

# CONVERSION

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin*

The story of Ruth chronicles its heroine's transformation from a Moabite maiden to the mother of Israelite monarchy. When did Ruth accept the religion of Israel? It is clear that as she arrives to Bethlehem, she is fully keeping the laws and customs of Israel. She gleanes in the fields, participates in Levirate marriage, and expresses herself in the language of Israelite religious sensibilities and concepts. It is clear then that Ruth became a Jewess before her arrival to Bethlehem, but was it all the way back before her marriage to Machlon or only on the road to Bethlehem?

It is tempting to assume that Ruth converted before her marriage. This would explain her attachment to Naomi, her suitability for Levirate marriage to Boaz, her eagerness to leave Moab for Judea, and it would rescue Machlon, Kilyon ("two great leaders of Israel", Rambam Kings 5:9), and Naomi from the opprobrium of participating, or condoning, an intermarriage. It is hard to imagine that faithful Naomi, on whose lips the name of Hashem dwelt, would form a relationship so genuinely close and affectionate with "the daughter of a foreign god". To say that intermarriage was not favorably viewed by the prophets and judges of Israel is an understatement (See Malachi 2:11, Deuteronomy 7:3-4, Ezra 10). Intermarriage is a basic betrayal of innermost religious values for it is a very basic commitment to share love, life and innermost personal sanctum with someone who thinks, hopes, longs, believes and dreams with a different sensibility - hence the appellation "daughter of a foreign god (Malachi ibid)". Accordingly, it cannot be that Machlon, who we already established was a worthy man, intermarried. "R. Pedas asked the son of R. Yosi, man of Soko, "Since Ruth converted (from the beginning) why did they not give her a new (Jewish) name? He said to him: "I received a tradition that that she had another name. When she married Machlon... they called her Ruth for she converted when she married Machlon and not afterwards. He responded, "But it says ...where you lean (your head), so I will lean, where you go, I go, your people is my people and your G-d is my G-d!" (implying that the conversion took place only at that point)...(Zohar Ruth 79a)." According to this view, Ruth converted before marriage.

Almost the entire consensus of rabbinic commentary is, however, to the contrary. From the Aramaic Targum to Ruth to Talmud, which derives laws of conversion from the conversation between Ruth and Naomi (Yevomos 47b), it is assumed that Ruth committed to Judaism on the way to Bethlehem. Machlon and Kilyon married Moabites. "Machlon and Kilyon were culpable of being destroyed by G-d because they took wives of another faith (Bava Bathra 91b)".

Even if they were Moabites and did not convert, how could Naomi propose that her daughters-in-

law "return to your people and your god (Ruth 1:15)". It is, however, less of a problem than suggesting that Naomi advised her Jewish daughters-in-law to go worship idols.

How we resolve this difficulty has implication for other similar passages, the marriages of Smason and Solomon for example. Fortunately, these at first glance disparate interpretations and their Scriptural antecedents can be agreeably reconciled.

R. Moshe Shternbuch in his *Moadim V'Zmanim* 4, 316 suggests that Ruth converted conditionally before marriage and that the conversion took effect retroactively when she opted to abandon Moab and to go to Judea. The involved halachic discussion is beyond our purview; however, Jewish Law knows two types of conditional conversions. The first one is conversion of a minor by a parent; upon reaching the age of majority the child can choose to finalize the conversion or to withdraw from it. The other one is a conversion that may have been for ulterior motives, wealth, security, or marriage but could also possibly be sincere. Such conversions are discouraged; however, if performed by an unscrupulous or ignorant rabbinic court, they are held in probation until the circumstances change and there is no longer an ulterior gain. If the convert continues to hold on faithfully, the conversion is valid from the beginning; if he or she abandons it, it is *prima facie* invalid. Thus, Ruth's premarital conversion was conditional for she may have converted solely for purposes of marriage. When she left her native land and followed Naomi to a life of hardship and loneliness, she demonstrated the purity and sincerity of her original commitment.

Although conversion takes effect with a ritual (circumcision and immersion before a court of three rabbis for men or immersion for women) its actual fulfillment is in the heart. Jewish Law knows of many such rituals. Mourning for example is effected with tearing one's clothing or sitting on the ground but it is fulfilled through emotion that these acts engender. The commandment to rejoice on a Festival is fulfilled by eating and drinking with company at a holiday meal but its fulfillment is the feeling of joy that the meal and the company generate. Similarly, conversion involves a ritual but it primarily takes place in the heart. The convert may be sure of the purity of her intent, or she may be deluding herself. When money, marriage or status is involved, the future will tell.

One of my teachers drew this parallel on the occasion of my ordination. He sat with me and explained that the document of ordination, the passing of examinations, even the countless hours spent in study and preparation is not what makes a rabbi. "Ordination is like conversion. It requires a ritual but it is affected within. It can take many years until the original motivation becomes apparent and declares itself. May you be fortunate that your old age justify your young age (Sukka 53a)".

Ruth completed and validated her original conversion with the decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem. However, her journey had started ten years earlier. They arrive at harvest time, in the spring, at the time of renewal and it is then that the new chapter begins.

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