

An Inclusive, Compassionate View on Conversion to Judaism

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One of the great rabbinic sages of the 20th century was Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel (1880-1953). A profound scholar from a distinguished Sephardic rabbinical family, Rabbi Uziel served as Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi from 1938 until his death in 1953.

He was a prolific author, having published many volumes of rabbinic responsa (*Mishpetei Uziel*), as well as studies in Jewish law and literature, rabbinic homiletics, and issues relating to contemporary Jewish life.

One of Rabbi Uziel's areas of concern was the issue of conversion of non-Jews to Judaism. Since this issue continues to be a source of controversy in the Jewish community, it is important that we be aware of the intellectually sound, compassionate and inclusive views of Rabbi Uziel.

In 1943, Rabbi Uziel responded to a question from Rabbi Raphael Hayyim Saban, Chief Rabbi of Istanbul. (*Mishpetei Uziel* 5724, no. 18). Rabbi Saban inquired about the permissibility of conversion of a non-Jew whose primary intention for conversion was to marry a Jewish spouse. Rabbi Uziel noted that in the ideal case, a would-be convert should indeed be motivated by purely religious aspirations. Yet, we do not live in an ideal world. Intermarriage is a reality, and such marriages are recorded in civil courts. If we did not convert the non-Jewish spouse, then children from intermarriages would be lost to the Jewish people, and the Jewish partner in an intermarriage would be guilty of the sin of intermarriage. Rabbi Uziel ruled that if we are faced with a *de facto* mixed marriage, we are

permitted to convert the non-Jewish spouse and, when applicable, the children. If this is true when the couple is already married, it is obviously true before they have begun a forbidden marriage relationship.

Rabbi Uziel argued that the rabbinic courts should not take the haughty position that it need not help such couples. On the contrary, he stated that not only may the rabbinic courts do such conversions, but they were morally obligated to do so in order to prevent intermarriage, and in order to ensure that children born from such unions will be raised as Jews.

In 1951, Rabbi Uziel wrote a responsum to Rabbi Yehudah Leon Calfon of Tetuan (Mishpetei Uziel 5724, no. 20) in which he argued that rabbinic courts should convert even those who did not intend to be fully observant of Jewish law and custom. Our responsibility is to inform would-be converts of the obligations of the Jewish religion; but there is no requirement that the converts promise to observe all the details of Judaism. A person may be accepted for conversion, even initially, even if he/she gives no indication that he/she will observe all the mitzvot. "From all that has been stated and discussed, the ruling follows that it is permissible and a mitzvah to accept male and female converts even if it is known to us that they will not observe all the mitzvot; because in the end, they will come to fulfill them. We are commanded to make this kind of opening for them. And if they do not fulfill the mitzvot, they will bear their own iniquities and we are innocent."

Rabbi Uziel's attitude is reflected in another of his responsa (Mishpetei Uziel, 5698, no. 26): "It is incumbent upon us to open the door of repentance; our sages of blessed memory did much for the benefit of those who would repent....I admit without embarrassment that my heart is filled with trembling for every Jewish soul that is assimilated among the non-Jews. I feel in myself a duty and mitzvah to open a door to repentance and to save [Jews] from assimilation by invoking arguments for leniency. This is the way of Torah, in my humble opinion, and this is what I saw and received from my parents and teachers."

If you would like to know more about the life and teachings of Rabbi Uziel, including an elaboration on his views on conversion, please go to our online store where you can order a copy of Rabbi Marc Angel's book, "Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel."