

Commentary

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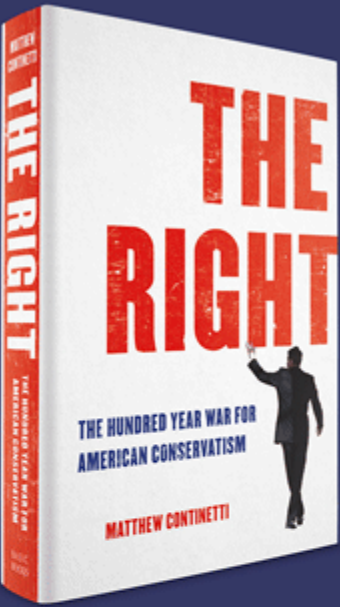
How Not to Become a Jew

A curious case of conversion illustrates a sharp point of difference between Judaism and Christianity.

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

FROM AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS* TO C.S. LEWIS'S *SURPRISED BY JOY*, THE conversion memoir is a time-honored genre. Several Jewish versions have appeared in the last few years, including David Klinghoffer's *The Lord Will Gather Me In: My Journey to Jewish Orthodoxy* and Stephen Dubner's *Turbulent Souls: A Catholic Son's Return to His Jewish Family*.

¹ But perhaps unique among recent entries in this category is *Girl Meets God*, by Lauren Winner, a 2002 book that describes not one conversion story but two.



**“A thinking person’s
map for the road ahead.”**
—**GEORGE F. WILL**

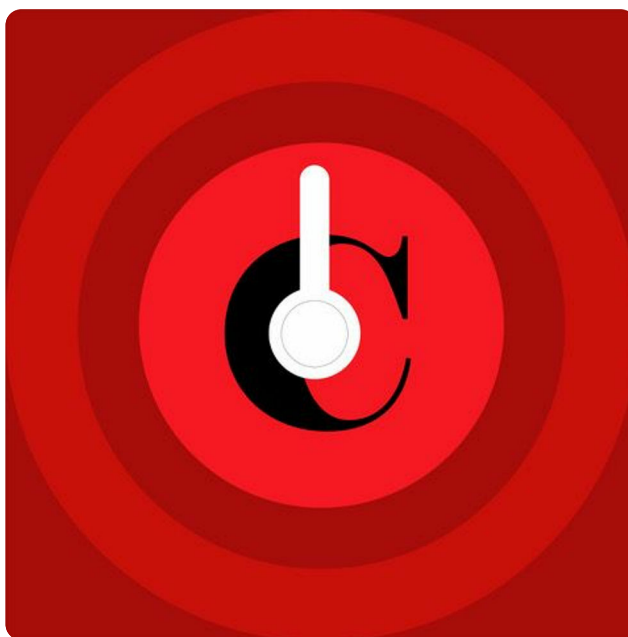
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Born in the American South, Winner, now in her late twenties, is the daughter of a Jewish father and a Gentile mother. Raised by her parents as a Reform Jew, she was, for most of her youth, obsessed with finding something more authentic. “I became convinced,” she writes, “that the heart of Judaism, the most essentially Jewish thing, was a set of texts, and a particular, rabbinic way of reading them—a canon and a hermeneutic, if you like. And I became convinced that the people who were reading those texts, and reading them the right way, were Orthodox Jews.”

Yet Winner was all too aware that, in the eyes of Orthodox Judaism, only a person born to a Jewish mother is considered a Jew by birth. Therefore, if she wished to become part of the Orthodox community, the only option open to her was

conversion. Upon graduating from high school, she entered Columbia University in New York—not, she writes, “because it had a pretty campus or a good lacrosse team or a favorable male-to-female ratio, but because it had hundreds of Orthodox Jews”—and embraced a traditionalist way of life.

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I began attending Orthodox services every day; rose at 6:00 A.M. to study a treatise on . . . the Sabbath laws; worked part-time; was elected the Religious Life Coordinator of Columbia’s Jewish Student Union; took up the ritual washing of hands Jews practice first thing every morning . . . virtuously visited the sick at a nearby hospital on Saturday afternoons; and began working with a rabbi to convert.

Soon she had achieved her goal.

Yet even as she devotedly practiced her new faith, Winner's academic interests and extracurricular pursuits were leading her in a different direction. She took courses in the New Testament and studied the religious history of the American South. In her spare time she frequented the Cloisters, a museum of medieval, mostly Christian, art, spending hours studying its tapestries and gazing at its collection of icons. And then, one night, she had a vivid dream in which she was in danger and was rescued by a male savior-like figure. "I knew," she writes, "as soon as I woke up, that the dream had come from God and it was about the reality of Jesus."



There followed a period of travail as Winner attempted to persuade herself that she was meant to be a Jew: "I had committed my life to Judaism. I was happily smitten with my Orthodox boyfriend. My day-to-day life in New York was all about Judaism; there was no room for Jesus there." But, although for most of her college years she persisted in her Jewish religious observance, eventually "my Judaism broke," and she turned away.

Finally baptized as a Christian, Winner returned to Columbia for graduate school. Today, she leads the life of a faithful Christian (and has recently published a book extolling pre-marital chastity and married sex).

Over the course of history, many Jews have ultimately embraced Christianity—some forcibly, some in order to advance in non-Jewish society, some out of wholehearted belief. But Winner is different: even as she affirms her new religion, she has continued to advert to her experience as a Jew. According to the book jacket of *Girl Meets God*, her purpose in so doing is “to reconcile both sides of her religious identity.” In a short second book, *Mudhouse Sabbath* (2004), aimed explicitly at a Christian audience, Winner appeals to lessons she says she has learned from Judaism in the hope of enhancing the religious lives of her fellow Christians.

It is no doubt partly for this reason that many traditional Christians have reacted with jubilation to Winner’s story, seeing in her an echo of the fathers of their faith. Like Paul, who was raised a “Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee,” Winner regards rabbinic Judaism as a stepping stone to the higher truth of Christianity. As such, wrote the reviewer of *Girl Meets God* in *Christianity Today*, “Winner’s story is invaluable to Christians who tend to forget that Jesus Christ was born a Jew, lived a Jew, and died a Jew.” But the real value of Winner’s book in the eyes of this reviewer might actually lie elsewhere, namely, in its effect on Jews who chanced upon it. For such Jewish readers, “it might cause further unease—leading to faith in the messiah who came once and will come again.”

A traditionalist Jew who reads Winner’s story will certainly experience unease, but for a different reason. In my own case, *Girl Meets God* spurred me to ponder not how Jews ought to think about Jesus but rather how they ought to think about Lauren Winner. What, from the perspective of Jewish religious law, is the status of someone like her today? Does conversion to Christianity undo a prior embrace of the Jewish faith? Does it make Winner a Gentile? To ask these questions is to consider, in turn, the similarities and the differences between conversion to Judaism and conversion to Christianity, and what these may tell us about the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Let us begin with the similarities. In both Judaism and Christianity, the conversion ceremony centers on the purifying power of water. In the Jewish case, the culmination of the conversion process (in Hebrew, *geirut*) takes place at a *mikveh*, a ritual bath created from a base of pure rainwater; only after a full-body immersion in the *mikveh* is a candidate for conversion considered Jewish. A male convert to Judaism must also be circumcised prior to his conversion—a requirement that, as we shall see, was a source of controversy among early Christians.

In like manner, according to the tenets of Christianity, one becomes a member of the church through the ritual of baptism (from the Greek *baptizein*, which means to “plunge” or “immerse”). The catechism of the Roman Catholic Church informs us that baptism is referred to as “the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one can enter the kingdom of God.” While baptism is most often performed by pouring water over the candidate’s head, the “most expressive way” to perform it, according to the catechism, is “by triple immersion” of the whole body.

A second similarity: in both conversion rituals, the convert, prior to immersion, expresses his desire to live according to the tenets of his new religion, and openly accepts its dogma. The Christian convert must embrace Jesus as his savior. A convert to Judaism is often asked to affirm thirteen principles of faith, codified by Maimonides in the 12th century, each of which begins: *Ani ma’amin be-emunah shleimah*, “I believe with perfect faith.” In her brief discussion of this litany—which proceeds from belief in the existence, eternal nature, omniscience, and omnipotence of God through the divine authorship of the Torah and confidence in the future redemption of the world by a messiah descended from David—Winner puts the point well:



People often say that Christianity is a religion of belief, whereas Judaism is a religion of action. . . . Judaism does care, passionately, about what you do, about what you eat and when you work and how you spend your money and whether or not you gossip and what fabric you use to make your clothes. But Judaism is also a religion of belief. Jews care, passionately, about belief. *Ani ma'amin be-emunah shleimah.*

At her own conversion, Winner reports, the rabbi asked: “ ‘So Lauren, have you read the *ani ma'amin*?’ I nodded. ‘And do you believe it amll?’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I believe it all.’ ” Lauren Winner the Gentile then immersed herself in the *mikveh* and emerged a Jew.

Both Jewish and Christian conversions, then, stress purification and cleansing through immersion; in both, the convert proclaims allegiance to his new faith, his acceptance of its dogma, and his determination to live his life according to its laws. There is, however, a striking difference between the two ceremonies, and it involves not how the conversion is performed, but who is present at it.

“A [Jewish] conversion requires a *beit din*, a court of three rabbis.” Winner notes the fact, but evidently does not regard it as particularly significant. But it is more than significant; it is essential. “If one immersed privately,” Maimonides informs us in his definitive code of law, “and converted with no witnesses, or even in front of two witnesses [but without a court of three], he is not a valid convert.” In Christianity, by contrast, baptism can be performed in private, as a matter strictly between a convert and his priest. In fact, in the absence of a priest, the catechism instructs that “anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize, by using the Trinitarian baptismal formula.”

This tells us something crucial. Unlike the case in Christianity, conversion to Judaism is as much a public, legal proceeding as a sacramental one. Hence the requirement of a *beit din*, a court of law, whose presence at a religious ceremony

would otherwise be distinctly odd. And the proceeding is legal in a special sense: in Judaism, conversion is an event at once spiritual and civil—or, indeed, political. To convert to Judaism is to take on not only a new faith but also a new nationality.

In Christianity, which in this respect as in others defined itself over against Judaism, nationality is irrelevant. “There is no difference between Jew and Greek,” writes the apostle Paul, for “all are one in Christ Jesus.” From the Church’s very beginning, baptism was therefore performed irrespective of nationality: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Conversion to Judaism is otherwise, which is again why a court is needed in order to declare it valid.

“Let us ask ourselves,” writes the talmudic scholar Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, pondering this political aspect of *geirut*, “what would happen if a potential [convert] were to declare himself ready to accept every one of the 613 commandments [of Judaism], committing himself to rigorous observance . . . , but refused to accept any sort of attachment to the nation, even the most minimal degree of allegiance.” The answer is “crystal clear”: having refused to take upon himself an essential aspect of Jewishness, he is not a Jew.

For Jews, the paradigmatic convert is the biblical Ruth, who sought not only a new relationship with God but also a new nationality. “My people will be your people,” she tells her mother-in-law Naomi, adding only then the phrase, “and your God will be my God.” Ruth’s politico-spiritual conversion, depicted at the very end of the Hebrew Bible, only confirms what any astute reader will have noticed from the very beginning: God’s religious covenant with the Jewish people has always been intimately linked with Jewish nationhood. (“And the Lord said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, to the land that I will show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation, and will bless thee, and make thy name great.”)

And here, as I have already hinted, we touch on an ancient point of contention between Judaism and Christianity. It can be put in the form of a question, or series of questions. Why, in Judaism, *must* the political be bound up with the religious? Why cannot one observe the commandments of the Torah without associating oneself with a particular people? Why did God elect a nation, rather than a universal movement?

The Hebrew Bible, wrote the late Daniel Elazar, “is an eminently political book, in the classical sense”:



By virtue of its unique concern for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, [the Bible] could not help being concerned with the immediate development of the holy commonwealth that was to lead to the establishment of that ultimate kingdom. Consequently, a great part of the Bible . . . is given over to discussion of political matters, with special reference to the structure and purposes of *adat bnai yisrael*—the congregation of Israelites, the formal name of the Jewish people as a body politic.

By choosing a *nation* through which to communicate His purposes for mankind, the God of the Jews stressed that man is a resident as much of this world as of the next, that not only the spiritual but also the political is a noble arena of human endeavor, and that man must work on this earth not only for the salvation of his soul but for the betterment of all. More than that, the election of Israel meant also that man, in Rabbi Lichtenstein’s words, is a child not only of eternity but also of history.

The story of the Jewish people begins with an individual, Abraham, who with his wife Sarah gives birth to a great nation. “For a single one I chose,” God says through the prophet Isaiah, “and I blessed him and multiplied him.” God, we are told in Genesis, fell in love with the man Abraham, and for a reason that the

Almighty makes explicit: “for I know him, that he will command his children and household after him, and they will keep the ways of the Lord, to perform righteousness and justice.” It is precisely Abraham’s love of justice and righteousness—those quintessentially political virtues—that God picks out for praise, and wishes to see perpetuated. In choosing a polity as a role model to other polities, God teaches the nations of the world that they, too, in their respective ways, can emulate Abraham and his children, and work within history to perpetuate justice and righteousness.

Daniel Elazar usefully contrasts this understanding with the view of Christian scripture, in which God’s covenant with the Jews is universalized and national identity is dissipated. For the early Christians, Elazar writes, “matters of individual salvation, in a world where the second coming was expected momentarily, desacralized the prosaic details of political life and thus drastically reduced their importance. At most, political life was a transient necessary evil.”

This seems to me somewhat overstated, at least if by political life one means life in community. Although baptism is the “sacrament of faith,” the catechism states clearly that “faith needs the community of believers,” adding that it is “only within the faith of the Church that each of the faithful can believe.” Echoing this, Lauren Winner writes that the concept of the collective is as crucial to the Christian faith as it is to the Jewish one. But she also manages to put her finger on a pertinent distinction:



Judaism speaks straightforwardly about community. “When the community is suffering, one may not say, ‘I will go to my house, eat and drink, and I will be fine,’” the Talmud tells us. “Do not separate from the community,” Rabbi Hillel says elsewhere. Christianity reaches for metaphor. The Church, the community of the faithful, is the very Body of God.

Just so. Although Christians believe themselves bound by baptism into a communion, this communion is other-worldly in nature. That is why a Christian, in Augustine's words, lives his bodily life here on earth "like a pilgrim in a foreign land." To be baptized is to become not a member of a nation but a citizen of the city of God, a spiritual kingdom that is not of this world.

Still, if the Jewish people are a nation, they are a nation like no other, and *geirut* is a citizenship ceremony like no other. One becomes a citizen of a nation, after all, by living in or emigrating to its homeland. The Jews certainly have a home-land—a small piece of the world that is the locus of their national aspirations and for which Ruth, the archetypal convert, left the land of her fathers. And yet one need not live in the promised land, or emigrate there, in order to join the Jewish nation. Lauren Winner joined the Jewish nation on the soil of the United States, and the Jews have collected converts in every land of their exile.

In short, while the Jewish people are a nation, their nationhood is not dependent on the land. Israel, according to Jewish tradition, came into being at Sinai, *before* entering the Holy Land. As the religious philosopher Michael Wyschogrod observes, this is most unusual: "Nowhere else in the memory of peoples is *entry* into the land remembered. A people is born out of a soil which is its mother. The people does not pre-date the land."

And that is not the only unusual feature. After the Jews entered the promised land, their nationhood did not depend on remaining in it. And after they were exiled from the land with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., their nationhood remained intact for millennia, enabling a Jew born in 19th-century Morocco to consider himself a member of the same nation as a Jew born in 19th-century Poland.

What, then, binds the Jewish people together, connecting and sustaining them during centuries of exile and persecution?

Franz Rosenzweig, perhaps the most important Jewish theologian of the 20th century, gave an answer:



There is only one community in which such a linked sequence of everlasting life goes from grandfather to grandson, only one which cannot utter the “we” of its unity without hearing deep within a voice that adds: “are eternal.” It must be a blood community, because only blood gives warrant to the hope for a future.

A blood community: a Jew is not only the coreligionist, or the fellow citizen, of all other Jews, he is their sibling. The nation that God chose is a physical family, and Jews are joined first and foremost by their common descent from Abraham and Sarah. The election of Abraham was a carnal election, and the resultant bonds of blood link Jews eternally, demanding that they do everything in their power to perpetuate their family.

In this respect, too, Christianity is thoroughly different, for, as Stanley Hauerwas has noted, “family identity is not at the core of our identity as Christians.” No one is born a Christian; two married members of the Church must baptize, and thereby convert, their children in order for them to become fellow members of their parents’ faith. Hauerwas puts it provocatively: “the Church grows through the conversion of strangers, who often turn out to be our biological children.”

It is precisely because Jewishness is familial that anyone born a Jew can never undo his Jewishness, no matter his beliefs. A Christian who does not believe in Christian dogma is no longer considered a Christian; but a Jewish apostate remains a Jew, and his return to the faith of his fathers is eagerly awaited by his brothers. A Jew is a member of the Jewish nation first and foremost because he is family, and family ties are unseverable.

To illustrate this point, let us take someone who has lived Lauren Winner’s life in reverse. This is the writer Stephen Dubner, whose Jewish parents converted to Catholicism but who later returned on his own to the Jewish faith. In his memoir

Turbulent Souls, Dubner describes a conversation he had, while still a Catholic, with a Jew by the name of Irving:



“You’ve never been back [to Brooklyn]?” Irving asked. “No.” “Not even to visit your bubbe?” “What’s a bubbe?” Irving blinked and scratched the top of his head. . . . “Aren’t you Jewish?” he asked. No, I explained, I wasn’t Jewish, but my parents had been, before they became Catholic. Irving looked at me as one might look at a dog that had suddenly stood up and begun to tap-dance. “Anyway, once a Jew, always a Jew,” he said after a moment, chuckling, and I nodded, as if I understood. . . . [But] what does this mean? How could a religion be transmitted through the blood? By what right, by what bizarre law, had these rabbis considered me one of theirs?

By what right? By right of the most fundamental notion known to man: that of familial bonds. Brother and sisters may squabble, they may fight, they may even betray and abandon; but they cannot break those ties.

But if the Jews are a nation formed by familial ties, and by blood, how is conversion possible? It is easy to understand how one can adopt a new set of beliefs, or how one can become a citizen of a formerly foreign nation. How do you join a family?

The answer given by Judaism is that you can. If every Jew is indeed a member of Abraham’s family, then, in some way that we cannot quite fully comprehend, a convert is bound into that same physical family. Just like a born Jew, a convert is not only a coreligionist, not only a fellow citizen, but also a new brother or sister. In reciting Jewish liturgy, the convert joins all other Jews in referring to the Almighty as “the God of my fathers”; he means it, and he is meant to mean it, in more than a metaphorical sense.

Familial bonds are the bonds that cannot be severed, but conversion is the exception that proves the rule. A convert, the Talmud informs us, “is akin to a newborn babe.” The rabbis chose their words deliberately; upon emerging from the *mikveh*, the convert is no longer the child of his Gentile mother and father but is one just born to a Jewish father and mother—born, that is, to Abraham and Sarah.

In her memoir, Winner asserts that conversion in some way affects the convert *physically*:



Somehow the *mikveh* effected a blood transfusion. The rabbis teach that every Jew, past and present, witnessed the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

Converts, they say, witnessed it, too, but then our *neshamot*, our souls, accidentally got born into non-Jewish bodies. Stepping out of the *mikveh*, that all changed. My body had become right. My *neshamah* could rest comfortably. I was a Jew.

I would not put it this way; conversion does not transform the composition of one’s blood, or one’s DNA or racial identity. Indeed, the fact that Judaism allows conversion is the ultimate indication that Jewishness is itself not a racial identity. But Winner is not far off in arguing that conversion in some way creates a blood-tie between the Jewish people and the convert. Unlike baptism, conversion to Judaism is not about the salvation of one’s soul and is not needed to wash away the curse of original sin. What conversion accomplishes is that it allows the Gentile to cleave unto the Jewish people as Ruth cleaved unto Naomi, miraculously to become part of the corporate body, and the physical family, of Israel.

The familial nature of conversion is also the reason for the insistence on circumcision as the first step in the process for men. Christianity famously debated, and ultimately rejected, its necessity:



Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted [Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to [Jews]. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we [Jews] nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

When God’s covenant is held to be universal, and religious continuity is achieved through mission rather than through family, circumcision is unimportant. For circumcision, referred to in Hebrew as a *brit*, or covenant, is a familial symbol: in particular, a symbol of the covenantal obligation to perpetuate the Abrahamic line. For a male convert to undergo circumcision symbolizes his pledge to direct his attention not only to his own spirituality but also to Jewish continuity. He is now a member of a family, and must undertake the responsibilities thereof.

Why then is there no parallel ritual for females, and why does immersion suffice? For the same reason: Judaism is founded on familial bonds, but only men need covenantal encouragement in strengthening and furthering those bonds. Women serve as the foundation of the Jewish family by instinct, in that they are inclined to bear and nurture children. Rabbinic Judaism recognizes this in its insistence on the matrilineal principle: only one whose mother is Jewish is considered a member of the Jewish family by birth.

We are now able to return to the question with which we began. Is someone like Lauren Winner still a Jew? Or has she undone her conversion by her subsequent apostasy? The answer is quite clear. Lauren Winner, having been born a Gentile, became a Jew and remains a Jew, no different from any born Jew who has forsaken Judaism. “Even if [a convert] has returned to idol worship,” Maimonides writes, “he is considered a *yisrael meshumad*, a Jewish apostate.” Winner’s abandonment of the Jewish faith, her betrayal, does not affect her status as a member of the Jewish people.

This is a painful statement to have to make, for more than the obvious reasons. Thinking about it, I am reminded of a talmudic passage whose bluntness, in our politically correct times, is rather jarring. Converts, the Talmud says, “are as painful to Israel as a scab.”

Most medieval Jewish commentators interpret this passage to mean that, precisely because conversion is irreversible, converts pose a terrible risk: the risk that they will lapse in their dedication to Jewish law or, worse, become actual enemies of the Jewish family. But one commentator, auspiciously bearing the name of Rabbi Abraham the Convert, retorted that this view is mistaken, and that the Talmud really means to criticize not converts but born Jews. In Rabbi Abraham’s reading, converts, because of their demonstrated willingness to sacrifice so much, and to sever all previous familial ties, in order to join the Jewish people, constitute a living rebuke to those who, thanks to an accident of birth, take their Jewishness for granted.

Both interpretations are to some extent valid. There are Gentiles who, in their love for Judaism and the Jewish people, put to shame many who have been Jews for their entire lives. It is because such Gentiles exist that Judaism has always opened itself to outsiders. Yet by this openness Judaism also exposes itself to the danger that, once having forged themselves into members of the Jewish family, converts will betray their newfound brothers and sisters, abandon their covenantal commitments, and join the ranks of those born Jews who have lost all interest in their heritage.

In this sense, too, to ponder the concept of conversion is to delve into the larger question of what exactly it means to be, and to serve as, a member of the Jewish people.

¹ For a discussion of these two books, see “The Seekers” by Jon D. Levenson (COMMENTARY, June 1999).

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