

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Welcoming Converts



Context

Since the early rabbinic period, Judaism has had a formal process by which those who are not Jewish are able to become so - conversion. While the core elements of this process have remained the same for nearly 2000 years, the attitude to those who might wish to join has varied significantly over time, with periods of active encouragement, reluctant welcome, and even the placing of obstacles. Where do we, as Reform Jews today, stand in relation to those who wish to join the Jewish people?

*In this essay, **Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain of Maidenhead Synagogue**, places our attitude to welcoming converts in the context of a survey of the history of Jewish proselytising. He emphasises both the distinctive nature of our approach and its historical precedents.*

Content

Conversion is an issue on which Jewish thinking has made a total volte-face over the centuries, initially being very pro-active, then becoming totally opposed to it, and recently becoming more accommodating. Reform Judaism has played a major role in this latest change in attitude.

In its earliest form, Judaism was an avowedly missionary faith, convinced of its superiority over the surrounding pagan faiths. It started with Abraham and the reference - in the very first chapter in which he appears - to the souls that he *had gotten in Haran* (Genesis 12:5). Even if that could have been seen, instead, as a reference to the servants he had acquired, the fact that later Jewish tradition chose to view it as converts indicates its mind-set and the assumptions that it held.

This was reinforced by an underlying religious vision which saw the Jews as *light to the nations* (Isaiah 42:6) and which envisaged many nations flocking to the mountain of God (ibid 2:2). The declaration of Ruth *Your people shall be my people, and your God my God* (Ruth 1:16) became the rallying cry of subsequent converts. There could be no higher signal of the honoured position of those who joined the Jewish people than the fact that David was her direct descendant and that from her stemmed both the most successful king and the messianic line.

It was little wonder that Matthew complained that the Pharisees, one of the main Jewish sects of the first century and subsequent leaders of Judaism thereafter, were so imbued with a missionary spirit that they would *traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte* (Matthew 23:15). It reflected how Judaism and Christianity vied with each other for the interest of the growing numbers in the Hellenized world for whom the ancient gods had lost their appeal.

However, with the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity around 313, the Church changed from a minority sect to the official religion of the most powerful empire in the world. This led to a series of edicts punishing those who oversaw the conversion of a Christian to Judaism. Missionary activity became dangerous not only for the individuals concerned, but also for the Jewish community at large, resulting in fines and arrests. The same situation was to occur later in Islamic countries, where converting a Muslim was banned under pain of death. There was often also a major social divide between Jews and the surrounding population, which meant any non-Jew changing faith not only risked the charge of heresy but would be totally alienated from their family and the rest of society. Thus it was external circumstances, rather than internal developments, which caused a major revision to the sense of Jewish mission.

The effect of this enforced brake quickly led to a change of attitude within the Jewish community, initially seeing attempts to convert others as unsafe, and then as undesirable, and ultimately as un-Jewish. It was also underpinned by the notion that Christianity and Islam were forms of monotheism, and so, unlike the pagans in biblical times, did not need to be converted. By the time of the Babylonian Talmud, the teaching of the first/second century sage, Joshua ben Hananiah - *the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come* (Sanhedrin 13.2) - had become the standard Jewish view. While Judaism was still seen as the faith chosen to first reveal God's existence to the world, there was no insistence that only Jews were assured of divine favour. It meant that there was no longer any motivation for conversion and it virtually disappeared from the Jewish lexicon.

It is only in the last century that a more positive approach has been slowly emerging, spear-headed by Reform Judaism. Whilst there has been no return to actively seeking converts, those who enquire of their own accord are often accepted.

It is not just that the political constraints and social barriers of former centuries have long ceased, but it stems from a positive desire within our Judaism to offer conversion. This is partly due to a return to the more welcoming approach of earlier times, as well as a desire to re-establish the universalist role of Judaism. Conversion is also regarded as one response to the rise in mixed-marriages: by bringing the non-Jewish partner into the Jewish fold, it effectively turns a mixed-faith marriage into a Jewish one. In addition, there are many instances of those who have no family connections to Judaism who wish to adopt it and who are accepted.

The actual procedure involves a mix of sincerity, participation and knowledge. This usually takes the form of attending synagogue, undertaking a course of study and being involved in Jewish life. The object is not to turn applicants into scholars or saints, but to give them the basic background, so that they understand the commitment to Judaism they are making, feel at ease within the Jewish community and are able to practice Jewish home life. It also involves the rituals of circumcision for males and mikveh (immersion in a pool of water) for both males and females. At the end of the process, the person appears before the Beit Din (rabbinic court) at which they present themselves and, following an interview with the panel of three rabbis, are formally accepted into the Jewish faith.

Being a movement which encompasses communities with diverse practice, there are variations in procedure from one Reform synagogue to another. This can include the length of the study course, and whether or not the rabbi is happy to accept applicants onto it immediately or asks for a period of reflection before embarking on the religious journey. However, what is uniformly recognised is the beneficial effect of converts, whether it be their communal involvement or their impact on the families of which they are part. Whereas Orthodox synagogues today still tend to discourage applicants - or demand conditions that are very difficult to meet - Reform rabbis are delighted to open the doors of Judaism to those who wish to enter.

Contemplation

Rabbi Romain's theme in this article is that Reform Judaism has made a profound impact on world Jewry in our attitude to those who want to join the Jewish people. The reluctance to engage with potential proselytes that characterised the Middle Ages was rejected by the early Reformers, with their ethos of inclusion, and their self-confidence about Judaism's universal message. It is certainly the case that suspicion of converts can still be experienced in other parts of the Jewish community, which also place greater emphasis on considerations of ethnicity. But this is not the norm in Reform synagogues.

This being the case, how do we ensure that our communities continue to be exemplars of inclusivity to those who wish to join us? What do we do to communicate these values, and to actively welcome those who want to convert?