

# KOL MEVASSER

## Conversion Is Not About Halacha

Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo

As the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the new rabbinical initiative for an independent conversion court (which I fully support) are headed toward a major showdown, it is remarkable that neither side has considered a most crucial question: Is conversion even possible? This may sound like a rhetorical question, since the answer is in the affirmative. Yet it goes to the very core of the problem. And as long as we do not deal with it, all deliberations concerning this matter are more or less meaningless. The reason for this is very obvious: **Logically speaking, conversion to Judaism should be impossible.** Just as a Jew cannot become a *kohein* (priest) if his father is not one, so a gentile should be unable to become a Jew. Either one is born into a family of *kohanim*, or one is not. Similarly, either one is born into the nation of Jews, or one is not. God chose the Patriarchs and their descendants as His people and it is only *they* who can claim to be Jews.

And yet, conversion to Judaism *is* possible! How is that? Philosopher Michael Wyschogrod gave a remarkable answer to this problem: **By means of a miracle.** (1) A gentile who converts to Judaism miraculously becomes part of the People of Israel. Unlike in the case of Christianity, this does not just mean that the gentile now shares the beliefs of Judaism, but that he or she *literally* becomes the seed of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. For this to happen, a quasi biological miracle is required. The gentile must be reborn as a direct descendant of Avraham and Sarah. This is accomplished by immersion in a

*mikvah* (ritual bath), clearly symbolizing the mother's womb. The proof of this far-reaching conclusion is that, according to the Torah, a convert is allowed to marry his or her own mother, father, brother or sister if they are Jewish as well. This is totally unprecedented and seems to defy all logic and violate all biological evidence. How can one undo the undeniable biological fact that the child has natural parents? Still, this is exactly what the Torah does. It was the Rabbis who forbade converts to marry their own parent, brother or sister, fearing that people might claim the gentile gave up a stricter religion for one with more lenient rules of sanctity. (2) But the fact that such marriages are Rabbinically forbidden does not change the fact that they are biblically permitted.

This is radically different from baptism in Christianity. After baptism, the prohibition of incest is not waived. The biological relationship between parents and the baptized person continues as before. Not so in Judaism, which requires the total rebirth of a person – to the extent that earlier biological relationships are completely severed. (Still, one is obligated to give full respect to one's biological parents as an expression of *hakarat hatov* [gratitude], a most important element of Jewish ethical teachings.)

Moreover, simply immersing oneself in a *mikvah* is not sufficient. It is crucial that the potential convert *desire* to take on a new identity. Human beings are not just masses of plasma, sophisticated robots, or creative animals. They cannot change their fundamental selves simply by physical immersion in a well of water. They are souls with deep emotions, who experience spiritual and moral struggles in which religious belief plays a critical role. Therefore, conversion should be a momentous decision rooted in the

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## KJ Schedule Parashat Shoftim

### Erev Shabbat

Friday, August 21st

Selihot ..... 5:45 am  
Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 6:25 am  
Minha / Arvit ..... 6:30 pm  
Candle Lighting ..... 7:15 pm

### Shabbat

Saturday, August 22nd

Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 8:30 am  
Women's Tehillim ..... 6:30 pm  
Minha & Arvit ..... 6:30 pm  
Havdallah ..... 8:17 pm

### Weekdays

Sunday, August 23rd

Selihot ..... 6:45 am  
Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 7:30 am  
Talmud Torah ..... 10:00 am

Monday to Friday, August 24th to 28th

Selihot ..... 5:45 am  
Shaharit / Morning Prayer .. 6:25 am

### Erev Shabbat

Friday, August 28th

Selihot ..... 5:45 am  
Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 6:25 am  
Minha / Arvit ..... 6:30 pm  
Candle Lighting ..... 7:06 pm

## Torah & Haftara Readings

Parashat Shoftim in Devarim  
Deuteronomy 820 to 835  
Haftara Reading from Prophets  
Yeshayahu/Isaiah 835 to 839

## Seudah Shlisheet

is sponsored in memory of  
Yosef ben Meier Sawdayi  
z"l

by The Sawdayi Family

## Condolences

to the Family and Friends of  
Yosef Meier Sawdayi, z"l  
brother of Eli Sawdayi and Sabah  
Sawdayi, on his passing in Israel.  
*May Hashem comfort them together  
with all the mourners of Tzion.*

## KJ Membership and High Holy Days

*In just one short month the new Jewish  
year of 5776 will begin on the eve of  
Sunday, September 13th.*

*Now is a wonderful time to renew your  
membership at Kahal Joseph and re-  
serve seats for yourself and your family  
during services on these special days.*

*For information or to renew please call  
Sarah in our office at 310.474.0559*

**Shabbat Shalom U'Mevorach**

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SIMON'S CATERING & EVENTS AND  
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**KJ Kids**  
**Talmud Torah**  
**& Sunday School**  
**Nurture Creativity Celebrate**  
**Explore Inspire Share**  
**Friends & Community**

**First Day of Class  
This Sunday!  
August 23rd 2015  
10 am to 12 noon**

*For more information contact  
Hanna at 310-474-0559*

## In Memoriam

We remember these yearzeit anniversaries  
August 22 to 29, 2015. It is customary to  
light a memorial candle, donate tzedaka, &  
attend Shabbat services .

**7 Elul / Shabbat, August 22nd**  
Yaacov Aboulafia *Yaacov ben Sarah*

**8 Elul / Sunday, August 23rd**  
Rachel Ezra Jacob *Rahel bat Lulu*  
Naji Ezra Helali *Naji ben Avraham*  
Yamin Sassoon *Yamin ben Sassoon*

**9 Elul / Monday, August 24th**  
Sam Dabby *Shimon ben Haskel Dabby*  
Hilda Deborah *Habiba bat Farha*  
Rachel Hayim Mingail *Rachel bat Miriam*

**12 Elul / Thursday, August 27th**  
Menasseh Saltoon *Menashe ben Nissim*

**13 Elul / Friday, August 28th**  
Nessim ben Yitro  
Isaac Ferris Abraham *Yitzhak Faraj*  
Sophie Solomon *Simhah bat Khatoon*

**14 Elul / Shabbat, August 29th**  
Nathan Assia  
*Haim ben Haim Elazar*  
Harry Brook Moses *Haim Baruch ben Moshe Ezra*

## Refuah Shlemah

Abe Abraham • Moselle Amron  
Mordechai Cohen • Sylvia Cohen  
Esther Duke • Sassoon Ezra  
Tilda Levy • Miriam bat Yetta  
Maurice Ovadia • Habiba bat Mazli

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deepest recesses of the human soul. While this clearly includes the desire to become a part of the Jewish people, it would be a major mistake to argue that mere immersion in a *mikvah* actually causes this highly spiritual change of identity. At the very minimum, the convert must identify at least partially with his new nationality and its history, culture and religion.

One can immerse in a *mikvah* hundreds of times and still remain a gentile if the act is not accompanied by some kind of spiritual transformation, or change in identity, through which one becomes part of the Jewish people, with a deep commitment to Jewish life.

Whether or not this transformation requires a full commitment to Halacha is open to debate. Already in the Talmud several approaches are mentioned – some more stringent, others more lenient. (3) In the past, both had merits and could be applied. This, however, is no longer the case in modern Israel. A new halachic challenge has emerged: the need to ensure that the State of Israel will not be undermined by massive assimilation caused by the arrival of more than 300,000 Russians of Jewish descent, who are not Jewish according to Halacha and are now marrying halachically Jewish Israelis. It is not so much the unity of the Jewish people that is at stake but the survival of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, whatever the exact definition of “Jewish” may be. It is this matter that makes the debate so vital and far-reaching. A new balance must be found between the need for survival on one hand and traditional halachic standards, whether strict or lenient, on the other.

We have to make sure that the integrity of Judaism and its mission to the world is secured while paradoxically guaranteeing that we have

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as many non-Jews of Jewish descent joining our people and Judaism, even if many of them will not live a full halachic life after they have converted.

This will require an entirely new approach, which our conventional codifications do not offer. Most important, merely insisting on full or partial commitment to Halacha will not be the solution to this problem. What is needed is a deep emotional commitment and understanding of the existential meaning of Jewishness. Even full observance of Halacha alone does not make a person Jewish. It is only part of the process. We must convince potential converts of the Jewish people’s uniqueness and of its highly unusual and paradoxical place in this world.

It will be necessary to initiate and develop programs for new converts, which will *not* emphasize the need for halachic commitment but which will first of all create within the candidates a warm and deeply emotional feeling of what it means to be a Jew; to belong to an unprecedented entity. We will want to make them realize that being Jewish is the greatest privilege a person can have; that they have become part of a nation that has defied the rules of history and remained alive when all other nations would have succumbed; and that this was possible because of a mind-boggling idea called Judaism, which turned the world on its head and has affected all of mankind in ways that we are as yet unable to fully grasp.

This Judaism consists of more than just halachic rules and observance. It is a guide to living in a spiritual order of such compelling nobility and power that it becomes totally irresistible and makes Jews indispensable. Halachic commitment must *follow* from this premise. It should be the end result, not its point of departure. Once the candidates are taken in by

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this vision and feel a deep emotional connection to the Jewish people, they become ready to convert even if their halachic commitment is still weak.

Let’s stop talking about Halacha until the convert’s longing for it becomes irresistible.

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## Elul Observances

From Chabad.org—As the last month of the Jewish year, Elul is traditionally a time of introspection and stocktaking -- a time to review one’s deeds and spiritual progress over the past year and prepare for the upcoming "Days of Awe" of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.

As the month of Divine Mercy and Forgiveness (see "Today in Jewish History" for Elul 1) it is a most opportune time for teshuvah ("return" to G-d), prayer, charity, and increased Ahavat Yisrael (love for a fellow Jew) in the quest for self-improvement and coming closer to G-d. Our rabbis liken the month of Elul to a time when "the king is in the field" and, in contrast to when he is in the royal palace, "everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him, and he receives them all with a cheerful countenance and shows a smiling face to them all."

Specific Elul customs include the daily sounding of the shofar (ram’s horn) as a call to repentance. The Baal Shem Tov instituted the custom of reciting three additional chapters of Psalms each day, from the 1st of Elul until Yom Kippur (on Yom Kippur the remaining 36 chapters are recited, thereby completing the entire book of Psalms).

Elul is also the time to have one’s tefillin and mezuzot checked by an accredited scribe to ensure that they are in good condition and fit for use. *Shabbat Shalom*

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## Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage

*Nixon Presidential Library & Museum, September 4 to November 15, 2015*

On September 4, 2015, the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum will open a new exhibition, *Discovery and Recovery: Preserving Iraqi Jewish Heritage*. The exhibit details the dramatic recovery of historic materials relating to the Jewish community in Iraq from a flooded basement in Saddam Hussein's intelligence headquarters, and the National Archives' ongoing work in support of U.S. Government efforts to preserve these materials. In both English and Arabic, the 2,000 square foot exhibit features 23 recovered original items and a "behind the scenes" video of the fascinating yet painstaking preservation process. More information is available at [www.ija.archives.gov](http://www.ija.archives.gov). *This exhibition was created by the National Archives and*

*Records Administration, Washington, DC, with generous support from the U.S. Department of State.*