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CCAR RESPONSA

Atheists, Agnostics and Conversion To Judaism

5754.15

She'elah

A prospective convert expresses a strong sense of communal and historic solidarity with the Jewish experience. She finds services fulfilling insofar as they connect her to the Jewish past. She finds Shabbat to be important for its connection to the past and its role in organizing/structuring the week for her and her family. She is, however, quite unsure about the existence of God. When asked by her rabbi, "Is there any aspect of the universe other than the material?" she responds in the negative, for she believes that physical and chemical forces are responsible for the universe as we know it. Although further reading and discussion lie ahead, our question is whether an atheist committed to Jewish practice, ethics, and study can be accepted as a convert? (Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro, Springfield, MA)

Teshuvah

The Halakhah. The traditional procedure for conversion to Judaism was established in the Talmud. A prospective proselyte is asked: "Why do you want to become a Jew? Do you not know that Jews are frequently persecuted and oppressed?" If the proselyte persists in his or her desire to become a Jew, he/she is informed of some minor and some major mitzvot and warned of the responsibilities for observing the commandments. If prospective proselytes accept the "yoke of the commandments"(kabbalat ol mitzvot), then they proceed with immersion(tevilah) and, in the case of a male, circumcision (milah).¹ What needs to be emphasized is the primacy of their acceptance of the commandments.² A declaration to this effect before a Rabbinic court of three is the decisive act of the conversion process.³ According to both Rambam and Joseph Karo, heading the list of the commandments to be taught to the prospective proselyte is the "essence of our faith." Using identical language they wrote,

Inform them of the essence of the faith, which is the uniqueness (oneness) of God and the prohibition of idolatry.⁴

Belief in the Lord as the only God and acceptance of the responsibilities of the covenant between God and the Jewish people is therefore the traditional sine qua non of conversion to Judaism. This is most clearly expressed by R. Yom Tov Lipman, who lived in the 14th and 15th centuries:

Our faith does not depend upon circumcision but upon the heart. One [i.e., a prospective proselyte] who does not believe sincerely is not considered a Jew even though he is circumcised. But one who believes sincerely is a full Jew even if he is not circumcised.⁵

Reform Perspectives. In regard to our she'elah, we note that the Responsa Committee of the CCAR answered a similar inquiry in 1982.⁶ Our colleagues concluded that while an atheist would not be accepted, an agnostic might be accepted if the local rabbis are convinced "that her attachment to Judaism and the knowledge of it are sufficient to bring her into Judaism and to help her develop a commitment to this religion."⁷ The important qualifying phrase is commitment to this religion. Reform Judaism is a religious movement, a community of faith dedicated to God. A ger must show a readiness to accept that faith in order to join our community.

Reform Judaism has long established liberal and welcoming policies toward prospective converts. The second convention of the CCAR (1891) and the third (1892) debated the requirements and rituals for conversion. Isaac Mayer Wise wrote the committee report on conversion, which concluded that it is lawful and proper to accept into the sacred covenant of Israel

any honorable and intelligent person, who desires such affiliation, without any initiatory rite, ceremony or observance whatever; provided, such person be sufficiently acquainted with the faith, doctrine and canon of Israel; . . . and that he or she declare verbally and in a document signed and sealed before such officiating rabbi and his associates his or her intention and firm resolve:

1. To worship the One, Sole and Eternal God, and none besides Him...⁸

Thus, for Reform Judaism, a prospective convert had both to embrace the Jewish people and make a solemn declaration of faith in God, the God of our ancestors, as the one and only God. While many rabbis then and now insist on certain rituals and other obligations as incumbent upon the prospective convert (e.g. immersion, circumcision, a course of study, examinations, etc.), the sine qua non of conversion for Reform Judaism, as it is for all branches of Judaism, has always been faith in God. The centrality of God in the Reform conversion ceremony is verified by examination of the succession of rabbinic manuals published by the CCAR.

The revised edition of the Rabbi's Manual required the convert to pledge:

I, _____, do herewith declare in the presence of God and the witnesses here assembled, that I, of my own free will, seek the fellowship of Israel and that I fully accept the faith of Israel. I believe that God is One, Almighty, Allwise and Most Holy. I believe that man is created in the image of God; that it is his duty to imitate the holiness of God; that he is a free-will agent, responsible to God for his actions; and that he is destined to everlasting life. I believe that Israel is God's priest-people, the world's teacher in religion and righteousness as expressed in our Bible and interpreted in the spirit of Jewish tradition⁹

It was deemed essential that the prospective convert clearly understood the importance of his or her commitment both to the Jewish people and to God.

The most recent CCAR rabbinic manual, published in 1988, maintains the tradition of questioning the prospective convert's belief in God. The first question asked is: "Do you choose to enter the eternal covenant between God and the people Israel and to become a Jew of your own free will?"¹⁰ The implication is clear. To become a Jew, Reform Judaism demands that the convert affirm belief in God and the unique bond between God and the Jewish people.¹¹

It must be emphasized that the declaration of faith does not demand that the ger /gitoret adhere to a particular God concept, but simply that he/she be able to affirm the reality of God in our religious experience. Conversion, as our movement understands it, is a religious ceremony, marking a transformation in the spiritual (as well as ethno-cultural) identity of the proselyte. We do not convert people to "secular" Judaism.

Some contend that since we find among the members of Reform congregations certain Jews who are avowed atheists or agnostics, we should not hesitate to accept a convert who falls into either category. It is true that some Jews experience crises of faith. We acknowledge the reality of the spiritual journey and struggle our brothers and sisters endure, and they remain part of us as long as they do not abandon our people or join another religion. However, that flexibility is reserved for those who are already "citizens," who already belong. It is the nature of the conversion process that the convert must meet standards which, in practice, are not demanded of the already-Jewish: a program of Jewish study, required synagogue attendance, participation in synagogue and communal activities, and the like.

The rabbi's task is to determine the convert's religious sincerity—again, a test not administered to those currently with the fold. It is a basic principle of Reform (as it is of the halakhah) that the ultimate determination of a convert's admissibility depends on rabbinic judgment, based on a personal knowledge of the candidate. One born a Jew is by definition a member of our people, but to be counted among them, a ger must first demonstrate not only a willingness to identify with us, but also an understanding and acceptance of the role of God in the continuing experience of our people.

In our case, the prospective convert demonstrates a love of the Jewish people and culture which seems to make her an attractive candidate for conversion. The problem is her ambivalence about God. It is unclear why she is classified as an agnostic and not an atheist. Atheists flatly deny the existence of God. Agnostics, by definition, maintain that anything beyond and behind the material phenomenon is simply unknowable.¹² Our she'elah records two of the prospective convert's opinions. She states that there is no aspect of the universe other than the material, and she maintains that "coincidence and chemistry are responsible for the universe as we see it." Her first statement is clearly atheistic. Her second could be construed as agnostic.

Consequently, if, in the opinion of the attending rabbis, she is an atheist, then the position of the Responsa Committee is well known. She is not to be accepted.¹³ However, if she is, as an agnostic, simply unsure or confused, then she should be carefully instructed and introduced to the diverse theological teachings that enrich our faith. Let her be taught that we are not so arrogant as to claim to know all about God, but neither is our faith so unsure that we can fathom life without God.

Ultimately, it is imperative that the officiating rabbis are convinced that this woman can utter with clear conscience the affirmation demanded by our movement that God exists and that the Jewish people are bound to God by a sacred and eternal covenant. If the attending rabbis do not believe that she can utter such an affirmation with a full heart, then she should be given more time for study and reflection so that she will come to understand the religious significance of becoming a member of the Jewish people.

It is clear that we as Reform Jews, and particularly we as Reform rabbis, have the responsibility to establish and maintain the standards that define our movement and render applicants eligible for inclusion. This principle was recently illustrated by the case of a secular-humanist congregation which desired to join the Reform Movement. The Responsa Committee was asked whether or not a congregation that excluded God from its services could be admitted to membership in the UAHC.¹⁴ The Committee's answer was no, and after several years of discussion, this decision was supported by an overwhelming majority of the Union's Board of Trustees.¹⁵

Reform Judaism is a religious movement of Jews dedicated to the covenant between God and the Jewish people. If we do

not insist that the ger meet this fundamental standard and find herself ready to affirm the reality of God in Jewish religious life and experience, it would be a legitimate question whether we have any standards at all.

Notes

BT, Yevamot 47a-b; SA, YD 268:3. Mark Washofsky, "Halakhah and Ulterior Motives," Conversion To Judaism in Jewish Law, edited by Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, Pittsburgh, 1994, page 37, note #1. Tosafot to BT, Yevamot 45b, s.v. mee lo tavlach. Rambam, Yad Hilkhoh, Isurei Bi'ah, 14:2; Karo, SA, YD, 268:2. Also see, Maggid Mishneh, s.v. keitzad mekabbelin.. Sefer Nitzachon:, cited by Solomon B. Freehof, "Circumcision of Proselytes," Reform Responsa for Our Time, p.75. American Reform Responsa (1983), #65, pp. 209-211. Ibid. pp. 211. Yearbook, Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention, CCAR, 1892, pp. 94-95. Rabbi's Manual, rev. ed. (1936), pp. 31-32. Pp. 201-202. The candidate may choose to make his/her own clear affirmation of God and covenant. Oxford English Dictionary, London, 1971. American Reform Responsa, #65, pp. 209-11. See p. of this volume. UAHC Board of Trustees, meeting in Washington, DC., June 11, 1994, voted 115-13 (with 4 abstentions) against admitting the humanist congregation, Beth Adam of Cincinnati, Ohio. See Reform Judaism, Winter 1994, pp. 25-27.

If needed, please consult [Abbreviations used in CCAR Responsa](#).

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