

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 2, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

Visit [Talmud: the Musical](#) or download a song! 

[Song 1 \(2409kb\)](#) [Song 2 \(4222kb\)](#)

(If you have trouble playing it as streaming audio, "right click" to download the entire file and then open it.)

Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

BH

CHOOSING JUDAISM, PART I

Dear Friends,

We discussed, some months ago, the issue of converting to Judaism. Here, you will be presented with the locus classicus about conversion.

Our Rabbis taught [in a baraita]: A person who wishes to be a convert at this time [comes to us and] we say to him: What did you see [in Judaism] that [made you] come and [wish] to be converted? Do you not know that Israel is afflicted, oppressed, despised and harassed and punishments come to them? If [the prospective convert] says: I know [all this] and I am not worthy [of this honor] they accept him immediately.

And they teach him a few easy mitzvot and a few strict mitzvot and they teach him about the sin [of neglecting the mitzvot of leaving behind stalks that fell] during harvest and [not going back to harvest] forgotten produce and [leaving] the corner [of one's field unharvested so that the poor might glean food from there] and the tithe for the poor. And they teach him all the punishments [following neglect] of these mitzvot. They say to him:

Let it be known that until now you came to this measure [of personhood] you could eat suet and you were not [liable] to be punished with excommunication. You [could have] violated the Sabbath and you were not [liable] to the punishment of stoning. But now, [if] you eat suet, you are [liable] to be punished by excommunication. If you profane Shabbat you are [liable] to punishment by stoning. And just as they teaching him the punishments [associated with] the mitzvot so they teach him their reward. They say to him: Know that the world to come is only for the righteous and Israel at this time is not able to receive neither a great deal of goodness nor a great deal of suffering.

One does not [act] too broadly [in welcoming him] nor is one [too] exacting in [their approach] to him. If

he [decides] to take on [the identity of being a Jew] they circumcise him immediately and immerse him [in the mikveh] immediately and two students of the sages stand nearby and teach him a few easy mitsvot and a few difficult mitsvot [and] he immerses [himself in the water of the mikveh] and he arises [from the mikveh] and, behold, he is like [any] Jew in all respects. [If the prospective convert is] a woman, women place her in the water up to her neck and two students of [the] sages stand by her outside [the mikveh]. And they teacher her a few easy mitsvot and a few difficult mitsvot. (B. Yebamot 47a-b)

As a congregational rabbi, I found this to be one of the most relevant pieces of rabbinic literature. So often, a person would enter my office (quite frequently with his/her fiancée) and profess a desire to convert to Judaism. Because of this passage, I was able to take a liberating stance right from the start.

I would tell the person that I received no "bonus points" as a rabbi if s/he chose to be a Jew or not; that one's soul is the only thing that is completely one's own and to which we alone are granted stewardship. And, if I read the signs correctly, I would tell the prospective convert that I would yield to no pressure from anyone, e.g., the prospective spouse or parent-in-law. When and if the person ever became ready to full-heartedly accept Judaism then I would be happy to perform the rite. Such an attitude came as a shock to a good many of the people in this position who came to my office. And, ironically, once the pressure was off, the prospective convert actually felt freer to truly invest in the conversion process.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of the process herein described? Should we push those wishing to convert away a bit or should we accept them right off the bat?
2. Ironically, Jews by choice usually have the incredible experience of immersing in the mikveh while born Jews too often go without experiencing the mikveh their whole lives. It is truly one of the greatest religious experiences in Judaism. If you have been to the mikveh, and you do not feel embarrassed to say, can you tell us what it was like for you? How would you explain its power? You may want to check out the following website about mikveh: <http://www.mikvahproject.com/infopg.html>.