To be or not to be (considered Jewish): that is the question!
Blog comments by Jack Goldstein

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(Sha Goldstein is an active member of the Jewish community in Bogota, Colombia. He manages Lancaster House, Hotel and Conventions, in Bogota.)

Upon arriving to the gates of heaven, Moishe Pippick is received by God, who offers him a succulent meat dish to welcome him. Moishe, neither short nor lazy, and already accustomed to dodge these situations, asks: “Respected God, and who supervised the shechita?” Quite surprised, the Lord says “But if I, your God, am offering it to you! Perhaps you doubt me?” Moishe with little humility replies: “You know what? Better give me a salad.”

Something like this is happening to us with the conversions. When we went out of Egypt, the biblical text tell us that numerous nations joined us in the journey (Ex. 12:38), and that forty days later, all together, by pronouncing the magic formula “Naaseh venishmah” (Ex. 24:3-7), were converted into His people, even though there had been golden calves or rebellions of Korach in the middle (The fable of the Midrash says that even the future generations were converted right there by saying the same words in unison). Centuries later, Ruth said “Thy people shall be my people, thy God shall be my God and thy laws shall be my laws” (Ruth. 1:16-17) and that was enough for us to allow her to became the great-grandmother of King David and the great-great-grandmother of a Messiah who has not arrived yet. The Canaanites had the option to adopt our faith under the threat of force. Probably many of them proceeded in this way.

The Maccabees, as I have already commented several times, did the same thing with the Nabateans, the Samaritans and the Arabs (The first historical mentions of the Arabs as such come from this time). Prophet Isaiah (53:3-7) speaks about the obligation to receive the offerings of converts since the altar of God belongs to all nations and it is for all nations. There are descriptions of Orthodox conversion processes in the Middle Ages which did not take one year and neither involved “Survivor-style” challenges in order to verify the genuine intentions of the candidates. In fact, there were rabbinical edicts by which we could offer better working conditions to our slaves as long as they accepted our religion. In general, we were much more lax (Seltzer, 1988). Without converts, we wouldn’t have had the wisdom of Onkelos, Shmaya, Avtalyon, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Akiva or the Prophet Obadiah. Perhaps someone would dare to question their Judaism?

Our crypto-history provides evidence of peoples or dynasties who at different periods adopted Judaism, as was the case with the Khazars, the Berbers, the Kingdom of Adiabene (Queen Helena, 1st Century. See in Talmud: Kiddushin and Yebamoth), and the Arab Jewish tribes of Qurayza in Yathrib and Kaybar, who were annihilated by Mohhamed (Quran, verse 3:23-14). One might speculate about the true origin of the Jews of Yemen (whose Torah has a few different letters), Ethiopia, or the Caucasus Mountains. But ultimately, it would be judicious to think that to the
present day the Ashkenazic Jews at least have not been mixed with Khazars, Slavs, Germans or Latins, and that the same could be said of the Sephardic and Mizrahis mixed with Latins, Arabs, Spaniards, Persians, Turkish and Berbers. After so many tragedies, we should be the first who reject any argument of blood purity. Someone is willing to take a DNA test?

The written Torah does not describe any legal process to certify a conversion. If something could be implicit, it is that the religion was initially inherited through the paternal line. It was our Mishnah which decreed that one is Jew when he/she was born to a Jewish mother or via an Orthodox conversion. But even so, the methodology has not ceased to be edited and still today the Chief Rabbinites of Israel do not have a unified position in this regard. The Halacha teaches that we should be cautious about the conversions that are made when there is a marriage in between or in times of prosperity in order to avoid that they look for an economic return (read: we must reject them). However, the normativity did not apply to the marriages of Moshe Rabbeinu or of Kings David and Solomon. It did not apply either for the conversions of slaves or of the spouses of so many congregants who would not be prudent to mention (and where I must be included). By Reading the Talmud in Pesachim 87b we can see that “God exiled the Jews from their homeland for one reason: to increase the number of converts”. I can only assume that this might have something to do with other words of Isaiah (42:6 and 49:6) in the sense that if we was chosen as a people for something, it was to serve as an example and as a light to the rest of the nations.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe was always a declared enemy of recognizing the Falashas as Jews (Kfar Chabad Magazine, Vol. 1079, 5 Shvat 5764 Pag. 35)*1, even though the Chief Sephardic Rabbis Amar and Yosef, and the Ashkenazic Rabbis such as Kook and Goren have been defenders of their Judaism. In the same way, the Sephardic Rabbis have been the ones who courageously certified the conversions performed by the Tzahal to so many soldiers who have risked their lives to defend Israel and its Jewish population, arousing the animadversion of others, such as Rabbi Elyashiv, hierarch of the Lithuanian Rabbinate. The Karaites, Subbotniks and all the range of Anusim (Bnei Israel, Bnei Menashe, and Chuetas, among others) go through the dilemma of being indeed accepted as Jews under de Law of Return, but only by some of the Chief Rabbis of Israel. And what to say about the Reform and the Conservative world who, in my humble opinion, are ironically the only religious groups in Israel which do not have full equality before the civil law of the State, while Muslims, Christians, Baha’i, Druzes and others enjoy it?

We have reached such extremes that personal quarrels between rabbis have degenerated into the decertification of some rabbis and the subsequent retroactive annulment (decades later) of perfectly Orthodox conversions and on people on whom have never been made the slightest objection to their praxis as Jews (Mathew Wagner, Jerusalem Post, Dec. 24, 2009). It is needless to describe the nefarious consequences that these judgments have had on the children and grandchildren of the innocent victims. Since 1935, a rabbinical Takanah has governed the communities of Halab (especially those of Avenue S. in Brooklyn and of Deal, NJ) prohibiting any conversion and even the social interaction with a convert, with his/her spouse and their descendants (the undersigned is a victim of this Takanah even being not Halabi and even being already divorced from who is a descendant of Anousim, converted by an Orthodox Beit Din in New York). So far, so good, since each community has the right to legislate on its own people according to its requirements. But not too long ago, there was a case of a woman who, being a daughter of an interreligious marriage, was converted during her infancy and lived a fully Jewish life. Years later, when the community opted to reject her union with a congregant, she traveled to Israel where, sponsored by the Chief Rabbinate (which theoretically could dictate jurisprudence on the Shevet Ajim of Brooklyn), she underwent a new and long conversion. Unfortunately, upon returning to Brooklyn she was rejected again. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef himself swore in favor of the woman and, according to witnesses, it was he himself who wrote her name in the Act of conversion.
Nevertheless, the community, with the same blatant whiff of Moishe Pippick, told the Chief Rabbi of
Israel that they would not accept the woman because of the sin committed by her father when he
married a convert several decades ago (Zev Chafetz, New York Times, October 14, 2007).
Personally, I find it admirable that, as a people and as a religion, we are not dedicated to get
adepts. I find that it is just prudent that the process is not easy and that we want to verify the
genuine intention of the candidate. It is just understandable that more than three thousand years of
history have taught us to be wary and hesitant to the convert, that it might seem strange to us that
someone would want to be linked with a persecuted people, but we cannot ignore the evidence of
our history and reject the same precepts of the Torah which command us to respect and admire the
convert. I consider that over time we have overdimensioned the regulations, and in the process we
made them contradictory, conflictive and unjust in many cases. I also think that each community
has autonomy to accept or decline memberships and to celebrate or not ceremonies to congregants.
Moreover, every person is entitled to accept or reject a convert in the bosom of his/her family. But I
do not think either that is fair, as a people, to reject the Jewish identity of individuals and entire
communities that devotedly have engaged themselves to fulfill the mitzvot, have made serious
conversions, and after many years and vicissitudes are still living their Judaism with pride.

Today in Colombia we are witnesses of the curious and admirable phenomenon of having many
persons and couples (some of them close friends of mine, who did not seek neither marriage nor
status) and at least nine communities established several years ago who have made conversions
(one or more times), who have performed their tevilah, who eat kosher food, who fix their mezuzot
and pray with tefillin, who get married with Ketubot, who circumcise their foreskins as adults, and
who comply with the precepts of Niddah and Tzniut. Hope we know how to establish with wisdom
and justice the principles that, without prejudices of blood or status, regulate their affiliations to
the universal Jewish world. We should re-edit the Takanah of Rabbi Sharabani which governs the
conversions to the North of certain artificial coordinates. The converts deserve from us at least our
respect and the right to be recognized in individual or family capacity as members of the existing
communities, or as independent communities under the umbrella of the Confederation of Jewish
Communities of Colombia. Even I would become a member!

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