

The 13 Principles of Conversion

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As the subject has come up in various forums including [God Save Us From Your Opinion: A Place For Serious Discussion of Judaism](#), [Jewish Conversion Discussion Group](#), and others, following are 13 principles regarding the Halakhic requirements of conversion. As in most areas of Halakha there are disagreements in the normative rabbinic community about these requirements. That said, the following points represent, in my opinion following more than 10 years of research, a solidly-based mainstream Halakhic approach.

- 1) Halakhic conversion requires *kabbalat mitzvot*, generally translated as “acceptance of the commandments”, on the part of the proselyte.
- 2) There is disagreement among the *poskim* (leading scholars of Halakha) regarding the Halakhic definition of *kabbalat mitzvot*.
- 3) A mainstream position among many *poskim* is that *kabbalat mitzvot* means nothing more than non-coercive conversion, that is consensual conversion; in other words the proselyte is converting of his or her own free will (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).
- 4) *Le-khatchila* (ab initio), the consent of the proselyte to convert should be **informed** consent. That is, the proselyte should know that Judaism includes *mitzvot* (commandments) that bind all Jews, whether by birth or via conversion, as well as reward for those who observe the commandments and punishment for those who transgress them (however we might theologically understand this reward and punishment). But, according to this opinion, *kabbalat mitzvot* does not mean that the convert is committing to observe the commandments in practice (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

- 5) Some *poskim* claim that the above position is a **minority** position (I humbly disagree), but do admit that this position was widely practiced in the past (see [here](#)).
- 6) Many *poskim* who reject the above position *le-khatchila*, do accept it *be-diavad* (post facto). That is, if the proselyte was converted despite a lack of intent to observe the mitzvot in practice, the conversion is nevertheless Halakhically valid *be-diavad* (see [here](#)). Of particular interest is the position of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (one of the greatest *poskim* of the 20th century) regarding a proselyte who did not intend to observe even as central a mitzvah as Shabbat (see [here](#)).
- 7) A proselyte who ceases to observe the commandments, no matter how immediate or extreme (including going back to his/her previous religion), remains Jewish according to Halakha (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).
- 8) The Talmud states that a proselyte who is prepared to accept the entirety of Halakha with one exception is not to be accepted. That said, the Shulkhan Aruch (primary code of Jewish law) does not rule according to this statement. Moreover, the Talmud's statement applies only if the proselyte converts **on condition** that s/he will **not be obligated** by Jewish law to observe this one Halakhic point s/he does not accept (see [here](#)). Further, the statement of the Talmud prohibits the conversion court from accepting such a proselyte only *le-khatchila*. But if the court performed the conversion, it is Halakhically valid *be-diavad* (see [here](#) and [here](#)).
- 9) If three laymen (i.e., non-rabbis) perform a conversion, it is Halakhically valid **at least** *be-diavad* (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).
- 10) In converting a proselyte who will likely not be observant and who will transgress the commandments, the conversion court is not guilty of lifnei iver (placing a stumbling block in front of the blind, i.e., aiding and abetting) if it is performing the conversion in order to prevent intermarriage (see [here](#)).

11) If a proselyte converts for the purpose of marrying a Jew, the conversion is Halakhically valid **at least** *be-diavad* (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

12) Conversion is the **first step** a gentile takes in his/her Jewish journey. The Talmud, Rambam, and Shulkhan Arukh describe a conversion process which is almost immediate, with no study or preparation beforehand. A standard practice in the 1950's was a one-month course in the basics of Judaism (see [here](#)). At least one leading *posek* (scholar of Halakha) rules that it is entirely **prohibited** to teach a proselyte Torah before the conversion (see [here](#)).

13) There are those who contend that the implementation of traditional Halakhic conversion must change from what was practiced in the past. They reason that prior to the phenomenon of secularization when most Jews observed the Halakha, it was presumed that a proselyte would be observant. But nowadays, since most Jews are not Halakhically observant, we must be careful to convert only those who we firmly believe will be observant. It is, however, **incorrect** that before the phenomenon of secularization it could be presumed that a proselyte would be observant (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). To the contrary, in an era marked by widespread secularization (such as the contemporary era), there is yet more room to convert proselytes who will likely not be observant (see [here](#)).

The Halakhic parameters of conversion are, of course, much more complex than can be covered in a Facebook post. For further Halakhic sources on the relevant issues, see [here](#).

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