

Conversion, Proselytizing, and Salvation Outside of the Faith
The Jewish Perspective
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Faiths in Conversation
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We Jews are not just a congregation of believers. Judaism is not just a religion. It is much, much more than that. It most certainly has a very specific religion that makes a myriad of demands of action and of orientation towards God and towards the world, but being a Jew is not defined by solely by matters of religion.

We Jews have our own culture and language, but it is even much more than that.

We Jews are an extended family that has grown into a people, a body politic, a nation. Who are the Jews? They are the children, the descendants of Abraham and Sara, of Isaac and Rebecca, of Jacob and his four wives – Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. If you are born into the family, specifically if you are born of a Jewish mother, you are Jewish. Then you are a citizen in our global nation. And if you are not born to a Jewish mother, then you are not Jewish.

If you want to join the family, to gain citizenship in the nation, which is what is called converting, well the option is available, but it is a long process of becoming one with us, of learning to identify with and eventually adopting all of the different aspects of our family culture and our mission, and our national heritage. It is much different and much more difficult than converting to Christianity or Islam.

From our perspective, you can be perfectly fine without joining our family and we make no effort to convince people to throw in their fate with us. We actually tend to discourage people from converting into our family. Conversion to Judaism means to remake yourself as a new person, and that is just so hard

and brings with it so many new obligations and liabilities. According to our theology, it is just not necessary: Stay in the religion and the culture that you are part of, and be the best that you can as a Christian or as a Muslim.

So much for our introduction. Now some details:

The Jewish People has no desire for Judaism to conquer the world. We have no desire to see everyone Jewish.

But we do yearn to bring blessing to the world. This is the whole reason for the existence of our nation. This harkens back to what God said to Abraham when He chose him to found this new nation:

Genesis 12:1-3 “The Lord said to Abram ... I will make of you a great nation ... And all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you”.

This concept is fleshed later on in the Torah and in the prophets:

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 “See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. Observe them faithfully; for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, “Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?”

Our religious, ethical and national system is supposed to inspire admiration among the peoples of the world, to bring

people to think about God and His wisdom, to motivate the nations to try to emulate the teachers of our Scripture.

Exodus 19:6 “And you shall be for Me a nation of priests and a holy people”

On the one hand a holy nation is a separate and unique nation, but on the other hand priests minister to and serve the other. The Jewish nation’s mission is to remain distinctive but at the same time to help the world improve itself by serving as a model of ethical monotheism.

The prophet Isaiah summed it all up with the expression ‘a light unto the nations’.

Isaiah 42:6-7 “I the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you as covenant people, a light unto the nations”.

Isaiah 49:6 “I will make you a light unto the nations that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth”

We see ourselves as a nation chosen by God to live according to a higher religious, moral and ethical standard and to thereby show the world a path towards God and proper living. These higher standards are exclusively for our family, but we believe that seeing and contemplating them from up close or from afar will uplift and enlighten the understanding and ways of life of other nations and individuals. We aim to be a model to showcase ideals to the rest of the world, to help them improve themselves. At the same time we have no aspiration that other nations or cultures or religions become absorbed into us.

Our minimal mission is to inspire the rest of the world not to be Jewish, but to accept and observe what we call the Sheva Mitzvot Bnei Noach, the Seven Noahide Commandments. Although they have many details and ramifications, they are summed up as follows:

- 1 Prohibition against idolatry
- 2 Prohibition against abusing the name of God
- 3 Prohibition against murder
- 4 Prohibition against theft
- 5 Prohibition against sexual licentiousness
- 6 Prohibition against cruelty to animals
- 7 Obligation to set up a judicial system that will implement the above

As I said, there are many details and ramifications of these seven commandments; and there is also much debate among Jewish scholars of the past and of the present as to their sub clauses and applications.

One very important disagreement concerns the first commandment:

Some read it in minimalistic fashion – It only requires one to refrain from actual idolatrous practices of bowing down and serving graven images. According to this interpretation, actual belief in God is not required and atheists would meet the minimal standard.

Others say that the negative prohibition implies a positive commandment, meaning that an actual belief in one God is required.

If a belief in God is required, some hold that that belief has to be absolutely and purely monotheistic, just as the Jewish and Muslim belief is. Others say that a basic belief in one God is required, but it need not be purely monotheistic in the most absolute sense such that a trinitarian belief system would also be acceptable.

Another controversy pertains to Jewish efforts to propagate the observance of these seven commandments. Some hold that

all we have to do is to be a model to others, while others hold that we Jews are indeed commanded to take active steps to spread the observance of these seven fundamentals.

Another very important controversy is the follows: Some but not all rabbinic authorities hold that it is not enough just to observe the Seven Commandments, but one must also acknowledge that the source of all morality is in divine revelation. One must believe that the Torah was given by God at Mount Sinai, and from it flows the obligation upon all human beings to live according to at least these seven commandments.

We Jews believe in our own version of the dual covenant theory. That is to say, we believe that God has two covenants with mankind. There is a covenant with the Jewish People and a covenant with the Gentiles. The Jewish covenant includes is organized around 613 very intricate commandments while the Gentile covenant with God is organized around 7 commandments. A Gentile who fulfills his obligations is good to go. Once a non-Jewish person takes upon himself these seven commandments and performs them with all their applications, from a Jewish perspective you are living an upright life religiously and morally, and you have thereby earned for yourself eternal life. Nothing more is demanded.

This was a matter of some rabbinic controversy about two thousands years ago, but the dispute was resolved and the ruling is unequivocal. Here is the ancient source:

Tosefta Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 13, halacha 2

Rebbi Eleazer says, None of the gentiles have a portion in the world to come, as the verse says, “The wicked shall go to hell, all the nations who have forgotten God”. ‘The wicked shall go to hell’ – these are the evil doers among the Jewish People. Rebbi Yehoshua said to him, Had the verse said, ‘The wicked shall go to hell all the nations’, and said no more, I would agree to your position. However, what the

verse says is, "... who have forgotten God". Behold, there are righteous among the nations who have a portion in the world to come.

The authoritative ruling is found among other places in Maimonides Code of Jewish Law written in the 12th century, where we find:

Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva, chapter 3, clause 5

The pious of the nations of the world have a portion in the world to come.

And the way to have "not forgotten God" the way to be among the "pious of the nations", is to keep the Seven Commandments!

Once last matter concerning Judaism's mission to the world as a nation of priests and a light unto the nations:

We see Christianity and Islam in a certain sense as Jewish success stories. With all the persecution and suffering that they have brought upon the Jewish People for generations, still, from our perspective, they have adopted from us the banner of ethical monotheism and taken upon themselves the Seven Noahide Commandments and much more. Through the agency of Jesus and Mohammed, most of the world today knows of Moses and the laws that God communicated to human beings through him!!!

On this subject I will quote a text that I quoted during our interfaith dialogue that was devoted to Jesus about two years ago:

Moses Maimonides, Mishneh Tora, Laws of Kings, chapter eleven, law 4

Jesus of Nazareth ... Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for [to paraphrase *Isaiah 55:8*] His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. [Ultimately,] all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite [i.e. Mohammed] who arose after him only serve to pave the way for the coming of the king messiah and for the improvement of the entire world, [motivating the nations] to serve G-d together, as it is written [*Zephaniah 3:9*], "I will make the peoples pure of speech so that they will all call upon the Name of G-d and serve Him with one purpose".

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with talk of the messiah, as well as of the Torah and the commandments. These matters have been spread to faraway places and among members of nations of uncircumcised hearts, who discuss these matters as well as the commandments of the Torah.

After all this comes the question of conversion. As we have emphatically stated, Jews don't engage in proselytization and we don't search for converts. But what if someone really wishes to convert?

Here is the authoritative ruling:

Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Kings*, chapter 8 law 10

Moshe Rabanu bequeathed the Torah and the commandments only to the Jewish People, as it says, "An inheritance for the congregation of Jacob", and well as to anyone of the other nations who would desire to convert ...

So the institution of conversion exists. However, for historically conditioned reasons, Judaism is very hesitant about allowing people into the conversion process. Some Jewish communities

have taken upon themselves not to do conversions at all, some do them very rarely, and others simply make it difficult in order to discourage any but the most dedicated of potential converts.

Now it must be remembered that even among those rabbinic authorities that don't demand that we make the process artificially difficult, it still is inherently an extremely demanding step. You are existentially taking upon yourself a completely new identity, you have to break in to a new family and culture, you have to learn a new language, acquire new collective memories, and immerse yourself in a whole new lifestyle and set of beliefs.

Some of the requirements are as follows:

Learn and practice the basic laws of Jewish life, including observance of the Sabbath and the laws of kashrut, all the holidays, daily blessings and prayers, etc, etc, etc. This also includes all of the laws of sexual relations. If a person is married to a non Jewish spouse, the only way to convert is to get divorced or for the spouse to convert as well.

Learn at least the rudiments of the Hebrew language and be able to pray some basic prayers in Hebrew.

Become socialized into a Jewish community and a synagogue framework

Committ yourself to raising your children Jewishly and giving them a rigorous Jewish education.

Be totally certain that this is what you want for the rest of your life.

This process usually takes between 1 and 3 years. When the overseeing rabbi feels that the candidate is ready, he or she is brought before a rabbinic court of three judges, which tests their knowledge, their observance and their sincerity. In the

presence of the court the person formally declares their acceptance of Judaism. If they are a male they must be circumcised and if they were already medically circumcised as an infant, then the court merely extracts a small drop of blood. Finally, the person is immersed in a special body of water called a mikve and upon getting out of the water, the person is Jewish. At that point they are given a new name, a Hebrew name that they chose for themselves in consultation with their rabbi.

Before closing I will mention two more points that perhaps we can develop during the discussion:

The law of the State of Israel is that any Jew from anywhere in the world that enters the country and request citizenship, is granted it automatically. This is called the Law of Return. Now since conversion makes one a Jew, conversion also automatically gives you the right to receive Israeli citizenship. Now Israel is a modern country with a flourishing economy, and there are many people around the world who would love to live in such an advanced country, a country that offers so many benefits to its citizens. And it is the only such modern country that can be reached on foot from Africa. Israel's government has to be on the lookout against immigrants with bogus conversion certificates. For this reason converts from around the world who ask for Israeli citizen have to go through quite an arduous process of proving that their conversion was legitimate.

Secondly and lastly, I cannot close without telling this audience how utterly offended Jews are by people who attempt to convert them to another religion. To us, it appears as an utter lack of respect for the integrity of Judaism and an utter misunderstanding of the historical relationship between Judaism and its two sister religions. Additionally, our collective consciousness has not forgotten that conversion attempts in

the past very often were accompanied by force, violence and threats of death.

What a way to end!!

Sources and notes:

Jochanan H. A. Wijnhoven, Convert and Conversion, Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, edited by Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, pages 101-105

Isaiah chapter 56:3-8