,

<sup>225</sup> *Or Yaqar*, Jer ed. 16(126-7), *siman* 3, to Deut 10:19-20 (*Ekev*).

Esau and Ishmael, began to enter the secret of converts, which was that Abraham converted because his attributes (*midot*) caused him to. [The process] wasn't perfected until Israel was in Egypt, stuck in the fiery furnace... There all the holy *neshamot* were gathered, those from the lineage of transgression that were spoiled in the generations of the flood, the dispersion and *Enosh*; and those that were outside because of the sin of Primal Adam. All of them were gathered. They are the secret of the 600,000 that were Israel as they left Egypt. In their being there, they were converts from this lineage, then the blessed Holy One raised them afterwards and entered them into the secret of Torah and *mitzvah*, and that is what is written, *for you were converts [in the land of Egypt]* (Deut 10:19). I brought you close, and you brought them close, and raised them in the secret of love.<sup>226</sup>

In Cordovero's mystical understanding of history, the sin of primal Adam caused holy *neshamot* to be dispersed and also allowed impurities to enter. Later, in the early generations, other *neshamot* were sent outside, those from the lineage of transgression. Using the patriarchs, God cleaned up the mess. Abraham converted in the secret of conversion, which is that his attributes caused him to. It took three generations, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for the holiness to emerge and the impurities to be removed. But it was not until the exile in Egypt that the clean-up process would be completed. The two groups of outsiders, those who were dispersed after the sin of primal Adam ("returners") and those who had been spoiled in the early generations, came together in Egypt and were raised up. They were the 600,000 who were in Egypt, 600,000 outsiders who needed conversion to come back inside, which explains the verse *you were converts in the land of Egypt*.

For Cordovero, the exile in Egypt was an important and positive event that "creates the possibility to free the holy sparks from Egypt and raise them up to their merit."<sup>227</sup>

#### Or Yaqar

Israel was exiled to Egypt in order to take from there a lovely treasure, the sparks of *Shekhinah* that were dispersed among all the nations, *neshamot* who were dispersed among all the generations and exploited by every ruler under the sun. All of them need to reincarnate and go to Egypt in order to be included among Israel.<sup>228</sup>

The *neshamot* that were dispersed, and then exploited by the rulers of the nations, are a lovely treasure that is lost and needs to be returned to its rightful place. Interpreting converts as Jews who, through no fault of their own, were lost a long time ago, as a lovely treasure

<sup>226</sup> *Or Yaqar*, Jer ed. 16(126-7), *siman* 3, to Deut 10:19-20 (*Ekev*).

<sup>227</sup> Zack 242.

<sup>228</sup> *Or Yaqar*, Jer ed. 6(115) to Zohar 1:196a (*Miketz*).

that needs to be returned, is the most positive reading of the phenomenon of conversion from the mystical tradition.

Cordovero's enigmatic closing line from the earlier passage, in which he appears to put words in God's mouth, is "I brought you close, and you brought them close, and raised them in the secret of love." How should this sentence be understood? Perhaps 'you' refers to Abraham and his descendants, who were first brought close by God, and then went to Egypt to escape famine. 'Them' refers to the 600,000 outsiders who were reincarnated in Egypt in order to be converted (the returners and the converts). God brought Abraham and his descendants close, then those descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob brought the outsiders close by following the commandment to love the convert, thus returning them from the outside back inside.

Cordovero teaches that the secret purpose of the commandment to love the convert is to bring back holy *neshamot* from the outside. By loving them and bringing them close, Jews can help these lost *neshamot* to re-enter the divine. In this way, Cordovero's understanding of the phenomenon of conversion is very similar to Vital's: in both cases, converts are individuals with holy *neshamot* that need to be restored in some way. For Vital, converts are the vessel through which the blemished *neshamah* of another Jew can be rectified and return to the divine. For Cordovero, converts have their own holy *neshamah* which is trying to return home after being lost. For both Vital and Cordovero, the phenomenon of conversion is a rich opportunity to deepen the mystical understanding not only of the relationship between non-Jews and Jews, but also all of Jewish history.

## Summary of Learning

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Like water dripping on rocks, all of the texts I prepared for this study slowly shaped my views of how conversion is understood by Jewish tradition. As most students of Torah know, it is a challenge to communicate that kind of learning effectively to others. To echo the wisdom of my teachers: there is no shortcut to intensive study. For the benefit of the reader who hasn't the time or inclination to slog through the three chapters, I have presented here a brief summary in four parts. The first part is a review of the key points from the three chapters. The second is an attempt to sketch out – broadly and roughly – the connecting threads and possible development of the theological themes from the biblical, classical rabbinic, and kabbalistic traditions. Afterwards, a discussion of areas that deserve further study and a list of the most teachable texts from this study appear.

### Key Learnings from the Chapters

#### Biblical Chapter

Biblical scholarship shows a strong consensus that the historical experience of exile made a meteoric impact on attitudes toward conversion. Pre-exilic attitudes are dominated by both ethnic and land-based theologies that Israelites constitute an ethnic people and their God resides in the land of Israel. Foreigners who live in the land must avoid behavior that would bring impurity, and there is no way they can become an Israelite. Exilic and post-exilic attitudes toward conversion show at least two responses to living as a minority among

foreigners. The first was to cleanse the community of foreigners and those who associate with them. This response, most visible in Ezra and Nehemiah, appears to have been successfully challenged by a second view. The second response was to allow the foreigner who agrees to basic terms of behavior and belief to live among the community, to treat him fairly, and to prophecy that someday all peoples will recognize God.

Conversion as the sages of the rabbinic period understood it, and as we understand it today, does not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Yet gentiles in the Bible do engage in a variety of Israelitish behaviors, including the following: declaring God's greatness, worshipping and serving God, traveling to find God, observing the Sabbath and festivals, entering God's covenant, and receiving a portion of the land of Israel. Because most of these behaviors appear in different texts, settings and periods, this list should be understood only as a record of the spectrum of conversion-like behavior that appears in the Bible. The reason there was no rabbinic-style conversion in the biblical period is not for lack of interest, but rather because the concept that someone could change to "become" an Israelite had not yet developed.

Four distinct theologies emerge from the study of conversion-related biblical texts. 1) When foreigners acknowledge God, it is a sign of God's greatness. This suggests that God can have influence and dominion over peoples and lands outside of Israel, which leads to a more universalistic view of God. 2) God welcomes foreigners who join the Israelite community through marriage or residence and will answer their prayer requests. 3) God wants us to treat foreigners who live among Israel fairly. Foreigners in the land are part of God's covenant with Israel and they should celebrate the festivals. Strangers who disobey God's law will be cut off. Foreigners should even be granted a portion of the land. 4) There

will be a messianic time when all nations will recognize God. These theologies show the high degree of influence that Israel's interaction with foreigners and strangers – in their own land and in exile – had on the religion of Israel.

### **Rabbinic Chapter**

The study of classical rabbinic material led to categorization of four primary theologies of conversion. While additional theological approaches to conversion certainly exist in the rabbinic corpus, these four were the best represented theologies, spanning both aggadic and halakhic texts. These theologies are:

1) Lineage: you must be born Jewish. This is a continuation of the ethnic-based approach from the biblical period and understands converts as a separate class of Jews (much like Kohen or Levite) that cannot recite the prayer "God of our fathers" because they do not have a direct link to *avot*. Convert status can be passed on to the children, and is eliminated only when one parent is a born-Jew. The halakhic principle that a convert is a "like a newborn child in every respect" is an attempt to minimize the impact of a convert's undesirable lineage by severing all of a convert's genealogical ties. The corresponding definition of Jewishness is that Jews are a people connected by genealogy, and equal membership is reserved to people who are born into the people.

2) Faith: converts have an exceptional relationship to God. In the aggadah, converts are praised for their independent recognition of God, coming to Judaism of their own free will. Much attention is given to illegitimate motives for conversion, such as for the love of a man or woman, for financial or professional gain, or out of fear, but in the end, the halakhah is to accept such converts after-the-fact. The only desired motive is "for the sake of heaven."

The rabbinic emphasis on internal motive is interpreted as a response to a world in which God seems to have abandoned Israel; each convert who has pure motives is living proof that God still exists and still loves Israel. Three stories of converts with improper motive who come to Shammai and Hillel serve as a critique on the rabbinic emphasis on motive, and teach that inside every potential convert is a nascent desire to convert *l'shem shamaim*. The corresponding definition of Jewishness is that Judaism is a faith-based religion. Israel is a people with a special relationship to God. When converts convert, it means that God has not abandoned the Jews.

3) Ritual: conversion is a re-enactment of the covenant God made at Sinai. The three halakhic aspects of a conversion (circumcision, immersion and sacrifice) are understood as a re-enactment of the process the Israelites went through at Sinai to become God's people. Aggadically, the Sinai moment is re-interpreted in such a way that converts or their guardian angels were actually present at Sinai. The halakhic provision that conversion is a one-way process (a convert who reverts is an apostate Jew) is similar to the irrevocable and eternal nature of the Sinai covenant. The blessings over circumcision over a convert mention the blood of the covenant. Sinai becomes the paradigm for becoming a Jew, thus all who become Jews must re-enact that moment. The corresponding definition of Jewishness is that Jews are the people who experienced Sinai and have an eternal covenant with God.

4) Mitzvot: converts follow the written and oral Torah. Upon receiving a convert, the rabbis explain a sampling of the mitzvot. If the convert accepts them, he is immediately circumcised. Rejection of even one mitzvah or rabbinic interpretation is considered grounds for turning a candidate away. The rabbis show concern for the level of mitzvot observance of converts and debate what the punishment is for a convert who is lax. As mentioned above,

they decide that a lax convert is considered an apostate Jew and not a reverted gentile. The corresponding definition of Jewishness is that Jews are the people of mitzvot. Jewishness is defined by an embrace of the written and oral Torah, and the rabbinic mitzvah system.

These theologies are surprisingly resonant for today's understandings of Jewishness. The four views are not mutually exclusive and are generally complimentary. While each theology may be more or less emphasized at a given time in a given community or by a particular Jew, each one is a critical part of our collective Jewish self-identity today.

### **Mystical Chapter**

The Zohar primarily re-enforces a deep ethnocentrism that strives to create an ontological separation between Jews and non-Jews, and thus between Jews and converts. To the modern reader, much of this ethnocentrism takes on a demeaning tone. A few passages appear to have a more aspiring ethnocentric view. The zoharic texts strive to show the purity of Israel over and above converts, who emerge at best as second-class Israel, until a few generations have passed and their gentile filth has been removed. Alongside this deep ethnocentrism, an alternative line of thought emerges that is movingly redemptive of the convert and his background. This more positive approach, which appears in the passage *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, suggests that a convert is the result of the marriage between a Jewish *neshamah*, the highest aspect of the tripartite soul, and a foreign body. In other words, converts have a Jewish soul, at least in part. The holy *neshamah* of a convert is also used as a garment by other *neshamot* to experience the world.

The kabbalists Cordovero and Vital work to integrate the Zohar's ethnocentric view with its more positive view, which I have called 'ensouling.' Vital explains that when Primal



Adam sinned, the holy *neshamot* that were contained in him flew out and were dispersed among the seventy nations. For this reason, Israel needs to be exiled among every nation in order to gather back the lost *neshamot*. In other words, the reason for the exile is to gather lost Jewish souls, in the form of converts, from among every nation. Vital also writes that the convert has an important functionary role in the reincarnation and rectification process of the Jewish soul of born Jews.

Cordovero explains that there are two types of converts. The first is "returners" who were dispersed among the seventy nations when Primal Adam sinned. These were collected together and purified through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The other type of converts was "transgressors" from the spoiled generations of the flood and the dispersion after the Tower of Babel. Both types of converts needed to be purified in the "fiery furnace" of Egypt. Thus all the Israelites in Egypt were converts, and they needed to reincarnate and go to Egypt in order to be included among Israel. He calls the converts who are collected in Egypt a "lovely treasure." For Cordovero, all of Israel went through a conversionary experience. This is his interpretation of Deuteronomy 10:19: *for you were converts in the land of Egypt*. The secret purpose of the commandment to love the convert is to bring back holy *neshamot* that have been lost to the Other Side. By loving them and bring them close, Jews can help these lost *neshamot* to re-enter the divine.

### **Sketching a Theory of Theological Development**

Any unifying theory of theological development will necessarily flatten out the nuance and rich detail that characterizes the textual traditions covered in this study. The biblical, rabbinic and mystical traditions are much too intricate and multifaceted to be

accurately represented by grand, sweeping characterizations. Nevertheless, it is possible to see across these periods an ongoing struggle to self-define Jewishness partly through the encounter with the Other. And there are common aspects to the spectrum of theologies that emerges in each period.

One of those common aspects is the root idea of ethnicity, lineage, genealogy: Israel is a people that replenishes itself primarily through the birth canal. The notion that the primary path to become a Jew is to be born that way is an idea that is rooted in the Hebrew Bible and wavered little, if at all, in the classic rabbinic and mystical communities. To the reader for whom such a statement seems overly obvious: consider that it didn't have to be that way. Christianity, for instance, grew much faster by dropping ethnicity and lineage as a primary defining characteristic (i.e., all who accept Jesus as their savior are welcome). But for Jews, the idea that the primary way to make more Jews is to give birth to them became a principal, definitional characteristic.

All other theologies seem to branch off from the root theology of lineage. In the rabbinic period, three such branch theologies were faith, ritual and mitzvot. The theology of faith defines Jewishness as a people with a special relationship with God. According to this theology, because of God's love for Israel, God performed a historical redemption and will continue to redeem Israel in the present and future. We know that the theology of faith never challenged the theology of lineage for primacy because Jews never became a people for whom the primary characteristic and entry requirement was belief in God or in a particular creed. To become a Jew required much more than declaring, "I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Such a statement was a necessary but insufficient condition for

conversion, and has sometimes not even been a required condition for membership (e.g., Jews may denounce their faith in God without being excommunicated).

The theology of ritual also branches off from the root theology of lineage. The theology of ritual defines Jewishness as a people who experienced Sinai. Those who do not claim direct lineage from a family that was at Sinai can become a Jew by going through a set of rituals that are interpreted as a re-enactment of the Sinai experience (circumcision, immersion and sacrifice). The revelation at Sinai, and perhaps the Exodus before and after it, becomes the quintessential Jew-making experience. But a born-Jew who does not engage in those rituals (i.e. circumcision) is still considered a Jew – proof that for born-Jews the theology of ritual is subordinate to the theology of lineage. With respect to converts, however, the theology of ritual does take a central role, especially in the rabbinic tradition. The Talmud, in Yevamot 46–48, records debates about whether circumcision and immersion are required for legitimate conversion. The outcome of the debates is that conversion requires both rituals: *l'olam ein ger ad she-yimol v'yitbol*<sup>229</sup> (“he is not truly a convert until he has been both circumcised and immersed”). That the only legitimate path to conversion was through rituals, rituals that are understood to be rooted in the Sinai experience, suggests that with respect to conversion the theology of ritual and the Sinai experience did take primacy. The theology of lineage could not hold for the convert because of his gentile birth, so the theology of ritual became definitional. For born-Jews, however, and for the Jewish people in general, the theology of ritual did not challenge the superiority of the theology of lineage.

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<sup>229</sup> Yevamot 46a.

The theology of mitzvot defines Jewishness as a people who perform mitzvot, as laid out by the rabbinic tradition. The mitzvah system, supported by its associated rewards and punishments, is a complex set of behaviors required of born-Jews and converts alike. The obligation of the mitzvot is a yoke around the neck of all Jews. Yet a born-Jew who does not observe some (or even all) mitzvot, and critically, a convert who is lax in the observance of the mitzvot, does not lose his or her Jewish identity, is not excommunicated, and is considered instead an apostate Jew. Once again, the rabbinic theology of mitzvot became a branch to the root theology of lineage.<sup>230</sup>

In the kabbalistic texts reviewed in this study, the theology of lineage was so vital to the definition of Jewishness that the mystics were forced to create elaborate and creative solutions to solve the problem of how a gentile could enter the Jewish people. Their solutions involved a big-bang-like theory in which the original Jewish souls were dispersed all around the world and had to be collected by the people Israel in exile, as well as an ensouling process in which converts were defined as Jewish souls that found their way into foreign bodies. Such spiritual gymnastics only serve to reinforce the primacy of the theology of lineage.

And yet, throughout the periods involved in this study, the idea that there must be some means by which a foreigner can join the people Israel has been an adamant and irremovable aspect of Jewishness, just like the theology of lineage. Even in the biblical texts, which do not know of conversion as the rabbis do, there is strong evidence that the community wanted and needed a path for integrating foreigners who chose to throw their lot in with the ancient Israelites. The rabbis formalized this path and the mystics spiritualized it,

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<sup>230</sup> More than any other theology presented in this study, the theology of mitzvot contends for primacy against the theology of lineage in some modern rabbinic circles. See David Ellenson, "Retroactive Annulment of a Conversion: A Survey of Representative Halakhic Sources" in Jacob and Zemer.

but they did not remove it. There is some core aspect of Jewishness that requires a back door entry, or a second rainbow to the covenant, to complement the front door and primary rainbow of becoming Jewish by birth.

What is the meaning of this back door into the Jewish people? Why did the path for conversion to Judaism emerge and then stubbornly remain marginal, rather than becoming primary (e.g. Christianity) or disappear (e.g. Native Americans)? Why, since ancient times, have the people Israel demanded that there be some way for foreigners to be integrated? Perhaps it was a pragmatic response to the reality of living in open communities, and thus a technique for survival. To use a biological metaphor, perhaps Israel, like all living things, needed to have a way to absorb nutrients from the outside and expel unusable material to the outside in order to stay alive. Or perhaps it came from a deep desire to see that God is truly universal and can be recognized by other peoples. The deeper meaning behind the role that conversion plays in defining Jewishness is a question that lingers on my mind as I bring this thesis to a close.

## For Further Study

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This study's intention was more modest than presenting a complete look at theologies of conversion throughout the Jewish tradition. To approach that goal would require the exploration of at least three additional major corpuses of Jewish tradition as well as the pursuit of additional theological lines of thought. The three major areas of study that are not covered in this thesis are the medieval responsa literature, the philosophical writings (especially of Maimonides and Halevi), and post-emancipation, modern literature. Exploring the responsa literature would add the depth of volumes of pragmatic theological choices regarding conversion.<sup>231</sup> The philosophical writings would present idealized theological views on a spectrum that is bound on one end by Halevi's ethnocentrism and at the other by Maimonides' pure faith.<sup>232</sup> The modern literature would show the influence that emancipation had on the theological spectrum. For the more scholarly-minded, a review of the apocrypha would also be promising, since those writings hold clues to the emergence of the rabbinic understanding of conversion that does not appear in the Hebrew Bible but does appear in the Mishnah.<sup>233</sup>

In addition to these corpuses, additional theological lines of thought deserve exploration. One such line of thought that appeared in the biblical, rabbinic and mystical

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<sup>231</sup> The two modern Hebrew works by Zohar and Sagi, and by Finkelstein, have explored many of these responsa.

<sup>232</sup> The following articles address their opposing approaches: James Diamond, "Maimonides and the Convert," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003) 125-146; Lippman Bodoff, "Was Yehuda Halevi Racist?" *Judaism* 38/2 (1989) 174-184; and Daniel Lasker, "Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the thought of Judah Halevi," *JQR* 81/1-2 (1990) 75-92.

<sup>233</sup> Cf. Cohen's *Beginnings of Jewishness* for analysis of some relevant apocryphal texts.

texts I studied, but never quite demanded mention until I had worked through all the material. is the regular correlation of converts with Abraham and the lineage of Abraham. Abraham is called the "father of converts" and the "first convert."<sup>234</sup> He is used as a foil by the rabbis and mystics to assign converts a genealogical connection to Israel without granting them full access to the trunk of the tree – Jacob/Israel. Abraham, as the first wanderer who heard God's voice, is a compelling symbol for the convert who must discover God in the wilderness of the spiritual journey. This and other theological lines of thought deserve further attention.

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<sup>234</sup> See note 104, pg. 51, in the Rabbinic chapter.

## Teachable Texts on Conversion

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This study was intended to be representative of Jewish tradition, avoiding bias whenever possible. For the partisan looking for teachable texts, the list below may be helpful. I have selected texts from across the tradition that hold messages worth teaching to our communities today, regardless of how "representative" they are. The numbers in parentheses are the page numbers that each passage can be found in this thesis.

### Bible

- Isaiah 56:1-8: My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples (21)
- 2 Kings 5:13-18: Na'aman (14)
- Esther 8:17: *mityahadim* (17)
- Ruth, especially 1:16-18: wherever you go, I will go (19ff)

### Rabbinic

- Tanhuma Lekh Lekha 6: converts are dearer because they came without seeing miracles (52)
- Numbers Rabbah 8.2: midrash of the gazelle in the wilderness (52)
- Yevamot 47a/b: classic *sugya* on conversion (55, 68ff)
- Kritot 9a: connects conversion rituals to Sinai (62)
- Shevuot 39a (63) and Shabbat 146a (64): converts were at Sinai
- Yevamot 47b: a convert who is lax is an apostate Jew (65)
- Shabbat 137b: blessing over circumcision of a convert (66)

### Mystical

- Me'irat 'Enayim, p.31, Bereshit 41a,b (Isaac of Acre): convert has a Jewish soul (75)
- Zohar 2:69a: when other nations convert, the base of the candle glows brighter (82)
- Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim (Vital) p.101: Israel in exile to collect lost Jewish souls (90)
- Or Yaqar, Jer ed. 16(126-7) (Cordovero): all Israel were converts (96-97)
- Or Yaqar, Jer ed. 6(115) (Cordovero): converts are a "lovely treasure" (97)



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