

## **FOR THE SAKE OF A KADDISH**

A TRUE STORY BY ABRAHAM ROSE

Translated from the Hebrew by his son, Reuben Rose.

JEWISH CHRONICLE—New Year Section September 25 1970

There are events in our lives which occurred many years ago that can never be forgotten. They stand out like rocks on the sea-shore.

One day a woman—short, stout and swarthy, one of the type of Jewish women then living in East London—came to see me. Her husband was the manager of a public house, and she helped him to run it. They had an assistant who saw to the decorum and respectability of the place. The public house was open for two hours during the day, and in the evenings until ten. The customers were, in the main, manual workers who spent their hours drinking, playing darts, and community singing. Her husband received a monthly salary together with a three room flat above the business.

“My husband and I,” she explained, “have been married for more than 40 years. “He served In the British Army in India in the First World War and knew Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scout movement. “We have a married son and daughter” she continued. “My son has a family and he will shortly celebrate the *Barmitzvah* of his elder son. They are married to Jews, and they keep Jewish homes. But I am not married to a Jew. I have therefore come to you, the *Rav* of the congregation, to advise me what steps to take to make my husband a Jew.”

It was not unusual for two young people to come to interview me about conversion, but here I was bewildered. “I have no authority to make converts to Judaism” I told her. “This authority is vested in the *Beth Din* that sits in East London. I don't know for certain,” I continued, “whether I have the authority even to prepare converts in their studies to pass the requisite examination”.

“Besides, I am not fully conversant with the whole affair. Apparently your husband is nearly seventy and your children have already grown up. Your son must be at least 40 and your daughter 30; in that case, what would you gain by your husband's conversion? How many more years do you think he will live? If all this time he has not made the effort, why bother now?”

"You have touched on the weak point" she replied. "That Is the very reason why I came to you. In two years' time, perhaps less, my husband will retire and live on his pension. He may not live long after his retirement, as he is not well. This fact drove me to take steps to make him into a Jew immediately, not so much for myself as for my son.”

“My son has become a member of an Orthodox congregation in London, and mixes in religious Jewish circles. If—God forbid—my husband should die before he has become a Jew, my son would, never forgive us. He wants to say *Kaddish* on his father's death. My son has Jewish friends who will want to comfort him in his days of mourning and come

to evening prayers, just as he does for them when they are in mourning. He doesn't want to be shamed when they learn that his father was a non-Jew and there are no prayers, no *Kaddish* and no mourning.”

This reason for conversion appeared strange to me. Generally, it is a question of infatuation. A young man and a woman of two different religions meet, become friendly, fall in love and decide to get married. In order not to cut themselves off from both families, the weaker character gives up his or her? religious connections and is prepared to accept the other's religion. The *Beth Din* does not look favourably on these mixed marriages, and puts up many obstacles to prevent the union. Sometimes it succeeds, sometimes not. There is, of course, conversion which stems from a deep conviction that the Jewish religion is the only true one; despite this, even righteous proselytes are not accepted with open arms by the *Beth Din*. In short, the *Beth Din* does not encourage proselytisation.

Bearing all this in mind, how would the Beth Din look upon a conversion made for the purpose of gratifying a son's wish to say *Kaddish*? The woman was, however, much in earnest so I promised I would call at their home and discuss the matter with her husband.

I found the public house on the main road, - opposite a bus stop at the junction of two streets. I rang the bell, and the woman opened the door of the flat. She introduced me to her husband, and when I looked at him I could not help marveling at two such different types. The woman, as I have previously described her, was so Jewish in appearance, and the man was so Gentile. He was tall, erect, sharp-nosed, red-faced, and clean shaven. Such a facially mixed marriage, I thought, I had not seen for a long time.

I asked him if he wished to embrace Judaism. He replied yes. Why? I asked. He explained his reasons. From the day he had married his wife he had become influenced by the home life and the special atmosphere she had introduced. All the food was tasty, especially on Friday night. The whole atmosphere was transformed. Candles were lit, the table covered with a white tablecloth, a lavish meal was prepared. It began with fried fish, followed by soup and chicken, finishing with dessert made from fruit in season. The Friday night atmosphere was festive. She had introduced a Jewish spirit into the home, and every week he looked forward to the Friday evening spirit. Their children, too, had been influenced by his wife; proof of this was that both had married Jews.

“I am proud of my son and daughter,” he added, “and I love my grandchildren. My son wants me to become a Jew so that he can acquire a Jewish father, and without conversion that is not possible. I am therefore prepared to fulfil the obligations of conversion in order to be recognised as a Jew. My son wants this, and that's the chief thing.”

In his conversation he used many Jewish words, Yiddish expressions, as if to show off his knowledge of Judaism. Most of these words were slang, and a few were those one does not use in polite company. As far as he was concerned they were permissible, as he had heard them all from his wife during their married life.

When he asked me, “What does Judaism demand of the convert?” I replied that he must acquire a knowledge of the Hebrew prayers, i.e. read them, observe the Jewish religion, and it is impossible to become a Jew in an instant. Every would-be convert must pass an examination before he is accepted. I did not mention the matter of circumcision; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, I thought to myself. “Good,” he said. “I am prepared to receive lessons. You teach me.” What could I say? So I agreed to give him one lesson a week.

I have been a teacher almost all my life. My father, too, was a teacher of Hebrew, and I remember when only nine years old helping him with his private pupils. But a pupil of 70 I had never had. They say that printed letters are enlightening letters; but the Hebrew letters that my pupil saw only confused him. In no shape or form could he pick up their names and their pronunciation. To teach a man well advanced in years who had never before occupied himself with languages and abstract studies was penal servitude for teacher and pupil alike. Even after several lessons he had not been able to absorb more than two blessings, those for bread and for wine, and those by heart. As for reading, he came to grief completely.

Up to now I had not got in touch with the son; and as I found myself in sore straits, I considered it only right to inform him that I saw no signs of success, and that he had best give up the idea.

He was a typical Anglo-Jew, full of politeness. He looked more like his father than his mother. I heard from him that he was busy with different communal organisations helping the poor and needy. He emphasized why he was so insistent that his father convert. Through the merits of the *Kaddish* he would know that he had a father, and so there was no alternative but conversion.

When I told him that in my humble opinion his father would not succeed in passing the examination in reading Hebrew prayers, he replied, “What of it? There are many Jews who don't know how to read the prayers, and of those who do know there are many who don't understand them.” “True,” I said, “but there is this big difference between your father and them. They were born Jews, and your father was not.”

Having gone this far, I pointed out that every convert has to be circumcised, and without this no conversion is permitted. “Is your father prepared to be circumcised?” I asked him. “Out of the question,” he answered. “My father suffers from high blood pressure, and the doctor has forbidden him at his age to undergo even a minor operation; and besides this, his health has not been too good these past years.”

“How can the *Beth Din* accept is a convert a man who has no knowledge of the Hebrew prayers, no knowledge of Judaism, and no circumcision?” I asked.

“I myself will go to the *Beth Din* to plead there,” he said. “My father's conversion is for my sake, and it is not for the *Dayanim* of the *Beth Din* to deprive me of my right to say *kaddish*.”

He became very agitated as he said this, and I felt truly sorry for him. “Give me time to think and I shall get in touch with you,” I told him. He agreed and thus we parted.

As expected, my thoughts on the subject crystallised as I went over the chapter on “He who divorces his sister-in-law by *chalitza* which deals with the question of a proselyte”. A proselyte who has undergone circumcision but has not taken the ritual bath is considered a proselyte, according to the view of R. Eliezer ... “Where a proselyte has taken the ritual bath but has not undergone circumcision, R. Joshua says he is considered a proselyte.” The debate continues until there comes the *halachic* decision: “He is not considered a proselyte until he undergoes both circumcision and ritual immersion.”

Traditional Judaism is based on *halacha*, that is to say on law, and the Talmud says, “in law, there is no compassion” (*Ketubot 84*); and if the *halacha* lays down that a convert needs circumcision at the outset, what hope could there be in this particular case?

But is it true that there is in Judaism no appreciation of personal feelings, no compassion? Is the *halacha* so frozen that it cannot melt in certain conditions? Are there no clear rules in the Talmud for alleviating the law in exceptional cases and in a time of emergency? On things permitted and prohibited In *kashrut*, we lighten the law “if there is a very great loss.”

Regarding a decree, “one must not impose on the public a restriction which the majority cannot endure,” and on the question of impending danger and prohibition, the *Talmud* says “regulations concerning health and life are made more stringent than ritual laws.”

From all this we can see that there is deep feeling for a person confronted with the dry law. On this basis I advised the son to take his father to be examined by a specialist. He should get a certificate stating that it was forbidden for his father to undergo even a minor operation because of the danger to his life. He should then appear before the Beth Din with his father, mother and sister and let the *Dayanim* decide his case. I told him I believed that if the *Dayanim* saw he was genuine, they would find a way to circumvent the strict laws.

The son - with his father, mother and sister, and doctor's certificate in hand—made his way to the *Beth Din*, which sat mid-week in the afternoon; and he was the principal speaker.

He began by saying that a good relationship had always existed between his father and mother. Though his mother had married a Gentile, her father had been a beadle in a large Synagogue in East London, and she was proud of her family tree. She suffered from remorse all her days. She had long wanted her husband to become Jewish, but the war and the instability of the succeeding years had made the time unsuitable. His mother had done a great deal in bringing him and his sister up as Jews. The home influence had always been his mother's. His father had helped her as much as he could.

He ended: "I want to say *kaddish* after his death, and I ask you as a Jew to grant me this right. I want my father to be buried in a Jewish cemetery and all the family to observe the days of mourning. If you do not accept my father as a Jew, you are putting the blame on me and my sister, and we are not to blame for what was done many years ago by others. My father has not many more years to live; you are able to give me a father, and through this I shall fulfil my duty as a son after my father's death."

He spoke with feeling and supplication, and tears ran down the faces of his mother and sister. His father, too, although he tried to restrain his emotions, showed by the redness of his face the tension which gripped him.

Question after question was asked them by the *Beth Din*. After a long time, the *Dayanim* announced that they would suspend the hearing for a little while, in order to consider the issue privately in another room. They were absent for a quarter of an hour. When they returned to the hall, the presiding Dayan turned to the father, and in a clear voice gave the *Beth Din's* decision.

"We have decided to allow you to embrace Judaism according to these conditions: "You must continue to receive instruction in Judaism for another month; we waive circumcision on account of the doctor's certificate, and we shall accept you as a Jew upon immersion; after your immersion you must observe Judaism and not profane the Sabbath and festivals; your wife must buy new, unused utensils for milk and meat to replace the utensils you are now using; you must join a Jewish community after your conversion; three months after your conversion you must marry your wife in, a synagogue according to our prescribed ceremony."

When I received the authorisation for the marriage, I invited the wardens of the synagogue and other members of the board of management to be part of the minyan for the wedding. The son was "best man" and the daughter was bridesmaid. They gave their parents to drink from the betrothal cup and from the wedding glass. The bridegroom received the ring from his son and betrothed his wife with our traditional formula: "Behold thou art consecrated to me . . ."

The *ketuba* was read with the new name of the bridegroom, Abraham son of our ancestor Abraham, which had been given him at the time of his conversion. Abraham broke the glass according to custom, and with shouts of "*mazal tov*" the ceremony of marriage was over for this couple, who for forty years had lived together as man and wife.

When Abraham son of our ancestor Abraham retired as manager of the public house, he moved to a Jewish neighbourhood to be close to his son. He continued to be a member of my congregation until his death. Mine was the duty to perform the burial rites. After the funeral was over and prayers were finished in the hall of the cemetery, the son said *Kaddish* for *tzidduk hadin* (acknowledging the rightness of divine judgment). Never before had I seen or heard a *kaddish* said with so much satisfaction and spiritual pleasure.

As I left the hall to remove my canonicals, one of the members of the Burial Society approached me and whispered in my ear, "Didn't you know that the deceased was not circumcised?"

Instead of answering him, I asked him in turn, "So what did you do?"

"My colleague and I circumcised him at the time of purification."

"Ah," I remarked, "then he will rise again at the time of the resurrection of the dead."

At Willesden cemetery, a little later, the wife of Avraham ben Avraham Avinu was laid to rest at his side. There they now lie, both awaiting *tehiyat hametim* (the resurrection of the dead).