YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

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**Laws of Conversion and Circumcision**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Shiur #03: Relating to the Convert (2)**

**Biblical and Rabbinic Attitudes Towards Conversion**

**Introduction**

It is nearly impossible to speak about the Torah’s attitude towards conversion in absolute terms.

On the one hand, Ruth the Moabite represents that ideal righteous convert (*ger tzedek*), who wishes to join the Jewish People and accept its teachings. Ruth left her land and people and pleaded with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to allow her to return with her to the Land of Israel and join the Jewish People, saying “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay; your people will be my people and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried; may the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me" (*Ruth* 1:16-17). Similarly, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi’ah* 11:4) describes “a gentile [who] desires to enter into the covenant, take shelter under the wings of the Divine presence, and accept the yoke of the Torah.”

On the other hand, we cannot ignore that throughout history, many of those who wished to join the Jewish People had ulterior motives. Furthermore, as Jewish communities were often insular, socially and culturally, accepting an “outsider” was justifiably viewed as a risk the traditional religious lifestyle. The primary function of the *beit din* was to examine the motives and motivation of the potential convert and decide whether to accept him or her to the Jewish People. In other words, they served as the Jewish community’s “gate-keepers.”

It is therefore not surprising to find different views and approaches, as well as a mix of admiration and concern, regarding the acceptance of converts.

This week, we will briefly discuss Judaism’s attitude towards conversion. While last week, we discussed whether accepting converts is considered to be a *mitzva*, in this *shiur* we explore the special *mitzvot* and prohibitions that guide our behavior towards converts, and then examine the rabbinic attitudes towards accepting converts.

**Biblical Attitudes Towards Conversion**

Although the Talmud expresses its awareness of the complexity of accepting converts into the Jewish People, as we will discuss below, the Torah undoubtedly holds the convert in the highest regard. In fact, the Torah addresses the treatment of a convert, referred by the word “*ger*” (literally, “stranger”), in numerous places.

The Torah commands us to relate to the *ger* in a unique manner; we are commanded to “love” the *ger*:

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (*Devarim* 10:19)

The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God. (*Vayikra* 19:34)

In both places, the Torah explains that we should be especially sensitive regarding a convert, as we ourselves were once “strangers” in the land of Egypt.

This commandment appears to be somewhat superfluous, as elsewhere (*Vayikra* 19:18) the Torah commands us to “love thy neighbor as yourself.” What does this more specific commandment to love the convert add?

The *Sefer Ha-Chinukh* (431) writes:

Even though the commandment regarding [loving other] Jews includes him, as it is stated about him ([*Vayikra* 19:18](file:///C:\Leviticus.19.18)), "and you shall love your neighbor as yourself"— as a righteous convert is certainly included in "your neighbor"—God added for us a specific commandment about his love.

The *Chinukh* writes that although the Torah adds another commandment regarding a convert, there is no fundamental difference between these two *mitzvot*.

The Rambam, however, implies that there may be a difference between these two *mitzvot*. Regarding loving another Jewish person, he writes (*Hilkhot De’ot* 6:3):

Each man is commanded to love each and every one of Israel as himself as [[*Vayikra* 19:18](https://www.chabad.org/9920#v18)] states: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, one should speak the praises of others and show concern for their money, just as he is concerned with his own money and seeks his own honor.

In other words, one should treat another Jew as he would like others to treat him.

However, regarding the convert, the Rambam writes:

Loving a convert who has come to nest under the wings of the *Shekhina* [fulfills] two positive commandments: one for he is [also] included among the "neighbors" [whom we are commanded to love] and one because he is a convert and the Torah ([*Devarim* 10:19)](https://www.chabad.org/9974#v19) states: "and you shall love the converts."

[Thus, God] has commanded us concerning the love of a convert just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself, as the *pasuk* ([*Devarim* 11:1](https://www.chabad.org/9975#v1)) states: "and you shall love God, your Lord." The Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, loves converts as the *pasuk* ([*Devarim* 10:18](https://www.chabad.org/9974#v18)) states: "and He loves converts."

The Rambam implies that not only should one love a convert as he loves his neighbor, he should love the convert as he love’s God. This love would appear to expressive itself not only in actions, but in feeling as well.

When does this *mitzva* to love the convert begin? The Rambam writes that the *mitzva* applies to one who “has come to nest under the wings of the *Shekhina*,” possibly implying that the *mitzva* applies to one who has already converted. However, as we mentioned previously, R. Yitzchak Albargeloni, in his *Azharot*, assumes that the *mitzva* of *ahavat ha-ger* applies even before the non-Jew converts; one who expresses his desire to join the Jewish People is deserving of special treatment.

In addition, the Torah (*Shemot* 22:20) adds numerous prohibitions relating to the treatment of converts: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” *Massekhet* *Gerim* (4:1) explains:

“You shall do not wrong to a slave, nor shall you oppress him.” (*Shemot* 22:20). “You shall do not wrong”—in words. “You shall not oppress him”—through money. Do not say to him, “Last night you used to worship Baal and Nebo, and until now you had pig between your teeth, and you stand and speak with me!” Don’t say to him thus, for he can say to you, “For you were slaves in the land of Egypt.” From here, R. Natan used to say: Do not project your blemish on to your friend. R. Eliezer ben Yaakov says: Because a convert may turn away to evil, Scripture warns in many places, “You shall not oppress a stranger” (*Shemot* 23:9); “you shall not wrong a stranger” (*Shemot* 22:20); “you will know the stranger” (*Shemot* 23:9), etc. Because he might turn away toward evil, Scripture warns [you] in many places.

The verse prohibits verbally mistreating a convert (*ona’at devarim*) and pressuring him regarding financial matters.

Indeed, the Talmud (*Bava Metzi’a* 59b) notes the frequency with which the Torah relates to this issue:

The Sages taught: One who verbally mistreats the convert violates three prohibitions, and one who oppresses him in other ways violates two. What is different with regard to verbal mistreatment, that three prohibitions are written concerning it: “And you shall neither mistreat a convert” (*Shemot* 22:20); “And when a convert lives in your land, you shall not mistreat him” (*Vayikra* 19:33); “And you shall not mistreat, each man his colleague” (ibid. 25:17), and a convert is included in the category of colleague? With regard to one who also oppresses a convert as well, three prohibitions are written: “And you shall neither mistreat a convert, nor oppress him” (*Shemot* 22:20); “And you shall not oppress a convert (ibid. 23:9); “And you shall not be to him like a creditor” (ibid. 22:24). [This last prohibition is a general prohibition, in which converts are included.] Consequently, it is not correct that one who oppresses a convert violates only two prohibitions. Rather, both this one, who verbally mistreats a convert, and that one, who oppresses him, violate three prohibitions.

The *gemara* further teaches that R. Eliezer the Great maintains that the Torah issued warnings in thirty-six places, and some say in forty-six places, regarding causing any distress to a convert!

Why does the Torah mandate that the convert should be treated with extra care? Initially, it we might suggest that the Torah simply warns against a common, human inclination to dislike a stranger, one who has come from the outside. The *Rishonim*, however, offer addition, deeper reasons for these *mitzvot*.

Some (see Ibn Ezra, Vayikra ad loc.; *Chinukh* 431) emphasize that the *ger*, as a stranger in the land and among the Jewish People, it often weak and disadvantaged. The *Chinukh* even extends the *mitzva* of *ahavat ha-ger* to “being compassionate to any person who is in a city that is not in his homeland and in the place of his forefathers.”

Other sources relate to the fear that the convert may return to his prior ways. The Talmud (*Bava Metzi’a* 59b) mentions that the Torah repeated this *mitzva* so many times because “a convert’s inclination is evil (*suro ra*)” –i.e., he is prone to return to his previous way of living. Of course, we are not only concerned for the convert’s future, but also for his potential impact upon those around him (*Kiddushin* 70b; Rashi ad loc., s.v. *kashin*).

Some understand the special *mitzva* to love the *ger* as a form of *imitatio dei*, imitating the actions of God (see *Sota* 14a). Indeed, the verses (*Devarim* 17:18) state that God is “the great mighty and awesome God, Who will show no favor, nor will He take a bribe; He executes the judgment of the orphan and widow, and He loves the stranger, to give him bread and clothing.” Therefore, just as God loves the *ger*, so too we are commanded to love the *ger*.

Alternatively, other sources express great admiration for the convert’s choice and its consequences. For example, the Rambam (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 207) writes:

We are commanded to love converts. The source of this commandment is God's statement (exalted be He), "You must love the convert." Since the convert spoken of here is a *ger tzedek*, he is included in the commandment for the entire Jewish People, "You must love your neighbor." Nevertheless, since he has now entered the Jewish religion, God shows him additional love and added an extra commandment [to love him].

The Rambam suggests that we demonstrate greater love for the convert due to his decision to join the Jewish People.

Finally, R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (*Devarim* 10:19) offers an important insight. He explains that while in many societies, a person’s status is a function of his place of origin or his wealth, the love with which the Jewish people relate to a convert demonstrates that the a person’s status is determined by man’s willingness to subjugate himself to God.

**Rabbinic Attitudes towards Converts**

As noted above, while the Biblical verses express the Torah’s pure, unprejudiced attitude towards the convert, rabbinic sources reflect the complexity of accepting outsiders and their impact upon the social and religious fabric of the community. Furthermore, while the Torah refers to the *ger tzedek* who converts out of pure, religious inspiration, the Talmud relates to those who convert for other reasons as well. Therefore, as expected, one may find different perspectives on conversion and regarding converts in rabbinic literature.

Some passages indicate a somewhat negative attitude towards converts joining the Jewish People. For example, one well-known *gemara* (*Yevamot* 47b) states that “converts are as harmful to the Jewish People as a leprous scab [*sappachat*] on the skin, as it is written: ‘And the convert shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave [*ve-nispechu*] to the house of Jacob’ (*Yeshayahu* 14:1).” Rashi (ad loc.) explains that converts hold on to their prior ways, and the Jewish People learn from them or rely upon them for religious matters. Similarly, Tosafot (*Kiddushin* 70b, s.v. *kashim*) adds that since converts are not knowledgeable and meticulous in the performance of *mitzvot*, tragedies befall the Jewish People. He cites additional explanations as well, and even asserts, based on a Talmudic passage (*Pesachim* 87b), that the Jewish People are in exile due to the converts.

The Rambam (*Hilkhot* *Issurei Bi’ah* 13:18) contrasts those who convert with pure intentions and those who convert due to ulterior motives. Regarding the second category, he writes:

For this reason, our Sages said: “Converts are as difficult for the Jewish people to bear as a leprous blemish.” For most converts revert for some reason or other and cause Jews to stray. It is difficult to separate from them once they have converted. Look at what happened in the desert at the worship of the Golden Calf and *Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava*. Similarly, most of [the complaints in the instances when] our people tried God were instigated by the mixed multitude.

Those who convert for the wrong reasons may potentially harm the Jewish People.

There are also numerous rabbinic sources that speak positively of accepting converts. For example, Tosafot (*Kiddushin*, ibid.) cites R. Avraham Ha-Ger, who explains that “converts are as harmful to the Jewish people as a leprous scab” because “they are experts in the details of the commandments and are meticulous in their fulfillment … which reminds the Holy One Blessed be He of the sins of the Jewish People, who do not act according to His will.”

Similarly, the Talmud (*Pesachim* 87b) teaches:

R. Elazar said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, exiled Israel among the nations only so that converts would join them, as it is stated: “And I will sow her to Me in the land” (*Hoshe’a* 2:25). Does a person sow a *se’a* of grain for any reason other than to bring in several *kor* of grain during the harvest? [So too, the point of the exile is to enable converts from the nations to join the Jewish People.]

This passage and other sources (*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 6:11) understand that Israel was spread throughout the world so that converts should join the Jewish People.

Tosafot (*Yevamot*, ibid., s.v. *ra’ah achar ra’ah*) explains that rabbinic ambiguity regarding whether it is desirable to accept converts as a function of their motivation. Indeed, the *gemara* (*Yevamot* 47b) teaches:

And they do not overwhelm him with threats, and they are not exacting with him [about the details of the *mitzvot*; i.e., the court should not overly dissuade the convert from converting]. R. Elazar said: What is the verse from which this ruling is derived? As it is written: “And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking with her” (*Ruth* 1:18).

The *gemara* understands that just as Naomi attempted to dissuade Ruth from converting, a *beit din* should similarly attempt to dissuade a potential convert, until they see that the convert persists.

Next week, we will continue our discussion of the laws of conversion.