

## Teachings About Conversion To Judaism

Why was the Torah given to us in the wilderness? Because just as the wilderness is accessible to anyone, so is the Torah accessible to anyone.

*Tanchuma, V'yakhel*, No. 8

God says to us, "As I welcomed Jethro the Midianite in the wilderness of Sinai, so must you welcome anyone who comes to you to join your people."

*Yalkot Shim'oni, Yitro*, No. 268

The Holy Blessed One does not favor any one person over another, but receives all; the gates are always open, and anyone who wishes to enter may do so.

*Sh'mot Rabbah* 19:4

1. If someone who is not Jewish comes before us and requests to become Jewish, we must welcome them with open arms (*Mechilta* on Exodus 18:6). We must neither dissuade them nor encourage them (*Midrash Rut Rabati* 2:17), but ask them: "What did you see to make such a choice? Do you not know we are a people that has been brutalized and downtrodden and unpopular, and our ways are very different from the ways of the rest of the world?" We do this in order to try their conviction (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:5), for a person must convert only by personal choice, not under duress or for an ulterior motive (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:1 and 7; *Yevamot* 47a).
2. In cases where the convert is romantically involved with a Jew, distinction needs to be made between someone who is asking to convert to please his or her partner and someone who is asking to convert because it is he or she wants to do, the relationship notwithstanding. In the second instance, although the convert is romantically involved with a Jew, we accept the convert (Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 44a). However, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, even if someone requests conversion because of romantic involvement with a Jew or for any other motif of personal advantage, we must not repel the convert, but must welcome him or her openly and warmly (*Kiddushin* 36a).
3. If after the tribunal's attempt at "dissuasion" the convert says: "Even so, I am not worthy," we accept the convert without further ado and immerse him or her partially in living waters (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:3). We then share with the convert several key concepts of Judaism, a few heavy ones and a few light ones, primarily about the oneness of God, the wrongness of idolatry, and the importance of charity to the poor (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:3 and *Yevamot* 47b). But we do not overwhelm the convert with too many teachings or burden him or her with too many lessons (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b). The convert then immerses, and the tribunal welcomes him or her into the Jewish people with words of praise and encouragement (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:5).
4. If the convert is a woman, we immerse her in living waters; and if the convert a man, we circumcise him first, and then-- after he has completely healed-- immerse him in living waters. However, if there is fear of infection by doing it in this order, the order may be reversed and immersion may take place first and then circumcision (Isserles [*Rama*] on Karo's *Shulchan Aruch, Yorah De'ah* 268:1).
5. If the male convert was already circumcised prior to his conversion, according to the ruling of Shammai (first century B.C.E.), a ritual "letting of the blood" is performed with

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- a tiny incision on the penis, and, according to Hillel, no blood-letting is necessary (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 135a and *Gerim* 2:2). If he has a damaged or severed penis, the requirement of circumcision for a male convert is waived altogether, and he requires only immersion (Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Iyora De'ah* 268:1).
6. A male convert who has been immersed but not circumcised, or circumcised but not immersed, is a convert (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 46a and *Gerim* 1:6; see *Nachalat Yaakov* commentary).
  7. The tribunal of acceptance should be composed of three Jews learned in the laws of conversion (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 46b). If there were only two, the conversion is still valid (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b). After the fact, however, even a single witness is acceptable (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47a-*Tosefot* [*yesh*]).
  8. In the case of immersion for a female convert, a female tribunal observes the immersion (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b0, and a male tribunal performs the ceremony from behind a partition (Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:2). In either case, the woman enters the water until it covers her shoulders while the tribunal addresses her; and in the case of a male tribunal, the men turn away when she is done with her immersion and about to emerge (Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:2).
  9. If need be, immersion may take place in loose clothing (Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 198:46).
  10. The tribunal then repeats the question as to why the convert wants to convert. Again, the tribunal shares several teachings of the Torah that reflect the essence of Judaism, such as the belief in one God, and the Judaic ways of benevolence (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47b). Again, we do not overwhelm the convert with too many teachings. When the convert feels ready to immerse, the tribunal recites the following: "Source of blessing are You, Wellspring of the Universe. In performing Your will we bring more sanctity into the world, and it is Your will that we immerse those not of our people who wish to become as we" (Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:5). [It is customary for the convert to then proclaim the oneness of God: the Shema.]
  11. [The convert then immerses at least once. Custom is to immerse thrice: the first time as a shifting from his or her previous spiritual path as his or her primary path; the second time as creating for him or herself a neutral space, from which newness can develop; the third time as a rebirth into his or her new primary path.] The convert is then welcomed and received with joy and celebration by those present (Babylonian Talmud, *Gerim* 1:5).
  12. Someone who comes to a Jewish community and declares: "I was not converted properly"- if they have children, we say: "You can disqualify yourself, but you cannot disqualify your children." The children are then considered Jewish, but the parent must undergo immersion (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 47a).
  13. Someone who comes to a Jewish community and says: "I was once not Jewish and then I converted"- they are believed (Maimonides in *Mishnah Torah*, *Hilchot Isurei Bi'ah* 13:10; Karo's *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:10).
  14. Someone who comes to a Jewish community and declares: "I am a Jew"- they are believed (Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 3b).

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15. If someone without proof or declaration of his or her conversion is seen observing Jewish practice and living a full Jewish life, he or she is to be considered as an authentic convert to Judaism, the lack of proof or witnesses notwithstanding (*Tur, Yoreh De'ah*, No. 268; Maimonides in *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Isurei Bi'ah* 13:9; Karo's *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 268:10).
16. If someone not of the Jewish faith performs the ritual of immersion in living waters with the intent to do so for Jewish religious purposes, and there were Jewish witnesses to the fact, then, if he or she decides to convert, that immersion can be considered retroactively as immersion for the sake of conversion and the conversion is valid, even though the immersion was not performed with the intent to convert (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 45b; *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 268:3).
17. A minor may be converted by a tribunal (Babylonian Talmud, *Ketuvot* 11a) at the request of the minor (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 268:7) or along with the conversion of the child's parents. However, once the child reaches an age of maturity of reason and independent choicemaking- on the average, around what would be the bat or bar mitzvah period (twelve for a girl and thirteen for a boy [Babylonian Talmud, *Kidushin* 16b])- the child must be asked by a tribunal whether he or she still wishes to remain Jewish. If the answer is no, the conversion is void retroactively (Babylonian Talmud, *Ketuvot* 11a). This procedure is not necessary if the child lives a fully active Jewish life (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 268:8).
18. If a woman converts while she is pregnant, the child is automatically Jewish (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 78a).
19. If someone converts before a tribunal of Jews who are not qualified to perform conversion, after the fact, the conversion is still valid. The same applies to someone who was not questioned about his or her convictions or motives by the tribunal and it turns out that the convert converted for ulterior motives, or to someone who was not taught the essentials of Judaism (*Tur, Yoreh De'ah*, No. 268, and Maimonides in *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Isurei Bi'ah* 13:17).

Winkler, Gershon. "Appendix: Ancient and Medieval Teachings about Conversion to Judaism." *The Way of the Boundary Crosser: An Introduction to Jewish Flexodoxy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 214-19. Print.