

## Loving The Convert: A Call To Communal Action

Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

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It was four simple Hebrew words, but the reaction was swift and immediate. When Fox News commentator Kassy Dillon posted the Hebrew name Devorah Rut Bat Sarah on social media one day in early April, she announced to the world that her seven year journey to join the Jewish people had successfully concluded with her conversion that morning<sup>1</sup>. Her journey began in 2014, with a visit to Israel through AIPAC; it was shortly after the kidnapping and murder of the three teenage boys that summer. Previously, she had been a supporter of the *State* of Israel, but she described that trip as calling to her *neshama* that sparked her interest in converting to Judaism. A semester abroad at the University of Haifa led her to begin practicing Jewish customs, and when she moved to Boston in 2021, she found an Orthodox sponsoring Rabbi named Rabbi Yehuda Levi to shepherd her through the conversion process. She even spent time in a seminary in Israel, all of which culminated in the announcement of her conversion. The post was greeted with love and admiration across social media platform, but it also prompted antisemitic responses; one person sent her a picture of an open oven! Her response?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1hshpt112>

*And the antisemitism begins! In reality, they've been sending me this nonsense for years. In a way, the antisemites knew I had a Jewish neshama before I did!*

Whether you agree with her politics or not, you have to admire her Jewish conviction. It is most appropriate that Kassy Dillon chose the name Ruth as her middle name, as so many converts do. Today we read Megillat Ruth, which celebrates the tenacity and perseverance of Ruth, the archetypal convert, that paid off in her role as the progenitor of the Davidic dynasty. But why does *conversion* occupy so much of our discourse on Shavuot? After all, it is the day when we *all* received the Torah! I think the answer can be found in Ruth's pivotal statement to Naomi, who had tried to dissuade her from continuing on her Jewish path:

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל־תַּפְגַּעֵי־בִי לְעֹזֵבֶךָ לְשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךָ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלֶיךָ וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלֵּיךָ עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי:

But Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִּי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי הַמּוֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ:

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me<sup>b</sup> if anything but death parts me from you.”

וַתֵּרָא כִּי־מִתְאַמְצֶת הִיא לְלָכֶת אִתָּהּ וַתַּחֲזֵק לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ:

When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her;

In the same way that the Jewish people accepted the binding nature of Mitzvot on Har Sinai, and became one nation, Ruth did the same, casting her lot with the doctrine of the Torah and the Jewish nation as well. This was true even when she was rejected and ignored after her conversion, by the citizens of Beit Lechem Yehuda. As such, it is appropriate for us to speak about conversion. I think, though, that the kinds of conversations and shiurim that usually take place on Shavuot are the wrong ones. They focus on the halachic requirements for conversion, or technical aspects of the conversion process. In talking about conversion, it is issues like these that tend to agitate people- especially seemingly onerous conversion standards, and the conduct of some modern Battei Din. To be sure, through various sins of omission and commission, there are Battei Din that routinely violate the prohibition of *inuy hager*, of oppressing converts. Even those that are well meaning and responsible may not fully appreciate the vast power differential that exists between them and a vulnerable conversion candidate. I am honored to serve as a Dayan on the local regional Beth Din for conversion Beit Din here in Dallas, affiliated with the network of Battei Din for Conversion administered by the Rabbinical Council of America. While we are human, and I'm certain we and I have

made mistakes in the past, I am proud of the religious and professional standards we employ. For this reason, I find communal discussions about Rabbinic standards of conversion- the trope that “if Ruth were alive today, she’d be rejected for conversion”- to be a tiresome straw man, a way of avoiding the more critical discussion it seems we are not having. A convert experiences two kinds of immersion- in the mikvah and in the community. Limiting the discussion to that which leads to the first is technical and short-sighted, and deflects responsibility from the community to do some serious soul searching.

The Talmud in Maseches Yevamos<sup>2</sup> makes the bold assertion that a convert is likened a newborn child- גר שנתגייר כקטן שגולד דמי. This imagery is psychologically astute, and ethically challenging. You would never leave a vulnerable newborn to his or her own devices, and we should not do the same with converts, who are starting their lives completely anew. On a basic level, they are living a new belief system, a new lifestyle, often at a new address and even new dishes! In some cases, their search for their truth has alienated them from family members who may be devout in other faiths, and living a halachic life does place barriers to many types of normal interaction with their family of origin. Jews of color, whether they converted or were born Jewish, have to suffer the additional indignity of casual or active racism in the Jewish community, or at least the quizzical looks of those who have a

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<sup>2</sup> 22a

preconceived notion of what a Jew is supposed to look like. While we resonate with the sentiment that a convert is a new person, do we treat them with the same sensitivity that we would a newborn child? I am not suggesting that we infantilize grown adults who are Jews by choice, God forbid. In preparing these remarks, though, I spoke to converts who shared some of the insensitivities they experienced. For example, it is exhausting to have to share the story of their embrace of Judaism every time they are in a new social situation, as if this is the price of admission to a Shabbat meal. It makes a convert feel like some kind of trick pony. Other converts feel awkward or disadvantaged when they're drawn into a game of "Jewish Geography"- a game that is often designed to establish Jewish bona fides or credibility and relies on being Jewishly connected. There is no better way to imply that someone is not welcome than to demonstrate that they don't know the same people, the right people, or the right kind of people.

This idea of a convert being like a newborn actually has some shocking halachic implications as well. Some argue that a convert would not be obligated to show deference or accord respect to their parents. This is because from the moment of conversion, they are not technically related. Believe it or not, the Rambam is of the view that, according to biblical law, a male convert would be permitted to marry his mother, or his maternal sister, for the same reason! Before you get upset or nauseated, the Rabbis never allowed this theoretical halachah into the realm of

practice. They argued that conversion is supposed to elevate a person; how would it look if they were permitted now, once they were Jewish, to engage in behaviors or relationships that were considered abhorrent by their religions of origin? What emerges from this idea is that when you become a Jew, you have the right to expect that you are living in a more moral, caring and spiritual state personally and communally. How awful would it be if that were not the case? What if people had a robust social life with friends and community when they were not Jewish, but after they immersed in the mikvah, they weren't shown the same kind of friendliness by their new faith community? Being Jewish means life is supposed to be better, and supposed to be holier. It is essential for converts to have a social group; they need to have people in their lives who are actually living the life they want to adopt or have adopted; They need to have people to whom they can ask questions about Judaism, without feeling like they are jeopardizing their conversion process (and, of course, Rabbis who are the same way). I've said it before, and I'll say it again- I think it's essential for anyone converting to Judaism to have a bad experience with Jews, and the Jewish community, before they can finally take the plunge. It's a way to test for resilience, and prove commitment. But that doesn't mean any of us should *cause* such experiences! Converts need friends to be a source of comfort and support when these incidents inevitably come to pass, whether with individual Jews, with a community or with religious leadership. Remember that Ruth herself persevered despite repeated rejection, because she had a friend. Naomi wasn't just there to tell

Ruth how to wash *negel vasser* in the morning, or how to take Challah, or what happens when you accidentally use a meat spoon in a dairy soup pot, when the pot had been used within the last 24 hours. She was there to help her in a way that no *Beis Din* could or would- by telling her *how to fit in*, how to make friends- even how to date. That is the role modeled for us in the book of Ruth, and it's the one we are challenged to play. Sadly, we often drop the ball.

I've been told by converts that they have a difficult time "breaking in" socially into a community. I can tell you from experience that converts are often on their own when it comes to dating; the Modern Orthodox community is not great about setting people up in general, and the yeshivish community tends to put converts into boxes when it comes to shidduchim. Indeed, wherever they turn, sincere converts are the objects of suspicion. In the more Yeshivish community, they may be suspected of being insufficiently sincere or observant, but in our community, it's the opposite; people are suspicious of converts because they are *too sincere!* Oftentimes, converts are asked "Why on earth would you want to be Jewish?" Kassy Dillon herself was asked by many Jews on Twitter what would possess her to convert *before* Pesach. She answered that it was simple; this way, she'd only have to kasher her kitchen once! There is the unspoken assumption that anyone who wants to join the Jewish community *voluntarily* must be weird, or excessively devout- and likely both. I think we, in the Modern Orthodox community, are generally

uncomfortable with religious devotion, piety and sincerity because we are insecure in our own Judaism. That's why it's difficult, in our community, to find people to learn with and mentor potential converts as well, and why potential converts who are deeply and sincerely interested in Judaism often don't look to Modern Orthodoxy as their spiritual home. I wonder how many of us would be able to successfully pass a conversion test ourselves right now...one convert told me that they invested considerably more time studying for their conversion than for the graduate degree they successfully completed. The learning commitment is large, time consuming and may make us feel awkward in revealing our lack of knowledge to others.

Of course, the broader issues here are true for any vulnerable group- baalei teshuvah, singles including those who are divorced, widowed or single parents, people with special needs, those experiencing mental health challenges, newcomers, foreigners and so forth. It's not just about how we treat converts; it's about how we treat anyone who requires extra sensitivity, extra kindness to be made to feel comfortable. Our challenge is to open our homes, our lives, our calendars and our bookshelves to anyone who needs us- be they converts or anybody else. After all, we are all enjoined to be sensitive to the needs of the stranger, for we, too, were once strangers in Egypt.



We are about to recite Yizkor, when we beseech God to grant a true rest to our beloved relatives under the wings of His Divine Presence- תחת כנפי השכינה. This terminology is borrowed from the book of Ruth itself, describing her choice to live a Godly, Jewish life. We believe in the limitless capacity of God's wings, as it were, to protect those in this world and the world of souls. It is up to us to extend those wings- as individuals and as communities- in this world as well.