**Rising to the challenge of conversion**

Rabbi Ralph Genende OAM

Why the aversion to conversion? I’m referring to the trend to make conversions more difficult and intractable that has gripped the Jewish world for the past twenty five years or so. Conversion to Judaism was never meant to be easy and instant but then it was also never meant to be tortuous and protracted. Let’s be clear – conversion isn’t like choosing a new restaurant or change of clothing. It’s a challenge, a delicate heart-operation, a process that demands thought, commitment, a change of lifestyle, a new perspective. It’s not just about choosing a religion or changing a religion. It’s about joining a people, becoming part of a family, adopting a new history and changing your name. For men it’s often about changing your actual body, your actual image of yourself.

The paradigm for conversion is Ruth who famously says: “For wherever you will go, I will go; where you live I will live; your people are my people; your God is my God; where you die I will die and there I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth recognises that to be Jewish is to live with other Jews, to be part of a Jewish neighbourhood connected to a Jewish community. She appreciates that it’s tying your destiny to a nation that has suffered as much as it has triumphed. She knows that it’s about engaging with the compassionate and demanding God of Israel; accepting the laws and customs that are in the Torah and the teachings of its rabbis. She knows that it’s a lifetime of commitment, ‘till death do us part’.

And so any conversion to Orthodox Judaism is about adopting the Jewish way of life, living an observant lifestyle. In one sense that’s the easy part, for the would-be-convert has to also relinquish their former way of living, let go of things they’ve always done, change primary relationships, challenge their own priorities and sometimes even principles. They’ve got to negotiate with their own families of origin, respect their own parents and traditions and simultaneously accept a whole new family and bewildering raft of new practises. They’ve also got to dig deep within and change their very self-perception.

Now this is no simple or quick strategy. It’s a long, considered and subtle process with its own inevitable ups and downs; times of despair, angst, stress and questioning; times of elation, joy, wonder and hope. You can’t put a time frame on the journey of a heart, the odyssey of a soul. It’s a life journey, quirky and individual. But it’s also a very practical and quotidian process. In the majority of situations today, conversion is about a relationship with a Jewish partner and the anticipation of a marriage. This is known and accepted by the overwhelming majority of Batei-Din worldwide including the Melbourne Beth Din. Invariably when approaching a rabbi or the registrar of the Beth-Din, the candidate has been through an exploratory phase, meeting the Jewish family of the partner, talking to a range of people, reading about Judaism and often attending Shabbat and festive meals. Some are ill-informed but many, if not most, aren’t just walking off the street with no idea about the challenges of conversion. Most, if not all, have already decided to undertake this step because they’re committed to their Jewish partner. The majority of potential Jews who walk through my door are pretty well-informed, more often than not, smart, educated, articulate and principled. They know that being Jewish isn’t simple and easy. And that’s not surprising when you consider that our Jewish kids are well educated and a huge proportion are professional, confident, intelligent and eloquent.

As Rav Shlomo Riskin has asserted, we are a religion of compassion and it’s caring and sharing that should dictate our approach to the would-be-convert. Being friendly, warm and tolerant in our attitude is not the same as being a ‘soft touch’ or having no standards or demands. “Love the convert” is surely a mitzvah that can begin the moment you meet that stranger who wants to become a Jew. Hilel knew that when he famously met the chutzpadik non-Jew who asked to know all about Judaism while he stood on one foot (Shamai didn’t get it and aggressively rebuffed him). Why treat would- be converts with suspicion and sometimes even try trick them to test their sincerity? To be sure, some will be more truthful and others more passionate in their commitment. Conversion is not about the end of a process but the beginning of a journey. Perhaps we shouldn’t expect converts too much from converts but we should expect them to have lived an observant Jewish life for at least a year, to be knowledgeable, to be dedicated, to be part of the Jewish community, and hopefully in love with Jewish destiny. We can and should expect them to be deeply connected, willing to stay the distance, raise their kids as Jews…

This is why the recently published recommendations of the MBD subcommittee are so important. These are a bold and refreshing set of suggestions about changing the way we receive those seeking to convert and mediate the process. While I may not agree with every point it’s a welcome document recognising that not only are the times changing, but that our approaches also need to be re-examined. The MBD has often been criticised for its handling of the conversion process-and not without justification –but now is the time to recognise and commend it for undertaking this review in such a rigorous, albeit imperfect, way .Some of the assertions are untested, a few of the suggestions are questionable and the research isn’t necessarily statistically reliable, but it is a courageous, thoughtful and forward- looking report and its authors are to be commended. It’s a brave and thoughtful start! It has the chance of being transformative. Hopefully it will be endorsed by the dayanim, refined and developed and ultimately positively embraced by the community.

Let’s recognise the wealth of fresh talent and energy that converts bring to our community. Solomon asserted ‘There’s a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing’. There have been eras in our history when it was dangerous to seek out or encourage potential converts. There have been times when the motives of would-be-Jews were dubious. Occasions to refrain from embracing. But there have also been times when we welcomed converts, and recognised the sacrifice, courage and determination they show by seeking to be Jewish. We have this opportunity right here, right now in Melbourne; a time to embrace. Now is the time!

Rabbi Ralph Genende