Conversion to Judaism

Motivation

-On Shavuot, 3 days from now, we will read about Ruth’s conversion:

And Ruth said, Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there be buried; the Lord do so and so to me, and more besides, if even death separates me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)

-There is a conversion crisis in Israel right now.

-Religious life in Israel increasingly dominated by charedim.
-In 2008, charedi-dominated Supreme Rabbinical Court annulled thousands of conversions, saying converts were not observant enough and had to re-convert under charedi auspices.
-Unprecedented in Jewish history: Normally what happens after a conversion cannot invalidate the conversion. Solutions now being negotiated.

Definition

-Convertible (ger, gioret): Gentile who chooses to become Jewish.
-Talmud distinguishes between
  -Ger tzedek ("righteous convert"), a full Jew; and
  -Ger toshav, a non-Jew living in Israel who observes the 7 Noahide laws.

We will discuss only the first.

Conversion Procedure (Talmud, Yevamot 47)

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a convert, he is to be addressed as follows:
-What reason do you have for wishing to become a convert? Do you not know that the Jews at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions’?
-If he replies, 'I know and yet I am [still] unworthy [of converting]', he is accepted immediately, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments... He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments.
-Furthermore, he is addressed as follows: 'You must know that before you came, if you had eaten forbidden fat you would not have been punishable with karet [excision], if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now, if you ate forbidden fat you would be punished with karet; and if you profaned the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning'.

-And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'You must know that the world-to-come was made only for the righteous, and that the Jews at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity or too much suffering'.

-He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is quickly circumcised. Should any shreds which render the circumcision invalid remain, he is to be circumcised a second time. As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution [in a mikvah], when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be a Jew in all respects…

-'He is not, however, to be persuaded, or dissuaded too much'. R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? - It is written [in the Book of Ruth], "And when [Naomi] saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her." [Ruth 1:18].…

-'If he accepted, he is quickly circumcised'. What is the reason? - The performance of a commandment must not in any way be delayed...

-'When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be a Jew in all respects'. In respect of what practical issue? In that if he retracted [his conversion] and then married a Jewish woman, he is regarded as a non-observant Jew and his marriage is still valid.

[Operative principle: Af'al pi shechata Yisrael hu - A Jew, even though he may sin, remains a Jew. (Sanh. 44a)]

Midrash: Discourage convert three times before accepting him (Ruth Rabbah 2:16)
R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Hanina: Three times is it written [in the Book of Ruth] "turn back", corresponding to the three times that a would-be convert is repulsed;
[Ruth 1:8. And Naomi said to [Ruth and Orpah], Go, return each of you to her mother's house
Ruth 1:11. And Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me?
Ruth 1:12. Turn back, my daughters, go your way.] but if he persists after that, he is accepted.
[Ruth persisted:
Ruth 1:18. When [Naomi] saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she stopped [objecting].]
-R. Isaac said: …A man should rebuff with his left hand, but bring near with the right.

**Attitude towards converts in Talmudic period mostly positive**

"Converts are beloved; in every place [God] considers them as part of Israel" (Mekh. Nezikim (Mishpatim) 18).

-R. Eleazar said: "He who befriends a convert is as if he created him" (Genesis Rabbah 84:4).

-R. Ashi said that the destiny of the converts has been determined at Mount Sinai (Shabbat 146a), citing Deuteronomy:

[I make this covenant] with he who stands here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with he who is not here with us this day. [Deut. 29:14f]

-Shim'on b. Gamaliel said: When someone comes to accept Judaism, a hand should be stretched out towards him to bring him beneath the wings of the Shechinah (Leviticus Rabbah 2:9).

-If a man is a repentant sinner, one must not say to him, “Remember your former deeds.” If he is the son of converts, he must not be taunted with, “Remember the deeds of your ancestors”. If he is a convert himself and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, “Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!” (Bava Metzia 58b)

**Jewish law: You may not ask if someone is a convert, or identify a convert as such. (The convert himself may, though.)**

-R. Johanan and R. Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, exiled Israel among the nations only so that converts might join them. (Pesachim 87b).

-Jews proselytized in Roman times (see also Josephus). Members of royal families, upper and lower classes, converted. Some of the greatest rabbis descended from converts: Rabbis Akiva, Meir, Shemaiah, Avtalyon... Wicked men such as Sisera, Sennacherib, Haman, and Nero had descendants who converted (Gittin 56a-57b; Sanhedrin 96b). Also Aquila, Onkelos, the Khazars, the Adiabene kingdom.

- The prophet Obadiah was a convert (Sanhedrin 39b);
- Roman Empire was 10% Jewish.
- Should Jews still proselytize?

*Inhibited for 2000 years: Christianity and Islam made conversion to Judaism a capital offense. Little enthusiasm for doing it now.*
But attitude towards converts not always positive

(Some converts were spies for the Romans. (See Josephus, e.g., Apion 2:123.)

-R. Helbo said: Converts are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a scab on the skin (4 times: Yevamot 47a and 109b, Kidd. 70b, Niddah 13b)

-Evil after evil comes upon those who receive converts (Yevamot 109b)

-Our Rabbis taught: "Converts and child molesters delay the advent of the Messiah". (Niddah 13b)

-R. Eliezer the Great said: A convert... has a strong inclination to revert to his evil ways (Baba Metzia 59b)

-But the same R. Eliezer said: "When a person comes to you in sincerity to be converted, do not reject him, but on the contrary encourage him" (Mekh. Amalek 3).

-R. Hisya: "Do not have any faith in a convert until 24 generations have passed because the inherent evil is still within him" (Midrash Ruth Zuta on Ruth 1:12);

-The Midrash blames the sin of the Golden Calf on converts from Egypt who joined in the Exodus:

...God [said to Moses]...’...Did I not instruct you not to allow a mixed multitude to be mingled with [the Children of Israel]? But you, being meek and righteous, answered me, “The penitent must always be accepted.” Knowing, however, what they would do later, I replied: ”No,” but, nevertheless, I fulfilled your request, with the result that it was just these people who made the [Golden] Calf, being idolaters from of old, and who caused My people to sin.’

For, see, it does not say: 'This is our god,' but 'This is your god '. Why? Because it was the converts who went up with Moses [from Egypt] who made the Calf and who said to Israel: 'This is your god.' (Exodus Rabbah 42:6)

-Syrian Jews have reputation of not accepting converts.

Most commentators favor converts

-In 12th century France, Rabbi Yitzhak ben Shmuel of Dampierre, a nephew of Rabbenu Tam and an author of the Tosafot, tipped the scales decisively in favor of converts. One of his followers put positive spin in R. Helbo’s judgment:

Since converts are knowledgeable in mitzvot and are meticulous about following them, they are as tough for Israel as a scab, because God uses their example to remind Jews of their failings when His will is not followed.

-Sefer Hasidim (Rabbi Yehuda Hachasid, ~1150-1217):

A man who marries a kindhearted convert, of modest, charitable and pleasant stock, is better off than if he had married a Jewish woman who
does not possess such virtues, for the seed of the convert shall be upright and kind.

-The Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) says that a convert cannot say “God of our fathers” because his fathers were not Jewish. (B. Bikkurim 1:4-5:4). But the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) allows it (J. Bikkurim 1:4). Normally the Bavli wins, but the dispute was settled by Maimonides in the 12th century in favor of the Yerushalmi. In his letter to a convert named Obadiah, he says:

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say... “Our God and God of our fathers”, “who has sanctified us through His commandments”, “who has separated us”, “who has chosen us”, “who has given to our fathers to inherit [a pleasant, good and spacious land]”, “who has brought us out of the Land of Egypt”, “who has worked miracles to our fathers”, and more of this kind.

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least.

The debate continued. It took four centuries for this position to be universally accepted.

Some issues

-Traditionally, conversion for marriage is not acceptable, yet most conversions are for marriage.
-Conversion requirements vary widely according to communities and rabbis.
-Israel has resisted attempts to identify auspices of conversion under Law of Return.

-Israel’s Law of Return (Chok haShvut):
1950: Any Jew can emigrate to Israel and instantly become a citizen
1954: Except a person with a criminal past, likely to endanger public
1965: Except a person identifying as a Jew but where official documents exist that show otherwise
1970: A Jew is someone born of a Jewish mother or who has converted to Judaism, and is not a member of another religion. The law also applies to the spouse, child or grandchild of a Jew, and their spouses, be they Jewish or not.
-Anybody else who wishes to emigrate to Israel must go through the normal immigration process, similar to that available in Western nations.

So non-Orthodox converts may make aliyah, but problems arise when rabbis refuse to perform life-cycle rites.

Last word to Rambam
Toward father and mother we are commanded to honor and revere them, toward the prophets to obey them, but toward converts we are commanded to have great love in our inmost hearts.... God, in His glory, loves a convert —... A man who left his father and birthplace and the realm of his people at a time when they are powerful, who understood with his insight, and who attached himself to this nation which today is a despised people, the slave of rulers, and recognized and knew that their religion is true and righteous... and pursued God... and entered beneath the wings of the Divine Presence...

(Maimonides, Letter to Obadiah the Convert)