

The Rabbi as Gatekeeper

BY ROBERT TABAK

Conversions pose a unique challenge for a Reconstructionist rabbi. He or she must prepare, preside, or decline to lead. Unlike questions of synagogue policy, or changes in liturgy, which may well involve a decision shared with the community, in conversions, the rabbi has to decide. This authority flows from the rabbi's leadership role, from the fact that the rabbi represents the Jewish people and tradition, and from the need for confidentiality, which is in tension with the ideal of communal decision-making in key areas.

While most conversions are non-controversial, some involve key issues of boundaries in Judaism. As a congregational rabbi for more than a dozen years, I was guided by the principle that "there is no mitzvah to convert," derived from the tradition of sending potential converts away three times to see if they are sincere.¹ When people approached me about conversion (especially those with no personal ties to the Jewish community), I had an initial conversation and found out what they knew about Judaism. I explained that conversion was a lengthy process, and that from a Jewish perspective it was not necessary to

be Jewish to be a good person or achieve some sort of "salvation." I suggested several books and asked them to call me when they had read something. If they did some reading and called back, we had the basis for a more serious conversation. If they did not call back, it indicated that they were not ready for a lengthy period of study and new experiences within the Jewish community.²

If most conversions involve a standard set of issues—gaining factual knowledge, building Jewish experiences, spiritual understanding, and an awareness of individual and family concerns—some involve far more. As will be seen in examples drawn from my experience and those of colleagues, the rabbi often has a key role. Most of these examples required a prompt answer, not a study commission. These cases illustrate the importance of boundaries, and the role in which rabbis sometimes find themselves as the Jewish people's gatekeeper.

"Rabbi, We Want Our Baby to Have a Bris—and a Baptism"

Stan and Gloria were members of my congregation. Stan was Jewish, from a very active family. His father had

Rabbi Robert P. Tabak is Assistant Director, Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia. The views expressed here are the author's personal views.

been a congregational officer; his sister chaired the synagogue education committee. Gloria was Catholic, and often attended services, holiday programs, and synagogue social activities. However, she had not given up her own faith.

They were expecting their first child, and had spoken to me about a bris/naming ceremony. After the birth of their son, I visited Gloria in the hospital, had a brief discussion, and we set a time a few days later to plan the ceremony. Stan and Gloria had a time conflict, and we ended up only able to meet the night before the circumcision. I discussed the meaning of the *berit* as a sign of Jewish identity, some of the readings, and the fact that since Gloria was not Jewish we would be doing the *berit leshem gerut* (for the sake of conversion). Stan would sign a brief pledge to raise his son as a Jew³ and complete the conversion process by taking him to the *mikvah* when he was older.⁴

Gloria suddenly burst out, "Rabbi, we want our baby to have a bris and a baptism, too." I was flabbergasted. I tried to explain that *berit milah* was an act of identity and affirmation. They wanted to expose the baby to both faiths. Gloria asked whether it would make any difference if the baptism was before or after the bris. I assured her that timing was not the issue. "You can not have a bris one day and a baptism the next." I did not know how I could participate under such circumstances. We parted with all three of us almost in tears.

I spoke to the local doctor who acted as *mohel*. He would follow my

lead. I had three options: a) show up and perform the ceremony, knowing it lacked integrity; b) neither the *mohel* nor I would attend the scheduled bris and it would be canceled; c) we could attend, but not hold any Jewish ceremony.

Officiating was impossible for me, because my role as rabbi would not be sincere in welcoming this child to the people of Abraham. Not showing up at all offered the greatest integrity, and avoided setting a precedent in the community with which I or my successors might later have to deal. But it was too late to call all the guests and cancel. They would show up and have to be turned away. Attending without officiating allowed for ambiguity. Friends would gather to celebrate. I would be physically present to offer support to a congregant. The doctor would perform a medical circumcision in a side room. There would be no prayers, no speeches, no Hebrew name. On the one hand, this would avoid the sin of *malbin panim berabim*, of embarrassing the family publicly. On the other hand, there was the principle of avoiding *ma'arit ayin*, the public impression of accepting or performing a sin, even if one did not occur. Would people mistakenly think later on that this rabbi accepted the idea that one could have both a *berit* and a baptism?

I chose to be present but silent among the dozens attending a non-*berit* medical circumcision and social gathering. To some degree, my strategy failed. Not a single guest asked me or the doctor why there were no

prayers, no explanation of the Hebrew name. Perhaps they assumed it had all taken place privately. In retrospect, I saw that the key perception was my presence (and that of the doctor/*mohel*) as communal representative, as rabbi. The gatekeeper's presence overshadowed the question of liturgy, or its complete absence. I hope that my difficult decision to attend kept doors open for Stan and Gloria's family and preserved some of their dignity. I felt, however, as if I had lessened my own integrity, and possibly that of the Jewish community. I am not certain that I made the correct decision, or would make the same choice today.⁵

The Isolated Convert

It is an important principle of Judaism that Jews are religious in community, not solely as individuals. An episode of TV's "Northern Exposure" on this theme featured a futile search for a minyan in the fictional Alaskan town. Should a rabbi perform a conversion for someone who lives in a town with no other Jews, no synagogue, no role models?

Janice was a teacher who lived in an isolated town in Oregon, with no Jewish community. She had read widely about religion and Judaism and had visited Israel. My community, 200 miles away, was the closest one with a rabbi. I provided her with reading material, met with her on several visits to my city, arranged for home hospitality.

Should I accept her as a candidate for conversion, as she wished? I decided I could help her study, but I could

not sponsor a conversion for someone who could not have ongoing ties with a real Jewish community. Judaism encompasses God, Torah, and Israel. Janice could accept God, and learn about Torah, but Israel is both a real and a spiritual community. I did not feel that I could help "create" a Jew whose ties to other Jews would be limited to a few weekend visits a year.

One of my colleagues faced with a similar situation made a different decision. Sharon was from a small town in Washington state, 150 miles from the nearest synagogue. He told her that he could only convert her if she would move to Seattle for at least six months, take an active part in the ongoing life of the congregation, and study. He thought this would dissuade her. Instead, she arranged for childcare, rented an apartment, and lived in the city for six months. She studied and experienced Judaism for half a year, completed her conversion, and returned to her isolated town. On a visit she made to my congregation shortly thereafter, we welcomed Sharon with an *aliyah* to the Torah.

"Rabbi, Don't Convert My Wife," or, Helped by *Halakhah*

Lauren was a single woman in her twenties who had a longstanding interest in Judaism. She studied as part of my basic Judaism class. We had a target date for her conversion to take place in February. I noted that Lauren was sometimes sitting with Barak, an Israeli college student, at a service or an event. In December, Lauren quietly told me that she and

Barak had just gotten married in a civil ceremony, and that they could have a religious ceremony later. Their marriage, she explained, would help Barak get his "green card" for immigration purposes sooner.

A few months later, I was sitting with two laypeople from the congregation in the synagogue library as part of a *bet din* for conversion. (This generally occurs when there are no other rabbis in a community.) Lauren had completed her studies, shared in the holidays, and made a trip of 350 miles each way to the closest *mikvah* that welcomed converts. We were meeting with Lauren after talking to several other candidates. This was not a "test," but an opportunity to let the candidates say something about what had attracted them to Judaism and what else they thought they needed to learn. In the middle of our short meeting, there was a knock on the door. It was Barak. I stepped out in the hall, and he said, "Rabbi, don't convert her. She's not worthy! I'm not that religious, but I know what being Jewish means and Lauren is not sincere." With that, Barak left the building.

I was upset when I went back into the library. I asked Lauren to step out and my two congregants and I discussed the situation. Lauren was waiting for the ceremony marking the completion of her years of interest and study. She did not know precisely what Barak had said. I did not have the time to research the matter deeply. To send her home would itself have been painful. It explained that two halakhic principles were

involved: the judge/s must decide on the basis of evidence (not on conjecture or rumor); and the evidence of a relative or someone with a prejudicial interest, someone *noge'a badavar*, must be disregarded.⁶ Using this framework, we decided that Lauren herself was sincere and committed, and that Barak's comments should be dismissed. Lauren re-entered and we completed our conversation. A few minutes later, Lauren stood before the ark in the chapel, joyfully accepting Judaism and her Hebrew name of Leah.

Of course, one need not be Ann Landers to see that this marriage was in trouble. We never got around to the Jewish wedding ceremony. A few months later, Barak, green card in hand, suddenly left Lauren and our community with no forwarding address. His charge against Lauren's insincerity seems, in retrospect, to have been a projection of his own.

This was a case where a *bet din* actually had to make a decision. The rabbi guided the decision, and used halakhic categories to assess a human being and her readiness to embrace Judaism. The members served as sounding boards and co-participants. The rabbi had prepared the candidate, knew her best, and could put this sudden request in a both a personal and halakhic framework. A consensus was reached, but had there been a conflict, the rabbi had a negative veto. The conversion could proceed (at another date) with other laypeople if necessary. It could not proceed, however, without a rabbi.

“How Can You Tell Me to Live as a Jew?”

Bill had an abiding interest in religion. He had begun a serious study of Judaism several years ago, and would often join his wife Helene and their two children as a member of our congregation. Bill had almost completed his Jewish studies, and was looking forward to his conversion ceremony. Suddenly, his marriage was coming apart. Bill told me he was having an affair with Karen, a single, non-Jewish friend of the family. He told me that he still loved Helene, but loved Karen too. Bill wanted to put his life back together. He wanted to convert immediately. He wanted to be spiritually whole, to be renewed.

In our conversation, I began to fathom that what Bill wanted was a simultaneous relationship with both women. I asked him if what he wanted was to be like the biblical Jacob, married to both Rachel and Leah. He struggled to say no—but it wasn't clear he meant it. It was clear that what he desperately wanted was the conversion ceremony—immediately, if possible. I referred Bill for counseling.

Did what Bill believe and intend to practice make a difference in whether I converted him? He clearly had left behind the faith of his birth. While what he wanted seemed a fantasy, what if he could work out an “arrangement” with both Helene and Karen? What if, after all his study, he were working out a definition of Judaism quite at variance with my own, or that of my congregation? As a liberal rabbi, did I not encourage thoughtful deci-

sion-making and an awareness of many Jewish possibilities?

Were I an Orthodox Jew, it would be clear that a convert would have to be committed to the entire traditional *mitzvah* system.⁷ As a liberal rabbi, I expect some serious level of ritual practice, some wrestling with *kashrut* and Shabbat, but I do not expect complete traditional observance. But moral obligation is central in my definition of Judaism. Bill's behavior made me reluctant to go through with his conversion.

Guidance from the Talmud

In this difficult process, I found guidance in several stories about Hillel in the Talmud (*B. Shabbat 31a*). In addition to the famous story about the gentile who asks to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, this page contains two other illuminating stories about Hillel and converts. In the first, a gentile comes to Shammai and asks how many Torahs Jews have. Shammai, in good rabbinic fashion, answers two (the written and the oral). The gentile asks to convert on condition that he accept only the written Torah, the Bible. Shammai drives him away. He then goes to Hillel, who converts him, and begins his lessons teaching him the *alef-bet*. This letter is an *alef*, *bet*, *gimel*. The next day the man returns for his second lesson. Hillel points to the same letters and says this is a *shin*, this, a *tav*, this, a *resh*. The convert is perplexed. “My teacher, yesterday it was completely different.” Hillel said, “If you are dependent on your teacher for even

the letters, how much more so for the interpretation of Torah.”

The second talmudic story concerns a gentile who, passing by the house of study, hears a description of the elaborate clothing and headgear of the high priest. Hearing the description, he thinks, “I want an outfit like that.” He goes to Hillel, and asks to be converted on the condition that he become the high priest. Hillel accepts him, and sends him to study. The new convert learns a law saying a “stranger” cannot approach the altar. He asks who that is, and is informed that even King David is not qualified to be high priest. It dawns on him that he too cannot be high priest, a position limited to the hereditary class of *kohanim*. By this time, however, he loves Judaism and thanks Hillel for bringing him in.

The insight I derived from these tales and their legal offshoots⁴ is that we may not convert someone who has a completely idiosyncratic definition of Judaism—for example, someone who only accepted the Hebrew Bible, but none of the rabbinic developments of the last two millennia, or one who was fascinated by the dream of a restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem.

I restudied the *takanah* of Rabbenu Gershom, a decree from around 1000 c.e. that codified the practice of Ashkenazic Jewry that a man can have only one wife. For almost a thousand years, this decree has been universally accepted by Ashkenazic Jews. I reached the decision that I could not convert a person to become a Karaite

or a biblical Jew or a Yemenite Jew of 1947 (some maintained their pre-existing polygamous relationships after they emigrated to Israel). I could only convert someone to be a twentieth-century American Jew. Until he worked out other important issues, I put Bill’s conversion on hold.

From these examples we can learn several things. The liminal or transitional experiences of life, including adopting a new religious identity, can produce a number of stresses. Even in liberal and participatory communities, the rabbi plays a key role as teacher and guide. The rabbi has the responsibility to serve as gatekeeper and the authority, particularly in marginal cases, to serve as the representative of Jewish tradition and peoplehood. Finally, the halakhic norms and aggadic insights of our tradition can be of significant value in making decisions, particularly on such a troubling question as to whether or not we should validate a particular person’s request to join *Am Yisrael* by coming “under the wings of the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence).”

1. Statement of Rabbi Sol Cohen, my teacher at RRC. The *mitzvah* of warmly receiving the person who has converted (see RRA Guidelines on Conversion, 1979) does not presuppose for traditional, and, I would argue, for liberal Jews, that we should seek out or even accept every person who might conceivably consider converting to Judaism. Basic talmudic laws on this subject are summarized in tractate *Gerim* (Hebrew and English edition), *Seven Minor Treatises*, ed. Michael Higger (New York, 1930).

2. The acceptance of converts in Jewish tradition has engendered a range of responses “from extreme opposition to the highest rev-

erence." For a summary, see Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York, 1979) 440-442.

3. My teacher, Rabbi Hershel Matt, ש"י, suggested this brief pledge, including a promise to observe two or three *mitzvot bein adam lamakom* (such as attend a seder, light Hanukkah candles, and enroll the child in religious school), and two or three *mitzvot bein adam lehavero* (such as teaching the child not to steal or to treat all people equally). Perhaps we should extend this idea to cases where only the mother is Jewish as well.

4. While the Reconstructionist movement has endorsed patrilineal descent, there are many Jewish communities where this is not recognized. I agree with Rabbi Richard Hirsh's endorsement of "conversion of an infant born of a non-Jewish mother unless circumstances make such an act impossible.;" see his "Jewish Identity and Patrilineal Descent: Some Second Thoughts," *Raayonot* 4:1 (Winter 1983), 11.

5. Since that time, the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) has expressly prohibited a *berit* in cases where there is also to be a baptism.

6. For example, halakhic rulings allow one to claim that one's own conversion was improper, and to disqualify oneself, but not to disqualify one's children.

7. *Tosefta Demai* 2:4. "A convert who accepts all the words of Torah except for one word—we do not accept him. R. Yosi said in the name of R. Yehudah—even one of the interpretations of the sages." See also *B. Bekhorot* 30b. This is one of the key bases for Orthodox rejection of non-Orthodox conversions, since they assume that the ideas of "Torah" in other movements are not completely traditional.

8. In both these cases, the *halakhah* is not decided according to Hillel. In general, we may not accept one who converts for an ulterior motive, or with conditions.