

Rabbi Uziel on Conversions

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

One of the outstanding modern rabbinic authorities was Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel (1880 - 1953) who had served with distinction as the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel beginning in 1939. Rabbi Uziel had an extraordinary career, both as a scholar and as a statesman. Recognized universally for his profound erudition, he was an active leader in Jewish affairs, applying his religious convictions to the political situations which the Jewish people faced.

One of the important areas which Rabbi Uziel treated in his responsa relates to the issue of conversion to Judaism. There were (and continue to be) many questions concerning conversion for the sake of marriage, and conversion to Judaism when the non - Jew does not sincerely intend to observe Jewish law in full. The weight of orthodox opinion has tended to consider any conversion to Judaism where there is no strong commitment to Jewish observance to be invalid and meaningless. One orthodox rabbi has stated what many believe, that "conversion to Judaism without commitment to observance has no validity whatever and the spuriously converted person remains in the eyes of Halakha a non - Jew as before."

Rabbi Uziel offered a different point of view on this topic. In a responsum written in 1943, Rabbi Uziel argued that when an intermarried couple comes to a Jewish court seeking the con-

version of the non - Jewish partner, we must allow such a conversion even if we are not convinced that the convert will be fully observant of Jewish law in every detail. We may not take the haughty attitude that since these individuals have flaunted Jewish tradition by their act of intermarriage we should let them suffer the fate of transgressors. On the contrary, since they have come to rabbinic authorities, the couple now displays a desire to rejoin the Jewish people in full. They have shown that they want to be part of the Jewish community. Even if we know that the main and perhaps the only reason for the conversion is marriage, yet when all is said and done such a conversion is still valid from Halakhaic point of view.

Indeed Rabbi Uziel argues that such conversions are not only permissible but actually are morally required. Rabbis are not only permitted to convert a non - Jew for the sake of marriage, but are urged not to avoid the positive responsibility of so doing. Rabbi Uziel believes the consequences of allowing an intermarriage to take place or to continue are far more serious than the implications of conversion when the ideal situation does not exist. Rabbi Uziel is particularly concerned that children born of an intermarried couple should not

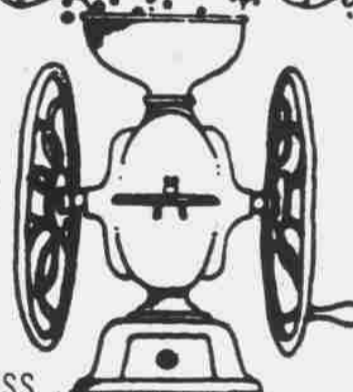
be lost to the Jewish fold. Therefore, by encouraging the conversion of a non - Jewish spouse, there is a chance that the children will grow up in a Jewish milieu. In a responsum dating from 1951, Rabbi Uziel concludes that it is permissible and in fact obligatory for us to accept converts even though it is known to us that they will not observe all of the commandments. We can assume that their coming to Judaism will lead them to become more observant. By opening the door for them and letting them enter our community we can strengthen Jewish life. Needless to say, we must make every effort to teach them the Torah and to encourage their observance of our commandments. But in the final analysis, we must rely on our sense of compassion and reason.

Rabbi Uziel's opinion has, as can be imagined, received sharp criticism. His liberal stance on the subject of conversion is not accepted by some. Yet, it is clear that he had the deep learning and faith to deal with a sensitive issue in a forthright fashion. One prominent rabbi wrote that Rabbi Uziel personified the Sephardi rabbinical tradition in his analysis of the sources, in the clarity of his language, and in the courage of his convictions.

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