

[Converts-- yes; Rabbanut-- no; blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

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The Talmud (Yoma 71b) tells of an encounter between the High Priest of the Temple and two sages, Shemaya and Avtalyon. The latter were converts to Judaism and were the leading rabbinic figures of their generation.

At the conclusion of the Temple service on one Yom Kippur, the High Priest left the Temple precincts and was followed by a crowd. But when the crowd saw Shemaya and Avtalyon, they abandoned the High Priest and followed after the two sages. The High Priest was angered. When he confronted Shemaya and Avtalyon, he snidely remarked: "Peace unto the descendants of the nations [i.e. converts]." The sages replied: "Peace unto the descendants of the nations who behave in the manner of Aaron [the original High Priest of Israel]; and no peace on the descendant of Aaron who does not behave in the manner of Aaron."

The sages rebuked the High Priest because he was not fulfilling the role of Aaron, one who loved peace and pursued peace. The High Priest showed disdain for converts, even though the converts were spiritually superior to him and more beloved and respected by the public than he was.

The Talmud indicates that those who cause anguish to converts are guilty of transgressing 36 Torah laws—some say 46 Torah laws. Humiliating or showing disdain for converts is a sin of immense proportion. This applies not merely if the converts were great sages like Shemaya and Avtalyon; it applies to all converts.

Why are the Torah and halakha so deeply concerned about the dignity of converts? It is in appreciation of the tremendous sacrifices undertaken by converts to join the Jewish People. It is in recognition that converts may well feel vulnerable as "outsiders." It is in the desire to assure that all Jews—born Jews and converted Jews—feel a sense of shared history and destiny, as members of one distinctive people. Anything that creates rifts between born Jews and converted Jews is sinful in the extreme.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel and its rabbinic courts have sought to solidify their power by not recognizing conversions done outside their authority. This is a continuation of the process begun in 2006 by which the Chief Rabbinate has undermined the authority of Orthodox rabbis in the diaspora in matters of conversion. The great shame is not only the disgraceful and anti-halakhic stance of the Chief Rabbinate vis a vis conversions conducted by properly ordained Orthodox rabbis; the great shame is that the State of Israel allows this travesty to persist. It allows the extreme and authoritarian Chief Rabbinate to serve as gatekeepers to decide who is or is not Jewish. It allows the Rabbanut to oppress converts and to humiliate upstanding rabbis.

All halakhic converts must understand: they are 100% Jewish according to halakha. In the eyes of

God and Torah they are full Jews, just as Jewish as any born Jews. Their Jewishness is not contingent on “acceptance” by the Chief Rabbinate or by any Hareidi dominated rabbinic courts. Halakhic converts are Jewish, their children are Jewish, they are obligated to fulfill the mitzvot as are all other Jews. Anyone who casts aspersions on their Jewish status is a sinner, plain and simple.

Regrettably, the Israeli government has empowered its extremist Rabbanut to pass judgment on the validity of halakhic conversions, when converts wish to make Aliyah or be married in Israel. Since the “rabbinic establishment” in Israel is notoriously right-wing, extreme and bureaucratic, giving them such power inevitably leads to unpleasantness...and worse.

The Rabbanut is one of the least (or perhaps even THE least) respected bureaucracy in Israel. It brings shame on Torah; it drives people away from religion. In posturing itself as “strict” enforcers of halakha, it violates halakha egregiously by invalidating conversions that are in fact halakhically valid; it violates halakha egregiously by humiliating and causing pain to converts.

There is a God in Heaven, and these rabbis will one day be called before the Heavenly court. They will have to answer for every pain they caused, for every convert they insulted, for every rabbi they disrespected. As they have judged, so will they be judged.

The High Priest showed arrogant disdain to the converts, Shemaya and Avtalyon. But those sages replied cogently: “Peace unto the descendants of the nations who behave in the manner of Aaron [the original High Priest of Israel]; and no peace on the descendant of Aaron who does not behave in the manner of Aaron.”

We paraphrase the words of Shemaya and Avtalyon: Peace to converts who live strong and vital Jewish lives; and no peace to rabbinic bureaucrats who do not live up to the ideals of Torah. No peace to those who oppress converts. No peace to those who undermine halakhic conversions. No peace to those who think more of their own political power than of the power of God. No peace to those whose words and deeds create rifts in the body and soul of the Jewish People.

Peace to all who follow the Torah ideal and who understand that “its ways are the ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.”

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