

An Unintentional Intermarriage

By Gila Davids*

A strange thing happened on the way to my becoming a *bá'alat teshuvah*: I discovered I was not a Jew.

I made this discovery about fifteen years ago at the happy and lively Shabbat table of an engaging *kiruv* rabbi and his family, another one of those inspiring Shabbat meals that had attracted us to greater Torah observance. My husband, Allen, and I were a year or so into our Jewish learning at the local outreach *kollel* in the Midwestern city where we lived. Though we were still members of our Conservative synagogue, we were slowly adding more *mitzvot* as we saw how they enriched our lives and deepened our connection to God. Our host, a rabbi at the *kollel*, had just converted our kitchen into a kosher one and my husband and I had taken on observing the family purity laws. At the time, we were also considering the possibility of enrolling our young children in the local Orthodox day school.

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A student of our host was also there with his parents. The student wanted his non-religious parents to meet his rabbi's family, and I think we were invited to represent "normal" people who had come to Torah on their own. I cannot remember how the conversation began, but at some point the boy's mother commented that she had grown up without knowing her father's parents and half of her cousins very well because they were not Jewish. I naïvely remarked, "That's just how I grew up; all my mother's relatives are not Jewish." I think it was then that I heard the *reb-betzin* gasp.

I had learned enough Torah to realize—and the gasp confirmed—that maybe something in addition to my dishes was going to need converting.

My mother had converted to Judaism in a small Indiana town in the early 1950s in order to marry my father. Her conversion was overseen by the rabbi of the local Conservative synagogue, to which my family belonged throughout my childhood. Mom became a dedicated Jewess, learning as much as she could despite the limited resources available to her. We never had pork or shellfish in the house; we were

regular attendees at our synagogue; she was president of the sisterhood and was our rabbi's right-hand volunteer. While we often visited my maternal grandmother, the influence of my father's family dominated. With eighteen Jewish cousins living nearby, there were plenty of Bar Mitzvahs and weddings to attend and holiday gatherings to anchor us in Jewish family traditions.

Rich Jewish memories bound our family members to one another, but as I built my own family in a large city far from my childhood home, I found that that was not enough for me. I sought to connect to the deeper riches I saw that Judaism had to offer. With the help of outreach programs and the religious families we met, my husband and I found a great treasure in authentic Torah observance.

Soon after my revelation at the Shabbat table, the niggling suspicion that we were headed for roadblocks in our path to greater observance grew into the realization that I needed to look into my mother's conversion. I had the conversion certificate, so Allen and I met with the rabbi of the Conservative synagogue where we had been members since our marriage. After reviewing the

forty-year-old document, the rabbi confirmed that some streams of Judaism would question my mother's conversion—and therefore *my* Jewish status, as well as my children's. But not to worry, he said, he knew of an Orthodox rabbi who was coming to town in a few months who could "fix" the problem if we wanted. Otherwise, I was "Jewish enough" for him.

Some years earlier, we had been inspired by this same rabbi to begin moving towards keeping kosher and learning more about the *mitzvot*. However, the classes and speakers he brought in just served to whet our appetite. To his credit, this rabbi had responded to our desire to learn even more by suggesting we attend classes taught by the local Orthodox *kollel*. (The rabbis at the *kollel* displayed an integrity and consistency we had rarely encountered in our religious, social or business lives. It was their sincerity and complete dedication to the Law of God that kept us going back to learn more.)

As I questioned my halachic status, I slowly started to understand that even with my background, my memories, my desire to grow ... it was not enough. It wasn't that I wasn't Jewish *enough*—I wasn't Jewish at all.

After thirty-eight years of participation in Jewish life, my desire to deepen my commitment brought me face-to-face with the realization that I—who had endured hours of after school classes to learn Hebrew and prepare for my Bat Mitzvah, who had been active in Jewish youth groups and went to Jewish summer camps, who shunned bread on Pesach and all food on Yom Kippur—was not a Jew. I, who reined in my enthusiasm for Torah growth until I thought my husband was ready for each step, could not only enjoy fluffy muffins on Pesach, but could also heartily eat shrimp on any fast day I pleased. Allen, a prime candidate for intermarriage who had never met a rabbi until we were engaged or stepped foot into a synagogue until we were dating, was a 100 percent kosher Jew. And he had indeed intermarried.

Early on in our journey towards observance, a few months before we began learning at the *kollel* and more than a year before my Shabbat table announcement, Allen and I had visited Israel and had stumbled into a class with the *rosh yeshivah* of Aish HaTorah, Rabbi Noah Weinberg. We were impressed with the rabbi's "ABCs" of Judaism—a class that laid out the framework for an authentic Jewish outlook on life. (While we did not manage to remember the A or the B, the C stuck with us.) Rabbi Weinberg had said, "Don't believe a thing I say today, check it out." From then on, whenever we heard a new law or idea, an obser-

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vance or a custom, we made a practice of reading up on it and asking questions until we understood. We found that every Orthodox rabbi we met, every book and article we read, not only confirmed our new understanding but also deepened it. Checking things out had proved to be good advice.

This was the advice we applied to what was proving to be the greatest challenge to our embrace of authentic Judaism: the questions we had about my halachic status. There were three Orthodox synagogues in town. We thought we'd check out what each rabbi had to say about my predicament.

The first rabbi we met with led a small congregation known for its friendly atmosphere. Rabbi S. reviewed the conversion document and surprised us with his frankness when he told us, in no uncertain terms, that my mother's conversion was not kosher, and since I was therefore not Jewish at all, I

should just abandon the idea of Jewish growth, as it was not incumbent on me. His verdict may have been true, but it was also harsh. I felt as if my soul had been torn out of my body. All I was, my entire identity, I realized, was connected to the holiness, the responsibility and the truth of Judaism. I seemed as if he had forbidden me and my children access to something that I thought was inherently ours. I was truly lost in between two worlds.

"Illegitimate converts" and their offspring are the innocent victims of those who undermine the foundation of holiness upon which halachah stands. The candidate for conversion cannot possibly have a full understanding of the consequences of her choice, but the rabbi who accepts her most certainly does. One who seeks a non-halachic conversion as a means to placate family or to find acceptance upon marrying a Jew may neither realize nor care that her Jewish status is not universally recognized. But if she regards her conversion as an integral element in creating a foundation for the new family she and her husband hope to build, she is misled if she thinks the foundation is a solid one. Unaware of the implications for the future, she will raise her children within the framework of Jewish life, and ironically, may be among the most committed "Jews" in her new family or congregation. The children, raised with a strong Jewish identity, will bear the full brunt of their parents' naïveté if, in their teen and adult years, they explore, as I did, an authentic Torah lifestyle. Such an investigation will undoubtedly reveal the shaky underpinnings of the Jewish identity to which they lay claim, causing confusion and pain for the entire family.

Allen and I continued our investigation into my status with a rabbi known to be an expert in halachah. Rabbi G. was a congregational rabbi who also taught Jewish law at a local university. The "Who Is a Convert?" issue is a growing and controversial topic, he said, and our case involved contradictory opinions, all of which are laden with agenda. Some try to find a way to accept the sincere non-Orthodox

convert while others insist every one of these conversions is invalid. The intellectual rabbi objectively explained several options we could follow and the consequences of these choices. Allen and I learned a lot, but left him without a viable option that rang true for us.

The truth was that my earnest commitment, my core identity, my life-long affiliation and my membership in Jewish organizations were irrelevant. Judaism is not a club one decides to join, nor is it a democracy where the majority make the rules. The only handbook for admission is the Torah, and the rules were decided by God. The only way “in” was for a *beit din* to conclude that I honestly wanted to shear away my past as a Gentile (which was painfully ironic), cling only to the Jewish people and sincerely commit to observing all of the 613 *mitzvot* that pertain to me.

While we were indeed on our way towards a more observant life, Allen and I did not think we were ready for the monumental step of becoming totally *shomer mitzvot*. Doing so would entail selling the home we loved, leaving the synagogue and neighborhood where we had close friends (who did not necessarily understand our situation) and moving to an Orthodox community so we could observe Shabbat and holidays properly. It didn't seem fair.

Just as when a ba'al teshuvah (BT), introduced to authentic Torah values, often feels cheated by the vapidness of the religious system in which he was raised, the child of an illegitimate convert who does teshuvah feels doubly betrayed. He may think and feel Jewish to the core. A born Jew, whether he is Orthodox or agnostic, remains a Jew regardless of his actions or affiliation. But a non-halachic Jew who remains committed to his Jewish identity may one day be faced with the devastating reality that he is not, at his essence, the person he thinks he is.

I could have been resentful and angry, but up until this episode, everything we had learned about authentic Judaism, despite the difficulties, rang of truth and compassion. We knew the

truth, but where was the compassion?

We decided to see what the rabbi of the city's largest Orthodox synagogue would say. At that meeting, we found the first inkling of honest compassion we had seen throughout this heartbreaking ordeal.

Rabbi D. welcomed us into his office, made some small talk and soon got to the subject at hand. He listened intently, as if it were the first time he had heard such a case. Rabbi D. did not turn me away or lecture us on the state of Orthodoxy. He did not prescribe a shortcut. He was the first rabbi who did not make a snap judgment, taking the time to make some investigative calls before ruling that the conversion was not kosher. Then he did what no other rabbi had done—he sympathized and was painfully honest with us; he showed us courageous compassion.

He assured us that the problem was not a terminal one. Rabbi D. explained that the Jewish nation only exists because of the Torah. A Jew was designed to be a particular kind of creation and, as such, the Torah spells out the way we are to wake, eat, pray and sleep. While each of us is unique, halachah is the framework through which we express our uniqueness in serving God, and it is essentially the same for every Jew—and only for the Jew.

Since my identity was firmly Jewish and I had been through thirty-eight cycles of the Jewish calendar (albeit superficially), and since my sincere *teshuvah* brought me to this discovery, Rabbi D. said he would work with me. When I was ready to be *shomer mitzvot*, he would convert me.

Allen and I were not ready to make the move to an observant community for almost a year. Since our children were also not halachic Jews, Rabbi D. advised the local day school to accept them as potential converts. Allen and I continued taking classes and slowly took on more *mitzvot*. On the surface, we seemed like any other BT family. Eventually we became *shomer Shabbat*, and uprooted ourselves from our home and community.

Finally, the day I was to go before the *beit din* arrived. Even though I knew and trusted the rabbis in this court of law, they presided with gravity; they were reserved and serious while I was intimidated and afraid. I knew that my life literally hung in the balance; I did not know how I could cope without halachah as the framework for my life.

After a grueling two hours, my new rabbi, Rabbi D., welcomed me as a sister into the Jewish people, and I dissolved into tears of relief and gratitude in his office. I stood in the mikvah and had the awesome opportunity of affirming my commitment to live my life immersed in truth.

Later that day, the rabbis of the *beit din* spoke with our children before they immersed in the mikvah. Rabbi D. took pains to explain to them, at a level they could understand, how this was a special turning point in their lives. Finally, Allen and I were married in a simple ceremony, surrounded by a few new friends and by the *kollel* couples who had taught us, counseled us and now celebrated with us.

But our story does not conclude here. For the children and grandchildren of an illegitimate convert, there is no happy ending. Sensitive family issues arise as my sisters, already challenged by our *teshuvah*, do not understand that they are not Jewish. Owing their strong Jewish identity to the values my parents instilled in us, my sisters married Jews and are raising their children with Jewish youth groups and summer camps, Brises and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Also raised in today's culture of relative rather than absolute truth, my nieces and nephews are not equipped to appreciate the role of halachah in their lives. They ask me questions that have answers they cannot hear. Most likely, they will one day end up at a *kiruv* event at some college campus, and face the same realization and rejection that I experienced.

Sadly, there are thousands like me, children of non-halachic converts, inter-marriage or both. And the number grows. One college campus outreach worker told

me that as a rule, of the kids interested in his programming who have Jewish-sounding names (the Cohens and Goldsteins), over 50 percent are not halachically Jewish. Conversely, the kids with non-Jewish-sounding names who show up at his events (the Rogers and MacDonalds) are almost always the children of an intermarried Jewish mother. They are the Jews.

As the clock ticks, we are running out of time to save the millions of remaining Jews from adding to the skyrocketing statistics of intermarriage. Kiruv professionals have the monumental challenge of touching as many Jewish souls as possible and cannot possibly be expected to spend their precious resources counseling the child of a non-Jewish mother.

Do I encourage my interested relatives, give them books, invite them for Shabbat as one would reach out to any Jew with a desire to grow? And if they marry Gentiles, should I, an observant Jew, boycott the weddings because of the appearance of intermarriage? And if they marry Jews, do I risk further ostracization from my family with my objections? The most sensitive issues arise in the relationship between the converted child and the non-halachically converted mother. It is a painful irony that I owe a great deal of my desire to have a true Jewish home to my mother's sincere commitment to Judaism. After 120 years, I will not be able to sit a proper *shivah* for either her or my father.

My story is not unique, but for most rabbis, the questions are. The *she'eilot* that have spun out of my *gerut*, conversion, have been among the most difficult my rabbi has faced in his career. Unfortunately, the problem, which is snowballing due to the broadening acceptance of patrilineal descent, presents enormous challenges for today's Orthodox rabbinate. A rabbi advising the BT or *ger* needs the blessing of an extra dose of insight to help us navigate the large questions and nuances unique to our new identity. Sensitivity is needed as well, as many of us have Jewish-born spouses as well as children in tow. The ability to wisely and compassion-

The Cycle Continues

Many young adults, raised in non-observant homes, are unaware of or unconcerned about the fact that their maternal grandmothers were improperly converted to Judaism. But these inauthentic conversions jeopardize the integrity of thousands of Jewish marriages outside the realm of Orthodoxy.

Unintentional intermarriages (i.e., when a Jewish male marries a woman who believes she is Jewish but is actually a non-halachic Jew) result in yet another generation of non-Jews who identify Jewishly. The cycle continues.

For observant individuals seeking to get married, a conversion that took place among a prospective *shidduch's* grandparents or great-grandparents is a cause for investigation. Indeed, the FFB child of many a FFD (from for decades) mother may find his halachic status judged in the light of his mother's *gerut*.

Even the "best" conversions are often scrutinized, causing pain and embarrassment to the child's parents, who may be converts themselves or children of converts who long ago assimilated into the community.

Of course, most children of *gerim* experience this kind of scrutiny at an earlier time in life. Children and grandchildren of converts are routinely asked to produce the paperwork from a parent or grandparent's conversion when applying to Jewish schools, camps or volunteer programs, when joining a synagogue or when making *aliyah*. Certainly the background check is necessary, but it serves as a constant reminder to the *ger* and to her children that even those of us born with a Jewish identity come from a tainted lineage. No matter how much we are cautioned to love the *ger* and to avoid causing her pain or embarrassment, an aura of suspicion still hovers.

After years of sincere learning, confusion and struggle, years of fighting the feeling of being isolated and the pain of unintentional insults, I finally stood in the mikvah and declared my acceptance of Torah and *mitzvot*. I thought, "At last, it's over." But it's not over. The questions, the suspicion, the sense of separateness caused by one rabbi who, half a century ago, chose to subvert the halachah, will follow me, my children and grandchildren at every turn in our lives. It never goes away.

ately guide us and uphold the incontrovertible truth of the Torah rests heavily on these rabbis' shoulders.

One can be either a BT or a *ger*, but not both. However, I *feel* like both, and I feel like neither. I share the same cultural background as many of my BT friends, made the same choice to claim our inheritance and deal with similar matters concerning our non-observant and intermarried families. Still, they cannot truly understand what it means to be a *ger*. Emotionally and spiritually, I connect to the family of noble *gerim* whom I have met. We overcame exclusion, suspicion and great hurdles that a

BT cannot understand. We unequivocally affirmed our commitment and were reborn as Jews. And yet I cannot truly understand what it means to shear away a past in the same way that the *gerim* I met did.

Yet, I would do it again. The *raison d'être* for the Jew is to change and grow beyond the limits we imagine we have. As I look back fifteen years to the beginning of my odyssey, to the woman I was at the rabbi's Shabbat table, and see where I sit today, I realize that when I cast my lot with the Jewish people and commit to doing God's will, anything can happen. **IA**

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