

Are Converts to Judaism Required to Immerse Their Utensils after Conversion?

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Introduction

One of the unique features of modern life in America is the ease with which secular culture and population accepts conversions to a different faith. Unlike other times and places, modern America allows one to change one's faith without any major social consequences, never mind the violence that was common in Eastern Europe just a few centuries ago if a person's conversion did not find favor with the local population.

Because of America's increasing acceptance and tolerance of different religions and lifestyles, conversion to Judaism has become much more common, resulting in a larger number of converts nowadays within the Orthodox community than in eras past. This pattern has given rise to a renewed focus on *hilchos geirim*, the halachic issues relating to the status of a convert after conversion.

There are essentially six areas of Halachah (Jewish Law) where the rules for a convert might differ from those who were born Jewish.

The first relates to the unique obligation toward a convert. There are mitzvos incumbent on born-Jews in their relationships with converts. The most striking is the special obligation to love the convert. In light of this, born Jews often experience difficulty deciding when to single out the convert and when to treat him or her like any other Jew. It is a very complex matter indeed,¹ but as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein avers, the duty to love the convert compels one to be lenient on matters of Halachah that relate to the ability of the convert to integrate into the community.²

¹ See Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvos* 307. For more on this obligation, see Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz's excellent work, "אהבת הגר—Loving the Convert: Converts to Judaism and Our Relationship to Them," distributed by the Chicago Rabbinical Council.

² See *Iggeros Moshe*, YD 4:26 and the conclusion of this article for further discussion.

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The second category relates to the convert's relationship with his or her family of origin. There are certain mitzvos that are applied *in toto* differently to a convert, since the convert's biological family is not Jewish. For example, how should a convert respect, honor, or mourn Gentile parents? Must a convert mourn parents in the same way as a born-Jew? Such questions apply no matter how long ago a person converted and no matter how well integrated s/he is within the Jewish community.

The third category relates to marriage laws relevant for a convert. There are certain people whom a convert may marry that a born-Jew may not generally marry, and there are certain people whom a convert may not marry that a born-Jew may marry. For example, a convert may marry a *mamzer*, and a female convert may not marry a *kohen*.

The fourth category relates to possible limitations on converts holding positions of authority within the Jewish community. Many societies exclude people from holding offices of power if they were not naturally born into the society. (One such society is the United States.³) The Talmud rules that a convert may not become a king of the Jewish nation. So too, a convert may not serve in any position of binding coercive authority in the Jewish community. This also precludes a convert's participation in some rabbinical courts. As such, there is much discussion as to which modern day positions of authority converts are prohibited from holding.

The fifth category relates to the eligibility of converts to recite traditional Jewish prayers that speak about ancestral Judaism. There is a famous dispute between Rabbeinu Tam and Rambam on this issue. As a general rule, the consensus seems to be that converts may recite all such prayers because a part of loving the convert involves helping them integrate into the larger community. However, some prayers and blessings remain in dispute, such as whether a convert should recite the blessing thanking G-d for "not making me a Gentile" as those born Jewish recite every day.

This paper deals with one case in the sixth and final category, which relates to the transition from Gentile to Jew. Such questions include the weight, role, and standing of acts the convert performed while still a Gentile as well as those that were ongoing during the process of conversions. For example, may a convert eat the kosher food cooked by the convert

³ For example, in the United States, only natural born citizens can be president or vice president. (Section 1, Article Two of the United States Constitution states: "No person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States...shall be eligible to the Office of President." The Twelfth Amendment states: "No person constitutionally ineligible to the office of President shall be eligible to that of Vice-President of the United States.")