What Medieval Jewish Apostates Can Teach Us about the Mitzvah of Ahavat haGer

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Dr. Chaviva Levin received her doctorate in Jewish studies and history from New York University and holds bachelors and masters degrees from Yeshiva University. She is an alumna of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship program. Her research interests center on the experiences of Medieval Ashkenazic (Northern European) Jewry and on Medieval Jewish-Christian relations, and specifically on the experiences of Jewish converts to Christianity. This article appears in issue 23 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

It is axiomatic that Modern Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodox Jews value the academic field of Jewish Studies, which functions as the bridge between the Bet Midrash and the academy, both locations in which we seek to situate ourselves. In articulating the value of such study, proponents often highlight the insights it affords in the realm of Talmud Torah. For example, understanding the ancient Near Eastern context in which Torah was given allows us to understand difficult passages or, perhaps more importantly, enhances our appreciation of the values Torah conveys by placing them in relief against their cultural backdrop. Similarly, enhanced literary sensitivity affords greater insight into both Torah's artistry and its message. Here I suggest that the field of Jewish Studies as practiced in the academy can contribute in surprising ways not only to our Talmud Torah but to our performance of mitzvoth as well.

My doctoral research examined the experiences of medieval Jewish apostates, Jews who converted to Christianity, a group who had been alternately ignored or excoriated by previous generations of Jewish historians, most of whose study was as deeply rooted in their Jewish identities as is my own. I found myself feeling a stronger sense of empathy than I had anticipated with the typically anonymous figures so often characterized as villains by previous generations of Jewish

historians. In exploring the work on religious conversion that emerged out of religious studies and the social sciences, I came to see that while we as a community tend to see apostates and converts as diametric opposites, from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of the ger tzedek (righteous convert) and the meshummad (apostate) is in fact shared: Each is a defector from one religion seeking to join a new religious community.

As Jews, we have minimal experience incorporating converts into our community; there is little in the way of historical models to which we can turn in seeking to address a new reality in which significant numbers of people want to become Jewish. For a variety of reasons, including but not limited to the role of decisions made by rabbinic authorities in the State of Israel vis-à-vis the status of converts in the Diaspora, the question of Jewish communal treatment of converts, or gerei tzedek, in our own American Modern Orthodox Jewish community has moved to the fore. Recent rabbinic improprieties aside, it is abundantly clear that we as a community have not been doing a good job integrating converts into our community.

This reality is not merely a “public relations” problem. There are two mitzvoth d’orayta, Torah commandments, that govern our interactions with converts: the lav (prohibition) of Ona’at haGer, oppressing the convert, and the aseh (positive commandment) of Ahavat haGer, loving the convert.[1] Although rabbinic texts are emphatic in their insistence that these are critically important mitzvoth,[2] they don’t offer much in the way of practical guidance as to what these actually mean. Thus, in discussing what it means to love the convert, only Peri Megadim (to Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim 156) provides a concrete example of what the mitzvah entails. He describes the case of a convert whose beast of burden’s load has become dislodged. Although it is a general mitzvah to help any Jew in this circumstance, the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer requires that assistance to the convert take priority, as there are two mitzvoth in play here—the same mitzvah of veAhavta leReakha kamokha, loving one’s fellow as oneself, that applies in the case of any Jew, as well as the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer. Just as we know that the mitzvah of veAhavta leReakha kamokha is by no means limited to helping a Jew with his fallen burden, the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer would similarly seem to be necessarily far more encompassing than the specific case mentioned here. But given our limited historical experience with performing or implementing this particular mitzvah, we don’t have a good sense of what its optimal fulfillment should look like. If Peri Megadim emphasizes that the convert is in need of the protection of a special mitzvah because of the vulnerability engendered by his or her lack of connection and support created by extended social and family

networks, then the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer would demand that we effectively integrate converts into communities.

Here, given our lack of communal experience at integrating converts, the experiences of medieval Jewish apostates can shed light on what we as a community should—and should not—do to effectively perform the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer. I'd like to first share some of what I've learned about the experiences of medieval Jewish converts to Christianity and then turn to consider the implications for our own context.

The story of medieval Jewish conversion to Christianity is mostly a story of failure to integrate former Jews as members of their new religious faith community. As much as medieval Christians theoretically anticipated the conversion of Jews, they didn't really expect too many Jews to actually convert and weren't sure what to make of those who did. In part because the goals of church and state were not aligned (much to the frustration of religious figures, kings or local rulers tended to either confiscate the property of Jewish converts or consign it to their Jewish co-religionists so as not to relinquish ultimate control over it), Jewish converts to Christianity were often impoverished. Although Church officials, such as the Pope, worked hard to encourage local officials, such as bishops, or institutions, such as monasteries, to provide for the financial support of converts, these efforts were often met with resistance and skepticism.[3] Poignantly, we have papal letters advocating for the support of a given convert and then, years later, letters to the same address entreating financial aid for the sons of that very convert. It is not surprising that some Jewish converts to Christianity gave up and returned to the Jewish community, nor that something of a vicious cycle developed. Christians were skeptical of the religious sincerity of Jewish converts, whom they feared became Christian more for material than spiritual benefit; inability to achieve support and integration led Jewish converts—or occasionally their children—to return to the Jewish community; this return reinforced the skepticism and suspicion with which subsequent converts were greeted, and so on. It's worth emphasizing that there are no scoundrels here. Although these responses were undoubtedly intensified by increasing Christian belief in the immutability of Jewishness and the impossibility of conversion from Judaism to Christianity over the course of the twelfth century, concern that Jews converted for material gain and that they were liable to return to Judaism was supported by the evidence of the behavior and choices of many such converts.

Even converts whose conversions "stuck" found themselves in a kind of religious "no man's land." One Christian miracle tale depicts the fear of a young Jewish boy

seeking conversion to Christianity that he would wind up as a penniless “Jew-Christian” of a sort with which he was all too familiar.[4] In another example that had a monumental impact on the modern Jewish experience, early modern Jewish converts to Christianity in Spain were labeled “New Christians” and subjected to social and economic disadvantages similar to those they had experienced as Jews (not to mention Inquisitional scrutiny). Successful integration into their new religious communities was all too elusive for many medieval and early modern Jewish converts.

Even cases that at first blush appear to have been successful conversions raise questions about how effective the integration achieved by these converts actually was. One child who was forcibly converted during the First Crusade was taken to a monastery and became a monk. In twelfth-century Christian author Guibert of Nogent’s depiction, the young formerly Jewish monk was outstanding among his peers—he composed a work of anti-Jewish polemic, and once, when he was holding a lit candle, the dripping wax miraculously formed the shape of a cross. This young monk was incorporated into a monastic community. But why the need for miracles? Or polemical works against Jews? And why wasn’t it sufficient for this young monk who had been converted from Judaism to simply be “good enough?” [5]

The names of apostates Nicholas Donin and Pablo Christiani are infamous among Jews for the role each played in bringing harm to his former co-religionists. Nicholas Donin is remembered for his role in introducing thirteenth-century Christians to rabbinic literature; he was the primary Christian antagonist at the 1240 Trial of the Talmud that culminated in the burning of the Talmud in the center of Paris two years later. Just over twenty years later, Pablo Christiani pioneered a new Christian missionizing approach using rabbinic literature to prove the truth of Christianity. Furthermore, he inaugurated the method, which would continue to be developed and sharpened over the course of the next century and a half, at the Vikuah HaRamban, Nachmanides’ disputation at Barcelona. These apostates certainly seem to have found a place within their new Christian communities, but their role as “professional converts” begs the question: If one of the only ways that Jewish converts can find a place within their new religious communities is to highlight their status as former Jews, does this really constitute true integration into a new religious community?

Even well-intentioned efforts at ameliorating some of the problems confronted by Jewish converts could backfire. English King Henry III took a personal interest in encouraging Jewish conversion. He founded and supported the London Domus

Conversorum, house of converts, to alleviate the plight of impoverished converts and ensure them of a modicum of material aid. As things transpired, for many converts the Domus became a permanent “halfway house” in which Jewish converts to Christianity learned from one another, married one another, and bequeathed their spots in the Domus to their children. Long after the expulsion of Jews from England in 1290, descendants of English Jewish converts to Christianity resided in the Domus, the final relics of Jewish life on that island. [6]

Despite the overall bleak experience of medieval Jewish converts, there were a few bright spots, or contexts in which Jewish converts were able to be incorporated within their new faith communities. Of course, these cases are by definition more difficult to study, as converts who effectively integrate typically disappear from the historical record. There are miracle tales that relate the conversion of young Jewish women to Christianity. These stories focus on the young women’s encounters with Christianity, generally through conversations with young Christian clerics, and their subsequent conversion. Immediately upon conversion, according to these accounts, the young women converts either marry Christian men or enter a convent; after becoming part of a Christian family or “monastic family” we hear no more of them. This is the closest we come to “happily ever after” for medieval Jewish converts.

Jewish apostates, or converts from Judaism, have only recently been incorporated into Jewish historiography [7] and at first blush medieval apostates and early-twenty-first century gerei tzedek may seem to have no apparent connection to one another. I suggest that the largely failed experiences of Jewish renegades from the Middle Ages can provide much needed insight into how to avoid Ona’at haGer and how to properly fulfill the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer. In the absence of much specific halakhic guidance about how to integrate converts into our community due to the relative rarity of conversion to Judaism in the past, the experiences of pre-modern Jewish apostates sensitize us to the distinctive situation of the convert and proffer insight that can productively guide our communal approach to a significant challenge with which we are confronted.

In thinking about our communal approach to converts, or gerim, we have tended to emphasize the importance of ascertaining the suitability of prospective candidates for conversion. We have focused on ensuring that prospective gerim are properly informed of, educated about, and committed to the observance of the mitzvoth in which they will become obligated and that the technical or ritual aspects of conversion are enacted correctly. Appropriately, responsibility for assuring that these important requirements have been met has by and large been

assumed by and been communally assigned to rabbis.
Among the things that emerge from my study of medieval Jewish apostates is that there are multiple elements inherent in the experience of joining a new religious community. These different aspects are inherent in the language that we use to talk about “Jews by choice.” We tend to use the terms “convert” and “ger” interchangeably, as direct translations for one another. And in some ways they are. But the different etymologies of these terms highlight different facets of the experience of becoming a member of a new faith community. To convert, from the Latin “conversus,” means “to turn toward,” and the term convert identifies one who has turned toward a new religious faith. The term “ger” by contrast, emphasizes that its subject is an alien, a stranger, not a native. Of course, both “turning toward” and becoming a stranger are elements in joining a new religious community.

Our community has emphasized the “turning toward” aspect of the conversion experience. We have been less attentive, however, to the other, equally significant aspect of the experience of conversion, that of integration of the convert into her or his new community.

We conceive of conversion as a phenomenon of the soul. Yet the experience of joining a new religious community is in many ways similar to the experience of immigration, as sociologist of religion Peter Berger has noted in his classic work The Sacred Canopy. He advises that the convert who wishes to “stay converted” would do well to make choices that immerse her or himself in her or his new community. By the same token, he observes that the receiving community has an obligation to allow the convert to become immersed in his new surroundings and to facilitate such immersion. [8]

As we foster integration of converts into our communities, we should recognize that, like other immigrants, gerim may bring old tastes and habits with them. Having become a convert is an indelible aspect of individual experience; integration into a new community, no matter how effective or embracing, cannot efface its significance in forming a person’s identity, nor should it seek to do so. We are well aware that immigrants, including those who are eager and whole-hearted in their desire to acculturate into their new home, retain aspects of their previous cultural identity. Immigrants may speak with an accent, enjoy their native cuisines, or even keep house in ways that differ from the norms of their adopted home. None of this in any way interferes with or contradicts the ability or desire to be or to become American, for example. In our eagerness to incorporate “new immigrants” into our community, we must be wary of replicating the

tendencies of the Spanish Inquisition, which saw in every converso who didn't like the taste of pork or who changed the linens on Friday evidence of "Judaizing," or residual belief in and commitment to the Jewish faith. [9] Although for some conversos this may have been the case, for many others, perhaps the vast majority, these represented retained cultural habits, not religious commitments.[10] Assuming that elements of converts' previous identities don't conflict with Jewish religious beliefs or practices we should tolerate and even appreciate or celebrate these rather than seek to eradicate them or view all deviation from cultural habits and norms as a religious threat.

What communities can and, according to the Torah, must do, is enable a convert to feel her or himself not a ger—a stranger, an alien—in our community, but at home. This aspect of the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer is highlighted in the pasuk in Parashat Kedoshim (Lev. 19:34) that R. Moshe of Coucy, in his thirteenth-century Sefer Mitzvoth Gadol (Positive Commandment 10) identifies as the source of the commandment to love the convert: "The stranger (ger) who sojourns with you shall be to you as the home-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Part of the Torah's mandate is to help the ger resemble the ezrakh, the native, to enable her or him to feel at home. This instruction is relevant primarily after the ger has converted and is incumbent not only on rabbinic leaders but on each individual member of the community as well.

This is a new, and welcome, task for our community. Ironically, the experience of medieval Jewish apostates is one of the resources on which we can draw to help us know how to properly and effectively incorporate newcomers into our religious community. Although they may have opted out of membership in medieval Jewish communities, their reception by their new faith community provides us with the tools to rise to the challenge of our own vastly different circumstances. While some of what emerges from their experience is fairly readily apparent, other aspects of what we can learn are not.

We are all aware of the prohibition of Ona'at haGer, which includes reminding the convert of his or her origins. We are less sensitive, though, to the reality that asking a convert to share her or his "story," whether publicly or privately, impedes integration and singles the convert out as a "ger." Such requests come with the best of intentions; it's not only fascinating to hear about someone who has freely chosen to be part of our community, but it's also deeply reinforcing of our own identity as Jews. It's no wonder that many converts find themselves asked to share their conversion narrative with Jewish audiences, especially

adolescents. As a community we are deeply concerned about attrition among “emerging adults.” Facilitating young people’s encounter with those who have chosen the life into which their audience was born seems like a wonderful educational opportunity. Desire to hear converts’ stories is not limited to young audiences. One major Jewish organization devoted an entire issue of its periodical to the stories of converts; now there’s a YouTube channel (“Kiruv Media”) that posts videos of converts sharing their narratives. Yet the experience of pre-modern converts suggests that asking converts to share their stories for the benefit of their new faith community affects converts in ways that are ambiguous at best.

The early modern German converts studied by Prof. Elisheva Carlebach found themselves as instructors of Hebrew, teaching rabbinic biblical interpretation to Christians, or authoring quasi-“ethnographic” depictions of Jewish life for interested Christian audiences. Each of these roles advanced important theological or spiritual goals within their new Christian communities. Yet limiting converts to new identities as Christians that demanded continual reference to their status as converts impeded their ability to fully integrate into Christian communities and ensured that they remained, like the title of Carlebach’s work, divided souls. [11]

The lesson for our own situation is clear: While we should not prevent converts who want to share their stories from doing so, we must avoid putting converts in the position of feeling impelled to share their experiences of conversion, no matter how inspiring these may be. Creating a context in which converts to Judaism find a place in our community only as motivational speakers or as “professional” converts is inimical to the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer even when received with great enthusiasm.

We should also be sensitive to the pitfalls of creating a “convert ghetto” or a contemporary “domus conversorum.” Needless to say, no one has suggested that we should establish a “merkaz kelitah” for converts. The contemporary reality is more complicated and the risk more subtle. As individual communities develop a reputation for being particularly embracing of converts, they naturally attract an influx of gerim and prospective gerim. We should be attuned to the perils of creating a community with a distinctively “convert” character. Paradoxically, as in the case of the medieval domus conversorum, the efforts of those most concerned with and committed to meeting the needs of gerim can potentially impede the communal integration of converts that represents the optimal fulfillment of the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer.

In addition to offering guidance about what not to do, the experiences of pre-modern Jewish converts also afford us insight into what we ought to do to help converts feel less like strangers and more at home. As we've seen, these converts mostly failed to integrate into their new communities; some even returned to their Jewish former communities in the wake of this unsuccessful integration. But there were some converts who joined religious communities (like monasteries or convents), who were adopted into Christian families or who married Christian young men and then left no further imprint in the historical record. While this invisibility is frustrating for the historian, it also suggests that the convert became effectively incorporated into her or his new community in a way that did not flag her or him as a former Jew or as a convert.

As things stand in our community, rabbis are charged with the responsibility of serving both as gatekeepers and as ushers into our community. The intensive rabbinic relationship with a prospective convert frequently culminates with the candidate's conversion to Judaism. Yet as we have seen, much of the challenge confronting converts revolves around what happens in the days, months, and years after the technical or ritual aspects of conversion have been completed. In thinking about how to help converts become part of our community we ought to consider how we might emulate the approaches that achieved successful integration.

The mitzvah of Ahavat haGer is predicated on the assumption that the sense of being a "stranger" persists after conversion, not during the process of becoming a Jew. This mitzvah, like all other mitzvoth, is incumbent not just on rabbis, but on all of us. As is often the case, though, that which is "everyone's" responsibility can become "no one's" responsibility. The instances of successful integration experienced by medieval Jewish converts suggest that becoming part of a family—either a monastic family or a nuclear, and by extension, extended family—enables the neophyte member to become genuinely part of the community. Re-imagining the process of conversion to include not just rabbinic guidance and oversight but also integration into a family that is willing and eager to "adopt" a new member can lessen the experience of being a stranger and foster the development of actual "belonging."

Rabbinic thinking about conversion construes the convert as being born anew: Ger sheNitgayer keKatan sheNolad dami (B.Yebamot 97b). This is not merely a homiletic observation but a legal statement with practical implications. Of course, newborns cannot survive in the absence of family or surrogate family; newly-born adult Jews have a hard time doing so as well. The lessons of medieval Jewish

apostates suggest effective integration of the convert necessitates carefully matching prospective converts with appropriate families who can serve as “surrogate” families, “adoptive” families, or even “God-families” who will think of the ger as “ours.” This can enable the convert to feel like a “ben/bat bayit”—that is, at home, becoming embedded not only within an individual family but within that family’s broader web or network of relationships within the community. This is a relationship with a person in the process of becoming Jewish that should be entered into with the assumption that it will continue more or less indefinitely, rather than terminating once the process of conversion has been completed. Parenthetically, fostering the development of close relationships with members of the community in addition to the relationship with the rabbi supervising the conversion builds in a safeguard against rabbinic abuse during the process, but that’s not the primary objective here.

Halakhic commentators discuss the extent and duration of the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer. Among the possibilities they entertain are that it is limited to the convert him or herself; that it extends until the tenth generation (!); that it persists until the descendent of the convert has one parent who is a native born Jew; or that it applies only as long as the convert and his/her descendents are known as “converts.”[12] While the range here is astounding, these possibilities all point in the same direction: The mitzvah of Ahavat haGer responds to the unique vulnerability of the convert; once the convert and/or his descendants are fully incorporated into their new community, either by no longer being “known” as a convert or by having one native-born parent and the network of relationships that being born into a Jewish family entails the mitzvah is no longer applicable. Optimal performance of the mitzvah of Ahavat haGer entails helping the convert move from the uniquely vulnerable category of the “stranger” in need of special protection to the more general category of veAhavta leReakha kamokha, that is, to being fully immersed within the community indistinguishable from other communal members.

Becoming a member of a new religious community is an indelible aspect of individual experience. Integration into a new community, no matter how effective or embracing cannot efface that significant aspect of individual experience, nor should it seek to do so. What communities can and, according to the Torah, must do is help the convert feel less like a stranger. The Torah exhorts us to love the stranger “ki gerim heyitem beEretz Mitzrayim,” “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deut. 10:19).” We are enjoined to learn from our mostly negative historical experience in the land of Egypt that treatment of the ger is critically important. In this same spirit, I suggest that we can learn how—and how not—to

relate to converts in our community from our own historical experience as converts, (or apostates) in pre-modern Europe. Although they may have opted out of Jewish communal membership, their reception (or lack thereof) by their new faith community provides us with the tools to rise to the challenge of our own vastly different circumstances. Their experience heightens our awareness of the two aspects of becoming part of a new religious community. In the words of Megillat Rut, the convert seeks both “amekh ami—your people is my people” and “Elokayikh Elokai—your God is my God.” While our current approach to conversion is focused on the second of these, academic study of medieval Jewish apostates reveals both the importance of the first and provides guidance about how to help bring about the aspiration of “amekh ami.”

[1] See Minhat Hinukh 63 and 431.
[2] See Rambam, MT Hilkhot Deot 6:4.
[3] See the letters collected in Solomon Grayzel, The Popes and the Jews in the Thirteenth Century, New York: Hermon Press (1966).
[4] See Mary Minty, “Responses to Medieval Ashkenazi Martyrdom (Kiddush ha-Shem) in late Medieval German Christian Sources,” Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung 4 (1995): 13–38.
[5] A Monk’s Confession: The Autobiography of Guibert of Nogent, ed. and trans. Paul Archambault, University Park, PA: Penn State University Press (1995).
[6] On the London Domus, see Robert Stacey, “The Conversion of Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth Century England,” Speculum 67 (1992): 263–283.
[7] See Todd Endelman, Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (2015), “Introduction,” pp. 1–16.
[8] Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, New York: Doubleday (1967), pp. 50–51.
[9] For a discussion of the complexity of the experience of first generation conversos see Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Converso Dualities in the First Generation: The Cancioneros,” Jewish Social Studies 4 (1998): 1–28.
[10] The religious identity of conversos, and especially the degree to which crypto-judaizing was a significant or dominant factor in that experience, has been contested. See the discussions of B. Netanyahu, The Marranos of Spain: From the Late 14th to the Early 16th Century According to Contemporary Hebrew Sources, third edition, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press (1999) and The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain, New York: Random House (1995); Renee Levine Melammed, Heretics or Daughters of Israel: The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castile, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press (1999); and Henry Kamen, The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision fourth edition, New

Haven and London: Yale University Press (2014).
[11] Elisheva Carlebach, Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750, New Haven: Yale University Press (2001).
[12] See Minhat Hinukh 431; Pri Megadim to Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim 156.