

ON CONVERSION

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The status of *gerut* as a subject of discussion and debate is not a recent phenomenon. For ages, indeed millennia, this topic has been implicated in a broad range of problems. Some have been disturbed by the option of *gerut*, per se. For those who have stressed the unique, inborn holiness that characterizes the Jew—for instance: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the Maharal of Prague, and the School of Habad—the ability of a non-Jew to convert aroused varied difficulties and objections. Quite apart from this primary issue, however, the problems can be further subdivided. First, how is one to treat the candidate for Judaism? This question has practical consequences in determining the actual conversion process. Shall we pursue the proselyte or avoid him? Repel with the left hand while attracting with the right or vice versa? Secondly, how should we relate to the *ger* after his conversion? Needless to say, the possibility of derision is out of the question; the Torah explicitly admonishes us: “And the *ger* you shall not deride nor oppress.”¹ And the Rabbis state: “He who derides the *ger* violates three negative commandments;”² R. Eliezer the Great numbers thirty-six distinct places—and according to one opinion, forty-six—where the Torah forewarns us to respect the *ger*.³ But beyond this, assessment of the nature of the *ger* and his integration into the Nation of Israel appears unclear—perhaps in dispute. Encouragement on the one hand and repulsion on the other; some esteemed the *ger* while others approached him with cautious apprehension.

However, the issue of relating to the *ger* is not the one I wish to address. My focus is on the process of *gerut* itself—the phenomenon,

The Hebrew version of this article appeared in *Torah she-be-al Peh*, vol. 13. It was translated by Michael Berger, a graduate student in the Department of Religion at Columbia University. The translator wishes to thank Rabbi Shalom Carmy, who reviewed the translation, and Rabbi Lichtenstein, for his careful review and revision of the final draft.

per se. If we wish to define and describe it, we will discover that the essence of *gerut* is its being a turning point. Its foundation is a radical transformation: an uprooting from one world to strike root in a different one. This point specifically characterizes Jewish *gerut* and distinguishes it, historically, from parallel movements in the classical world. As Arthur Darby Nock emphasized, whereas adoption of one of the religions that dominated the Hellenistic world—Orphism, Mithraism, and others—meant merely a supplement to the local tradition and not the former's total negation, Judaism (and consequently, Christianity) presents conversion as a total metamorphosis. The *ger* is compelled to abandon his past background and enter the realm of his future, for commitment to Judaism is based on Elijah's question⁴: "How much longer will you oscillate, wavering between two options?" In the words of Nock, conversion demands "renunciation and a new beginning. What was required was not merely the acceptance of ritual, but rather a willful attachment to a theology; in a word, faith: a new life in a new nation."⁵ This should not cause surprise. *Gerut*, after all, embodies—nay, constitutes—the forging of a covenant, which is, by its very nature, exclusive: ". . . And the two of them made a covenant"⁶—to the exclusion of others. Nonetheless, the question still arises: what type of turning point? How does it take effect and in what manner is it realized and manifested?

It seems to me that in *gerut*,⁷ both in the process and in the outcome, there exist two elements that are to some extent parallel, to some extent complementary, and to some extent contradictory. On the one hand, *gerut* is grounded in a profound revolution. In its ideal form, its root, is a longing for holiness; its core, desire for the *ein-sof*, gravitation to a sublime and exalted ethic, striving for a world wholly good and wholly true. "David called himself a *ger*, as it is said:⁸ 'I am a stranger *ger* in the land.'⁹ Of course, he was not a *ger* in the strict Halakhic sense (although he was descended from proselytes); rather, in the realm of religious experience, he had penetrated the soul of the *ger* and related to it: "as a hart panting after water brooks, so my soul pants after You."¹⁰ Here is the essence of *gerut*: a craving that can dislodge one from the society of one's youth and which finds expression in the overcoming of the confines of group and nation.

The source and character of this element are, to be sure, apt to change. In certain cases, its essence is reaction to a sullied past, a renunciation of a life filled with iniquity or deprived of meaning and purpose. In this form, *gerut* is included in *teshuvah*, repentance; it is precipitated by regret over the past, abandonment of sin, and resolve for the future. At other times, the motive propelling the proselyte is the glow of the future, rather than the sordidness of the present. The potential *ger*, despite his being in a setting that is not necessarily

defiled, but merely defective, sees himself as isolated, “in a dry and thirsty land, without water.” In his anguish he pleads: “O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You: my soul thirsts for You, my flesh longs for You.”¹¹ At the practical level, as the Rambam put it, the *ger* desires “to enter the covenant and to be absorbed under Divine aegis, and to accept for himself the yoke of the Torah.”¹² But categorizing the different types of *gerut* is merely a matter of detail. The fundamental motive here is one—a religious experience, a spiritual effervescence—sometimes feverish, oftentimes tranquil; in short, the birthpangs of a Jewish soul. This creation is private and personal—if you will, even subjective. Essentially, it is the *ger*’s intimacy with the Holy One. “The king has brought me into his chamber,” and no stranger will trespass into the inner sanctum. Nothing is more a matter of the heart than *gerut*, and, in the channels of the heart, can there be room for external involvement?

This principle finds expression in a simple, yet famous, halakhah: “A *ger* is like a newborn babe.”¹³ We customarily associate this statement with several laws: a *ger* is not aligned genealogically to his father, nor does he inherit from the latter (according to Biblical injunction); and, according to Resh Lakish, he does not fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and to multiply through the children born to him while he had been a gentile.¹⁴ However, these are only consequences; it behooves us to understand and grasp the concept itself, in its literal context. The *ger* returns to the source, penetrating the secrets of ontological reality, and, while standing on the threshold of a new life, ruminates over the mystery of existence and is involved in a superior creation: he is born and gives birth at once.

The validity of this comparison is pronounced (albeit with an emphasis on the “converter” more than on the convert) in its aggadic formulations: “Whoever brings another person under the wings of *Shekhina* is considered as having created him, shaped him, and brought him into the world.”¹⁵ To be sure, this refers to the educator of a Jewish child, but how much more so should it apply to *gerut*? In the well-known words of the Sifre¹⁶ regarding Avraham our Patriarch: “And you shall love . . . like the love of humanity Avraham your forefather had, as it is written: ‘and the souls that they had acquired in Haran.’ Now if all people united to create a small gnat and give it a soul, they would not succeed. What then does this verse mean? Rather, it teaches that Avraham was converting people and bringing them into the Jewish faith.” And in *Bereshit Rabbah*,¹⁷ the same passage concludes: “Rather, to teach us that one who brings the non-Jew closer to Judaism and converts him, it is as if he had created him.”

Until now we have dealt with only one aspect of *gerut*: subjective and intimate, confined to the relationship of the *ger* to his Creator, centered around an internal experience and spiritual nascence, linked to *teshuvah*, repentance, which, in the Rambam's celebrated formulation,¹⁸ is also defined as personal metamorphosis and new creation ("And he alters his name, as if to say: I am another, and I am not the same person that committed those deeds")—symbolized by birth.

However, there is yet a second aspect to *gerut*: objective, formal, communal. If the *ger* is, on the one hand, a partner in the dialogue taking place in the depths of his soul, he, on the other hand, simultaneously becomes the subject of public assessment, participating—albeit, to be sure, not in an emotional vacuum—in a crystallized ceremony. Here, the emphasis is not upon process, including all the adventures and the apprehension implied in the word, but rather on procedure. To his knocking on the door, he hears the response: Let us presume that your spiritual pilgrimage has prepared you sufficiently for *gerut*; but if you want to realize it, you must still follow these steps in order to be accepted.

This element, too, finds expression and symbolic representation in a halakhah. "Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: a *ger* requires the presence of three people, for *mishpat* (judicial process) is written with reference to a *ger*."¹⁹ For the same reason, since Halakhah deems *gerut* a form of legal procedure, conversion cannot take place at night;²⁰ and the Rambam saw this as the source of the gemara's prohibition against the *ger*'s ritual immersion (*tevilah*) on the Sabbath and Holidays: ". . . since *gerut* requires a Beth Din, we immerse him (the *ger*) neither on the Sabbath nor on Holidays nor at night; although if he was immersed, then he is a *ger*."²¹ This is not merely a matter of supernumerary piety. In the opinion of some commentators, led by the Ramban,²² *tevilah* at night is ineffective even *post factum*. Even according to the Rambam, we may assume, as did the *Maggid Mishneh*, that it is valid *a posteriori* only because, in certain cases, juridical procedures may be concluded at night.²³ This assumption is clearly borne out by the Rambam's formulation with respect to the need for three judges:²⁴ "[If] he immersed privately, and converted with no witnesses, or even in front of two persons, he is not a *ger*." Many Rishonim took issue with him on this point and sanctioned private *tevilah*—this, however, not because they valued the necessity of a Beth Din any less, but rather because they deemed a Beth Din's presence as mandatory only at the time that the *ger* accepts the normative onus of *mitsvot*, and not during the immersion ceremony.²⁵ As for the requirement of having a Beth Din at one of the stages of *gerut*, all commentators but one—an

opinion quoted by Tosafot²⁶—recognized its role as indispensable; *gerut* consists of an actual *din*, a judge and his subject.

Between the elements of birth and adjudication, there exist two distinctions that, from a logical standpoint, are completely separate—and in fact, one could probably find one in the absence of the other—but actually tend to arise concomitantly. Until now, I have accentuated one point, that of process—spiritual and private on the one hand, formal and communal on the other. Beyond this, however, the goal differs no less than the path. Birth emphasizes a spiritual creation; the legal aspect, a social affiliation. The potential *ger* appears on society's rostrum and presents himself as a candidate for citizenship in "the kingdom of priests and the holy nation," knocking not only on Heaven's door but also on the gates of Keneset Yisrael, the Jewish people. He is not content with being brought by the king into his chamber; the *ger* strives to "climb the datepalm and take hold of its twigs" as well.²⁷

Upon initial consideration of the two features of *gerut*, we are certainly inclined to see the yearning of the potential *ger* as the essence of *gerut*, and the judicial process as merely a validation, an endorsement. To a degree, this inclination is correct, but only to a degree. The legal aspect of *gerut* and the attachment to Keneset Yisrael involved in it are not solely an issue of a seal of approval. Keneset Yisrael does not merely mediate between the *ger* and the Almighty. She is a participant and not just a broker; a concerned party and not just an agent of God. In the encounter of the I and Thou that is established through *gerut*, the *ger* meets two Thou's: The Lord of the Universe, and his nation, Israel. Not, God forbid, the latter alone; such an attitude borders on idolatry. Surely, he confronts Keneset Yisrael solely in the light of its being "holy unto God, the first of His harvest." In this context, however, there is a very real encounter.

This point is reflected in the procedures of *gerut* itself, especially as the Rambam delineated them:²⁸ "How are *gerim* accepted? When one comes from the Gentiles to be converted to Judaism, and [the Beth Din] finds no pretext [for his conversion], they say to him: 'What has led you to such conversion? Don't you know that Israel is presently afflicted, oppressed, attacked, preyed upon, and that misfortunes befall her?' If he responds, 'I know, and I am not worthy,' they accept him immediately." The question arises: what is the nature of this declaration? Although it is mentioned in the Gemara,²⁹ it can there presumably be understood as a part of the investigation determining the sincerity of the *ger*. However, the Rambam here explicitly deals with the stage at which the *ger's*

sincerity has already been demonstrated. If so, what is the need for this lengthy discourse?

Actually, the answer is quite simple. Let us ask ourselves what will happen if a potential *ger* declares himself ready to accept every one of the 613 commandments, committing himself to rigorous observance of *mitsvot*, minor as well as major. However, as to any sort of attachment to the nation, he refuses to accept even a minimal degree of allegiance. He does not share in its present adversities, does not identify with its past, and does not yearn for its future. What is to be his status? We may answer unequivocally, on the basis of the Rambam's words in the Laws of Repentance. Among those transgressors who, "for their tremendous wickedness and sinfulness," do not inherit a share in the World to Come, the Rambam numbers "those who separate themselves from the ways of society." And, characteristically, he details: "He who separates himself from the public, although he may have never violated a law, if he stands aloof from the community of Israel, and does not partake in their communal observances, nor share in their calamities, nor fast on their fasts, but rather goes his own way as anyone of the local populace, as if he were not one of them—no share in the World to Come awaits him."³⁰ This being so, in our case the verdict is crystal-clear: there has not been a total, comprehensive acceptance of *Ol Mitsvot*. The prospective *ger* has readily committed himself to the entire Torah, excluding only involvement in the community—yet this exclusion is hardly a trivial matter.

In light of this decision, we no longer need to wonder about the declaration concerning Israel's situation at the *gerut*. It is not solely an inquest into the motivation for conversion. The declaration by the Beth Din is a stage in the fulfillment of *gerut* per se and relates to the commitment implicit within it.

Within this context, the individual and the community encounter each other along a very wide front. The *ger* does not meet and identify with the present nation alone, but with its past and future as well. Once again, it is the Rambam who underscores this point. The Mishnah states:³¹ "The *ger* must bring [his first fruits], but he does not utter [the accompanying declaration], for he cannot say 'that God has sworn to our fathers to give us'; and if his mother was Jewish, he brings [the first fruits] and utters [the declaration]. And when [the *ger*] prays privately, he says 'the Lord of Israel's forefathers'; and when he is in the synagogue, he says 'the Lord of your forefathers.'" In contrast, the Rambam rules in accordance with the view of R. Yehudah in the Jerusalem Talmud:³² "The *ger* himself brings [the first fruits] and makes the declaration. Why? [God spoke to Avraham:] 'For I have made you a father unto a multitude of

nations’—hitherto you were the father of Aram, and herewith you are the father of all nations.” And, in the Rambam’s own wording:³³ “The *ger* brings [the first fruits] and makes the declaration, since it was spoken to Avraham, ‘I have made you a father unto a multitude of nations’; here he was made the patriarch of all those in the world who [ever] become Jewish.”

In this formulation, the opinion of R. Yehudah does not identify the *ger* with a specific history, for it is possible to view the attachment to Avraham as direct, exclusive of Keneset Yisrael’s mediation. If so, one may ask (as the Ramban already hinted³⁴): the mention of Avraham is understandable, but how shall a *ger* describe Yitzhak and Yaakov as his “forefathers”? The Rambam, however, already dealt with this issue, in his famous responsum to R. Ovadiah Ger Tsedek. He opens with an explanation that is in keeping with the thrust of his words in the *Mishneh Torah*:

The fundamental point here is that it was Avraham our father who instructed the nation, enlightening them and informing them of the true faith, and of God’s unity and singularity. It was he who repudiated idol worship and violated its worship, nullifying it, bringing many to accept God, teaching and instructing them, commanding his sons and future descendants after him to remain faithful to the Way of God, as it says in the Torah: ‘For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord. . .’ Therefore all who embrace Judaism until the end of all generations, and all who profess the unity of the Lord’s Name as is directed in the Torah, are like the pupils of Avraham of Blessed Memory and are members of his household, all of them; it was he who brought them to this positive juncture, and, as he did to the members of his own generation with his skills of oratory and pedagogy, so he has reclaimed all those who would convert in the future, through the testament he left his children and his descendants. The result is that Avraham our forefather was the father of his legitimate progeny who follow the path forged by him, and he, too, is father to every *ger* who converts.

Up to this point, the Rambam has discussed the direct link to Avraham, and, on the basis of his thesis, he concludes:

But [saying] ‘You (God) took us out of Egypt’ or ‘that [God] has performed miracles for our ancestors,’ if you want to alter the wording and say ‘that You took Yisrael out of Egypt,’ or ‘the miracle You have wrought for Yisrael’—say it [in such a way as you please].

However, he promptly goes one step further:

And if you do not change (the wording), there is no loss at all, for after having entered the Jewish fraternity and accepted Judaism, there is no difference between you and us, and all the miracles that were wrought were wrought for us and for you. This is Isaiah’s intention in the verse:³⁵ “Neither let the son of the stranger, that has joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, ‘The Lord has

