

## Conflicting Attitudes to Conversion in Judaism, Past and Present

Therefore maidens shall love Thee [Song 1:3] this refers to proselytes . . . R. Berakhiah said: Israel said to God ‘O sovereign of the universe, because Thou bringest light into the world Thy name is magnified in the world. And what is that light? Redemption. For when Thou bringest us light many proselytes come and convert and join us as did Jethro and Rahab . . .’. R. Haninah said: When God performed the miracle for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah many converts converted as it is written [Isa 29:23–24] ‘When his children see what I have wrought in their midst they will hallow My name; hallowing the Holy One of Jacob and revering the God of Israel. And erring spirits shall gain understanding . . .’<sup>1</sup>

Evidence suggests that conversion originated during the Babylonian Exile. Around the same time, biological genealogy was gaining popularity, especially among priests whose legitimacy was becoming increasingly defined by ‘pure’ pedigree. When the biological, or ethnic, criterion is extended to the definition of Jewishness, as it seems to have been by Ezra, the possibility of conversion is all but precluded. The Rabbis did not reject the primacy of genealogy, yet were also heirs to a strong pro-conversion tradition. In this book, Isaac Sassoon confronts the tensions and paradoxes apparent in rabbinic discussions of conversion, and argues that they resulted from irresolution between the two conflicting traditions. He also contends that attitudes to conversion can impact, not only one’s conception of Judaism, but also one’s faith, as seems to be demonstrated by authors cited in the book whose espousal of a narrowly ethnic view of Judaism allows for a nepotistic theology.

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<sup>1</sup> *Midrash Shir Ha-shirim Rabbah* [Hazitha] 1:22 (translation based on Maurice Simon’s, Soncino Press London 1961 [1939] p. 39). Cf. Rashi on Song 1:3.

# Conflicting Attitudes to Conversion in Judaism, Past and Present

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## Glossary

**Aggadah** non halakhic material in rabbinic literature; a single aggadic text (pl. aggadoth)

**Amora** a talmudic sage of the post-mishnaic period (pl. amoraim)

**Asmakhtah** lightly rated, non-binding derashah (pl. asmakhtoth)

**‘Avon** transgression, sin

**Bahereth** a dermatological affliction (see Lev 13:2, 4, 19 etc.)

**Bamah** lit. a high place (pl. bamoth). After the centralization of the cult, *bamoth* became a pejorative by which the Deuteronomistic histories refer to all cult centres outside the chosen site. The rabbis used the term also to denote legitimate pre-centralization shrines.

**Baraita** tannaic materials not included in the Mishnah (such as the Tosefta)

**Bavli** the Babylonian Talmud developed in the Mesopotamian academies third-sixth centuries CE

**Berakhah** blessing

**Beriyoth** God’s creatures, esp. humans; humanity as a whole (sing. beriah)

**Berith** covenant

**Beth din** rabbinic court of law (pl. baté din)

**Dayyan** judge, esp. of a beth din (pl. dayyanim)

**Derash** midrashic interpretation (as opposed to peshat)

**Derashah** rabbinic exegesis to a specific text; a sermon

**De-oraita** derived from scripture

- De-rabbanan** derived from the rabbis
- ‘Erub Tabshilin** food prepared for sabbath in advance of a festival that falls on a Friday
- Ezrah** native; often contrasted with ger
- Geburah** power; in Kabbalah it denotes the *sefirah* that symbolizes power
- Gemara** Talmud; esp. its post-mishnaic parts that elaborate on the Mishnah (*q.v.*) and make up the majority of its text
- Ger şedeq** righteous convert (pl. geré şedeq)
- Ger toshab** resident alien
- Get** bill of divorce
- Gezerah shavah** analogy based on congruous wording (see Enc. Jud. 8:367)
- Giyur** abstract noun denoting conversion or converting (its rarer synonym is geruth)
- Ḥaber** associate, friend; historically, a member of a commensality that observed ritual purity (pl. ḥaberim)
- Halakhah** an individual rabbinic ruling (pl. halakhoth); the corpus of rabbinic law
- Ḥalişah** the shoe-loosing ceremony enjoined at Dt 25:7–10
- Haqhel** public reading of the Torah on Sukkoth in the year of [*or* in the year following] shemittah (see Dt 31:10–13; M. Sot. 7:8)
- Ḥazal** the Sages
- Hashem** God, the Lord (see Dt 28:58)
- Ḥesed** love, lovingkindness, covenant-fidelity
- Kareth** excision, cutting off
- Kibyakhol** as if; so to speak (used to indicate the language’s inadequacy when speaking of God; see M. San. 6:5)
- Mamzeruth** illegitimacy, bastardy (hence, a mamzer/mamzereth)
- Maqom** lit. place, location; also God (within whose embrace and grasp the world has its being; see Gen. Rab. 68:10)
- Midrash** rabbinic exegesis; such exegesis as a literary genre
- Miqveh** a gathering of waters, a pool (see Gen 1:10; Lev 11:36); a ritual bath (var. *miqvah*)
- Mishnah** the compendium of rabbinic law that constitutes the oldest component of the Talmud (early third century); also, a mishnaic passage (pl. mishnayoth). Cf. gemara



- Mishpat** law, justice, a court of law
- Miṣvah** commandment, benevolent act; pl. miṣvoth
- Nathin** a Gibeonite [in talmudic usage] (pl. nethinim)
- Nebelah** carrion; meat from an animal not slaughtered by the kosher method
- Ona'ah** oppression, wronging, cheating
- Pagum/pegumah** tainted (mostly used in reference to genealogy)
- Parush** separate, set apart; a Pharisee
- Peshaṭ** the plain, self-explanatory meaning of the text (as opposed to derash)
- Pilpul** talmudic argumentation; casuistry
- Poseq** a decisor of, or ruler on, halakhah (pl. posqim)
- Qal vaḥomer** *a minori ad majus* argument
- Qiddush [ha-yom]** sanctification; especially the sanctification blessing recited over wine on sabbath and festivals
- Rishon** medieval halakhist (pl. rishonim)
- Sappaḥath** a dermatological affliction (see Lev 13:2)
- Setham** anonymous; opinions presented anonymously in the gemara and thought to be redactional; the Talmud's [final] redactors (also spelt: stam)
- Sheḥiṭah** ritual slaughter of sacrificial or profane animals
- Shema'** credal or liturgical recitation of Dt 6:4 (whose incipit is *shema'* =hear)
- Sugya** a unit of talmudic discussion (pl. sugyoth)
- Ṭaharah** purity (moral or ritual)
- Talmidé-ḥakhamim** lit. students of the wise, but mostly denoting torah scholars in general
- Tanna** sage of the mishnaic era, esp. as contrasted with *amora* (pl. *tannaim*; adjectives: tannaic, tannaic)
- Targum** Aramaic paraphrase of Scripture (pl. *targumim*)
- Ṭebilah** immersion in a ritual bath
- Terumah** a heave offering; in rabbinic usage the firstfruits of grain, wine and oil given to the priests (see Num 18:12 and Dt 18:4)
- Torah she-be'al pé** the oral torah (as distinct from the written)
- Tosefta** collection of tannaic material more or less contemporary with, but not included in, the Mishnah (var. *tosifta*)

*Glossary*

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**Ṭum'ah** impurity, defilement (moral *or* ritual)

**Yerushalmi** the Jerusalem Talmud (a.k.a. the Palestinian Talmud)  
developed in the Holy Land third-fifth centuries CE

**Yihhus** genealogy, pedigree, bloodline; a system that uses all or any of  
these to rank people socio-religiously

## Abbreviations

### Bible

Gen	Genesis
Ex	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Dt	Deuteronomy
Jos	Joshua
Jud	Judges
1Sam	1 Samuel
2Sam	2 Samuel
1Kgs	1 Kings
2Kgs	2 Kings
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Ezek	Ezekiel
Hos	Hosea
Jon	Jonah
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Ps	Psalms
Prv	Proverbs

*List of Abbreviations*

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Song	Song of Songs
Dan	Daniel
Neh	Nehemiah
1Chr	1 Chronicles
2Chr	2 Chronicles

**Rabbinic Texts**

M. Ber.	Mishnah Berakhoth
M. Dem.	Mishnah Demai
M. Bik.	Mishnah Bikkurim
M. Erub.	Mishnah Erubin
M. Sheq.	Mishnah Sheqalim
M. Yom.	Mishnah Yoma
M. R.H.	Mishnah Rosh Hashanah
M. Suk.	Mishnah Sukkah
M. Ta'an.	Mishnah Ta'anith
M. Hag.	Mishnah Hagigah
M. Yeb.	Mishnah Yebamoth
M. Ket.	Mishnah Kethuboth
M. Ned.	Mishnah Nedarim
M. Sot.	Mishnah Sotah
M. Git.	Mishnah Gittin
M. Qid.	Mishnah Qiddushin
M. B.Q.	Mishnah Baba Qamma
M. San.	Mishnah Sanhedrin
M. Mak.	Mishnah Makkoth
M. Edu.	Mishnah Eduyoth
M. A.Z.	Mishnah Abodah Zarah
M. Hor.	Mishnah Horayoth
M. Hul.	Mishnah Hullin
M. Mid.	Mishnah Middoth
M. Kel.	Mishnah Kelim
M. Neg.	Mishnah Nega'im
M. Makh.	Mishnah Makhshirin
T. Dem.	Tosefta Demai
T. Pes.	Tosefta Pesahim
T. Kip.	Tosefta Kippurim (Yoma)

T. Hag.	Tosefta Hagigah
T. Yeb.	Tosefta Yebamoth
T. Sot.	Tosefta Sotah
T. Qid.	Tosefta Qiddushin
T. San.	Tosefta Sanhedrin
T.A.Z.	Tosefta Abodah Zarah
T. Hor.	Tosefta Horayoth
T. Qor.	Tosefta Qorbanoth (Zebahim)
Ber.	Berakhoth
Shab.	Shabbath
Pes.	Pesahim
Yom.	Yoma
Bes.	Besah
R.H.	Rosh Hashanah
Meg.	Megillah
Hag.	Hagigah
Yeb.	Yebamoth
Ket.	Kethuboth
Ned.	Nedarim
Naz.	Nazir
Sot.	Sotah
Git.	Gittin
Qid.	Qiddushin
B.Q.	Baba Qama
B.M.	Baba Mesi'a
B.B.	Baba Bathra
San.	Sanhedrin
Mak.	Makkoth
Shebu	Shebu'oth
A.Z.	Abodah Zarah
Hor.	Horayoth
Men.	Menahoth
Hul.	Hullin
Bekh.	Bekhoroth
Arakh.	Arakhin
Ker.	Kerithoth
Nid.	Niddah
Y. Ber.	Yerushalmi Berakhoth

*List of Abbreviations*

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Y. Dem.	Yerushalmi Demai
Y. Kil.	Yerushalmi Kilaim
Y. Hal.	Yerushalmi Hallah
Y. Bik.	Yerushalmi Bikkurim
Y. Pes.	Yerushalmi Pesahim
Y. Ta'an.	Yerushalmi Ta'anith
Y. R.H.	Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah
Y. Meg.	Yerushalmi Megillah
Y. Hag.	Yerushalmi Hagigah
Y. Yeb.	Yerushalmi Yebamoth
Y. Sot.	Yerushalmi Sotah
Y. Qid.	Yerushalmi Qiddushin
Y. San.	Yerushalmi Sanhedrin
Y. Hor.	Yerushalmi Horayoth
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
Exod. Rab.	Exodus Rabbah
Lev. Rab.	Leviticus Rabba
Num. Rab.	Numbers Rabbah
Deut. Rab.	Deuteronomy Rabbah
Ruth Rab.	Ruth Rabbah

**General**

BCE	Before Common Era
CE	Common Era
Esp.	especially
<i>S.v.</i>	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word <i>or</i> heading)