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Conversion to Judaism in Jewish law

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INTRODUCTION

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These essays explore conversion to Judaism and the issues connected with it in the late twentieth century. Our problems are very different from those of the past; they will be discussed in these pages.

Conversion to Judaism by individuals and groups has been part of the Jewish heritage from the early Biblical period onward, but not in our modern sense. In the Biblical period it meant joining a community more than a religion. We should note that even this was peripheral to other concerns.

In the patriarchal tales of the Bible, the stories of the conquest of Canaan, and the period of the judges and kings, however, conversion to Judaism remained a minor matter. Much more important was the dangerous attraction of other religions; the prophets consistently spoke about the problems which those religions caused the Israelites and Judeans.

The only militant effort at conversion to Judaism occurred during the period of the Maccabees (165-125 B.C.E.), when the Idumeans were forced to become Jews. Subsequently in the Roman Empire we sought converts through persuasion. Some historians feel that the Jewish communities of the Roman Empire consisted of more converts than of born Jews. In addition, many people were attracted to Judaism but never officially joined the Jewish People; those individuals called *Yirei Adonai* or *Gerei Tzedeq* were loosely identified with Judaism and sympathetic to its ideas. The number of such individuals in the Roman Empire as well as the size of the Jewish population in the Roman Empire remains an area of scholarly disagreement.

The Talmud reacted to those who converted to Judaism and those who sought to identify themselves with some portion of Jewish ethics and monotheism. The recorded reactions both positive and negative reflect historic circumstances, local events and personal experiences.

From the Council of Nicea (fourth century) and the later Fall of the Roman Empire until the middle of the nineteenth century, conversion to Judaism was rare and the subject was hardly discussed in Jewish circles. Attempts to convert us were, of course, made by the dominant Zoroastrian, Christian and Muslim communities which sought to force the Jewish minority into its fold. Jews, on the other hand, only rarely sought or succeeded in gaining converts. The most notable exception were the Khazars, a Southern Russian people whose ruling class converted to Judaism in the seventh or eighth century. This incident which seized the imagination of the oppressed and downtrodden Jewish community of Europe and North Africa was an isolated occurrence.

We did nothing to encourage conversion to Judaism during the Middle Ages as even a single convert could enrage the Christian world and bring about the destruction of a community. Some Christian and Muslim individuals nevertheless joined us; their members were very small and many of their names have, for that reason, been recorded.

The medieval codes of Jewish law dealt with converts and conversion but only briefly. There was no thorough discussion of these matters until the late nineteenth century when the Emancipation brought us into direct contact with the surrounding cultures of Europe and its inhabitants and conversion to Judaism began to occur.

In twentieth century America, and in other western lands, conversion to Judaism is no longer rare. We do not seek it through missionary efforts but welcome those who wish to join us. The larger number of converts has raised many issues about motivation, status, relationships with various segments of the Jewish community, requirements for conversion, etc. These essays, presented in San Antonio in nineteen ninety-two in a different form, should bring a better understanding of conversion to Judaism and its *halakhic* implications to the reader.