Thou Shalt Not Oppress the Ger

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I am a convert. There can be no question that I am halakhically Jewish, at least if you trust the Lubavitchers to know halakha. I am writing to protest the downright shameful treatment of converts by the Orthodox community, which so conveniently forgets the explicit commandment to not oppress the *ger*.

First, let me state my background—though I will omit identifying details for reasons that will appear later. I was raised as a Christian in the Bible Belt to believe that the Bible was the word of God. Nobody explained to me why "God's Word" did not include the laws in the first five books, which today are observed only by Jews. Due to my parents' severe opposition, I could not do anything toward converting to Judaism until I went away to graduate school in a small college town.

This was more than 35 years ago. At that time, I took instruction from the only Orthodox rabbi in the state, who could be described as Modern Orthodox. In those days, I knew nothing of Modern/Hareidi distinctions among Orthodox Jews; in fact, there were no Hareidi Jews in my immediate vicinity. The Bet Din consisted of my rabbi; the only Conservative rabbi in that town (he was a Sabbath observer), and one other person. As I started meeting other Jews for the first time (I had had no significant social Jewish contact before my conversion), I started getting questions about this conversion. I had met a community of Lubavitchers by this time, and they decided that although they believed my conversion was valid, they would redo it just to remove all question. They even placed a call to New York and got a ruling that I should not say God's name in the blessing for this re-run. This second conversion took place about a year and a half after my first conversion.

I did not meet and marry my husband until nine years later. His entire family is Hareidi, and he is yeshiva-educated. We are Shomrei Shabbat but not "yeshivish," and live in a small college town with a bare minyan for our Orthodox community. We have one child, a son, who is also Shomer Shabbat.

The basic problem a convert faces in the Orthodox world stems from the following mind-set: If you observe one mitzvah more than I do you are a fanatic, and if you observe one mitzvah less you are an *apikores*, or heretic. This is hard a enough mind-set for a *ba'al teshuva* to navigate and to figure out what is essential halakha and what is less essential *minhag*, or custom—and even more so for the convert. If a convert is at all less stringent than the person he or she is speaking to, the logic seems to extend that the convert has not accepted all of the mitzvoth, and therefore the validity of the conversion is in question. I've even had an Orthodox rabbi say this to me in those very words!

I recall an occasion when I asked: Why, if there is one law for the convert and one who is born Jewish, that converts are automatically classed with prostitutes as people *kohanim* may not marry? That's when I learned that questioning is not permitted. Another "learning experience" I had was when I became

friendly with a young man—and our friendship was disapproved of by people in the community, who forced him to end the friendship. I obviously hadn't accepted that the only permissible relationship between a man and a woman was marriage to that person, so therefore I wasn't "really Jewish." I even got into trouble when I expressed secular political views that differed from those of the person I was speaking with. I didn't elevate "what's good for the Jews" (including the State of Israel) over all other considerations. This showed that I had not really become part of the Jewish people, and therefore I wasn't considered to be Jewish.

My point is that the only way for a convert to be "accepted" is to become SuperJew: to be more stringent than anyone else, and to totally block out the former non-Jewish self. I have known of a few such people, though I have never become close enough to them to tell if this is real or an act they put on for self-preservation. Sorry, folks, I'm not SuperJew, nor are the vast majority of converts I have known—though they and I feel pressure to be so. If you can be "accepted" only by putting on an act, you're not really accepted.

In the culture in which I grew up, the cardinal sin is forgetting where you came from. I've often had Jews tell me that they assume I wouldn't want my children to know my parents, and that since my parents are not halakhically my parents I owe them no obligation. I'm afraid that I've never bought that, and it has been the source of many problems. Does this mean I'm not really Jewish?

And I wish I had a dollar for every remark I've heard made by Jews about "the goyim." I can't stand such remarks about me (I'm still the same person I was before) and my family and my former co-religionists (whom I do NOT consider to be idolaters!), and it's no excuse that the speaker didn't know my background. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 94a) recognizes that this is painful for the convert and explicitly forbids such comments lest the convert regret the conversion. Believe me, I've heard much worse about non-Jews from Jews than I've ever heard about Jews from non-Jews. I'm afraid that this does not exactly solidify my identification with the Jewish people, whom I encountered only after my conversion to the faith.

The effect of all this on me (and I've only related a few examples) was very nearly to drive me away from Judaism. When people do things to you in the name of religion, it becomes hard to separate the people from the religion. In this case, it is also very hard to separate halakha from *minhag*. When a demand is made on you that you simply can't fulfill, and you are told that this is an essential part of the package, how do you not then reject the whole package? I very nearly did. If there had been a way to undo my conversion, I might well have done it. But when I give my word, I keep it. I believed I was now obligated to observance and couldn't get out of it. What really saved me Jewishly was that I was now living in my present small college town, where all Jews are accepted without question (because, for one thing, we can't afford to be very particular). This tolerance allowed me the space to recover after my experiences with larger and more rigid Orthodox communities.

Most of my problems of the sort I've described occurred before I got married. Since then, my husband's *yihus* (religious lineage and connections) has largely protected me, coupled with the decision we made to hide my ancestry where at all possible. This started with my mother-in-law, a Polish immigrant who probably subscribed to the "can the leopard change its spots" view of non-Jews that I have also heard (primarily from members of her generation). She was deeply embarrassed about her son having non-Jewish in-laws, but she wanted her son to be happy. She solved the problem by pretending to everyone (and herself) that my parents were Jewish, and ordering us to say nothing to the contrary. She has been dead many years now, but my husband, with his greater knowledge of the Orthodox world, convinced me that it would be better for our son if my background still was not known. We have all become very good at giving the misleading impression that I was born Jewish, while at the same time not saying anything that isn't true. I do not have sufficient Hebrew language skills to pass as someone who was born into a Jewish, religious home, but we allow the impression to exist that I am a *ba'alat teshuva*. Although our son knew my parents (now long-deceased), to outsiders we emphasize my husband's family and de-emphasize mine. I am not comfortable having to deny who I am, and I hope that someday my son will decide that denying half his heritage is not good, but I've acquiesced because it's best for him. If my status becomes known, he will be forever under the same cloud that I am. I wouldn't wish my experience on anyone, especially my own son.

My latest problem, which has reawakened all of these memories, is that my son has started looking for a *shiddukh*, a wife, in the Orthodox world. We recently had a very bad experience. The girl signaled interest on a computer site, knowing of my background. Her mother took over and forbade her to meet my son until I was investigated. The result was very unpleasant for me: the matchmaker, in the course of her Inquisition, persisted in thinking that it was for the sake of marriage, that the re-conversion was at my husband's insistence (never mind that both conversions took place long before I met him), and even asked whether our son had conversion papers! Their rabbi then called us to explain that it was his synagogue's policy to have copies of conversion papers on file, and asked us to send them. (All of this was before my son could even talk with the girl to see if the match was worth pursuing.) I was going to refuse unless the same demand was made of the other parents; before it came to this point, my son refused the match. He agreed with me that proof of my Jewishness should not be halakhically necessary (especially at this stage), since it was not in question that I had long been observant, and further, it sounded like a bad in-law situation. It still left me very upset. I don't mind the asking itself as much as I do the unwillingness to accept my answers. I am hoping that in whatever *shiddukh* he makes, my background can remain hidden (except to the girl herself) until after the wedding, because I can foresee a repeat of this unpleasant suspicion directed at me and only me. I don't know whether this will be possible.

This brings me to one of my long-standing grudges. Converts are asked to show papers at every instance, from day school enrollment (either their own or their children's) to weddings. The same is not asked of people who claim to be born Jewish. I resent being singled out for this suspicion. I don't care how politely it is phrased or what reasons are given. ("Standard synagogue policy" certainly doesn't cut it.) I find it offensive and discriminatory to constantly have to prove myself, to know that there will never be a time when I am simply accepted as a Jew without strings attached. Perhaps the larger community is simply unaware of the impact this practice has on a convert's feelings. But it's past time that this was realized and these policies reexamined.

These actions may actually violate an additional negative commandment, beyond oppressing the *ger*. Maimonides, when talking of "cheating with words," gives an example of someone who tells a convert to "remember your origins." He may have meant that someone who while in negotiations with a convert assumes a superior position because of his Jewish birth is cheating, by taking for himself something to which he isn't entitled (since Jewishness should be equal for all Jews). These demands for proof of conversion in return for *shiddukhim* and Jewish education may qualify.

I will now refuse to provide papers for any reason unless the same is required of non-converts as well. (I can tell you that my husband has no such paperwork to prove he is Jewish.) If one needs to be sure I am Jewish, one should apply the same criteria for people who claim to be born Jewish. To me (and my yeshiva-bred husband agrees), this discriminatory treatment is a clear violation of the commandment not to oppress the *ger*. One convert I know got so fed up with this practice that she tore up her papers. I haven't dared go that far, but I'm sorely tempted. Whatever happened to the halakhic presumption that if you are observant of mitzvoth, you are Jewish? I've been Shomeret Shabbat for 35 years. Shouldn't that suffice? (The yeshiva community actually may be better on this point than non-yeshiva people; my Hareidi sister-in-law and her husband immediately and totally accepted me with no questions asked.)

I have been told that I should not feel offended by these procedures because, especially these days, people need to make sure that both parties to a Jewish marriage are Jewish. First, I don't think anyone should tell me how to feel. The commandment not to oppress the *ger* only makes sense in light of the *ger*'s own feelings. Second, why are the same requirements not made of the parties who claim to be born Jewish? *Ba'alei teshuva* aren't asked for papers; but even for them, isn't it forbidden to shame a *ba'al teshuva* by reminding him or her of past non-observance? Third, I don't think one should downgrade the explicit commandment not to oppress the *ger*.

So what if an occasional mistake is made? I'm afraid that with my background I can't consider this the worst thing that could happen. I can hardly take the position that any non-Jewish ancestry is a blot on the Jewish people. Actually, I believe there is an opinion that if it should transpire that a maternal ancestor wasn't Jewish, it would not negate the Jewish status of observant *mikva*-going

descendants. But if that doesn't suffice, do a conversion to make sure—and I don't mean making an already observant person start from scratch. This problem is fixable. Elijah the Prophet is going to have quite a job sorting us all out anyway; what's a few more, especially when weighed against the commandment not to oppress the *ger*? Personally, I'd go with this Torah commandment as against concerns with the purity of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, however, the Orthodox community seems to have taken the other position. I think a number of so-called religious Jews will have a few things to answer for on the Day of Judgment.

The situation today is even worse than it was 35 years ago. With the Orthodoxy's move toward the right, standards for converts have been raised. It is forbidden to refuse a sincere convert. In the effort to weed out the insincere, has the bar been raised so high as to also exclude many sincere converts? In my day, the "Big Three" mitzvoth were Shabbat, kashruth, and *taharat haMishpahah* (family purity); anything more was desirable but not a deal-breaker. It was not required that the convert know all of halakha. And at least where I did it, anyone who did not have a Jewish fiancé(e) was automatically accepted. In addition, if a problem was later discovered with the procedure, redoing it was no big deal. Now, to judge by the experience of newer converts in our community, one must have to commit to a higher level of observance and must live in a large Orthodox community (which, as a resident of a small community, I disagree with—it is quite possible to live halakhically without a lot of large local Jewish institutions). Additionally, there is a reluctance to simply redo questionable conversions. One Shomer Shabbat person in my community is in halakhic limbo with his questionable prior conversion, which nobody is willing to redo as long as he lives here. The point about questionable conversions that appears to be overlooked is that although the conversion may be invalid, it also may be valid. The current focus seems to be on the possible invalidity, with the result that these converts are treated as if the conversion never happened. What about the possibility that it may be valid? If it is, aren't we committing several serious sins, from oppressing the *ger* to discouraging further observance?

The religious leadership in the State of Israel adds to the problem by only accepting certain rabbis' conversions. Where would that leave me? I doubt such a list even existed 35 years ago; if it did, I don't know whether my rabbi would have been on it. Put it this way: My son knows it would be probably too complicated for him to consider making *aliyah*.

Even outside the State of Israel, there is a problem with local autonomy. A conversion that is accepted in one community may not be accepted in another. One person in our community converted 50 years ago. No problems arose until now, when her daughter was refused membership in one European synagogue, and her grandchildren were denied a Jewish education in that community. Since the (Orthodox) converting rabbi has long been dead, he could not be asked for information. The daughter is accepted as Jewish in some Orthodox communities but not in others. What is a convert to do, especially when it is long enough after the fact that all witnesses have died?

I have read the Rabbinical Council of America's new conversion policies, which are intended to address at least the uniformity problem. Aside from the fact that these policies are only prospective, I am afraid that in implementation they will be used to institutionalize a very high bar for converts and justify retroactive rejection of converts such as myself. I fear that the prescription that converts should tell their local rabbi of their status merely invites the sort of social problems I've described above, unless said rabbi is both trustworthy and sensitive (which, unfortunately, not all are). We do, after all, know the halakhic implications of our own conversions! I for one (and I suspect others as well) prefer not to emerge from the closet now.

It appears that no convert can ever be secure in his or her status as a Jew, no matter how much time has elapsed. Ignorance of the halakha involved, coupled with prejudice against non-Jews, makes it all too easy for a Jew to consider a convert to be insufficiently observant, hence non-Jewish, and to feel no qualms about expressing this. It should be absolutely forbidden for a Jew to raise this issue about a conversion once validly performed, and it also should be forbidden to reexamine decades-old conversions that were done by Orthodox rabbis. Otherwise, there will be literally no end to the suspicion surrounding a convert.

It may not be too farfetched to draw an analogy with the "purity of blood" concerns of Spanish Christians at the time of the Inquisition. "Old Christians" constantly suspected "New Christians" of being secret Jews, even if generations of the New Christian family had been devout Christians. This entailed serious social and political repercussions against the New Christians, who became a permanent and inferior social class. Only if one could prove "purity of blood," that is, unadulterated Old Christian descent, could one rest easy. I am afraid that the present-day Orthodox Jewish social structure may be developing into a similar caste system, with converts at the bottom of the ladder and with decreasing possibilities of social integration. The tales I hear from outreach organizations about the problems *ba'alei teshuva* face in Orthodox communities indicate this—and, of course, converts have even lower status than *ba'alei teshuva*. Rambam would be appalled.

When people ask to convert, they are warned about persecution from non-Jews. Nobody ever warns them about persecution from Jews. Perhaps this is simply not on the radar screen of conversion rabbis, very few of whom have ever experienced it themselves. However, this has been the experience of nearly every convert I know. Frankly, if I had known 40 years ago everything I know now, I doubt I would have found becoming Jewish to be worth the struggle, despite my theological convictions. Is this the message we want to give converts—that they will never be fully accepted by the Jewish community? I can never fully belong, nor can my son if the truth about me were made public. At least my child is a male, so the problem should die with him. As for me, there is nothing more that I need from the Jewish community. I only want to protect my son, who did not choose his situation, from having to go through the same experience. It is past time for someone to remind Jews that the commandment not to oppress the *ger* is still part of the Torah.