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"If You Were a Human Being" a Thought Experiment[1]

> Take a sincere convert. This is a person who dislocates their life, who undertakes radically new commitments and breaks with old commitments, a person who risks destroying, or weakening, family bonds, all for the sake of their commitment to religious truth or their quest for religious meaning. How can you tell me that this person is a Jew just like us? Can we understand such a person? Beyond "Hello" and "How are you" what can we say to them?
>
> (*Kalman Abrams*[2])

> "Why take such a drastic step as to embrace Judaism? You are fully aware that, according to Jewish belief, there is no need for this, because the pious of all nations are assured of a share in the World-To-Come."
>
> "I know that. But I do not want to wait for the hereafter; I want the World-To-Come in the here and now."
>
> (*Walter Wurzburger*[3])

1. A Jew ought to live as a Jew;

2. Socrates is a Jew;

Therefore:

3. Socrates ought to live as a Jew.

[1] This article was originally written for the Orthodox Forum, held in March 2012, on the topic of conversion and Jewish identity. Yitzchak Blau and Ephraim Unterman commented on this draft. During the 2008 summer I studied the *sugyot* pertaining to *gerut* with Daniel Vinik.

[2] Shalom Carmy, "The House I Lived in: the Taste of Gooseflesh" (*Tradition* 44:2, 2011).

[3] Walter Wurzburger, *God is Proof Enough* (New York: Devora Publishing, 2000), 7, citing exchange with a candidate for conversion to Judaism.

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A simpler deontological syllogism is hard to conceive. Accept the first two premises and the third follows relentlessly. If you believe correctly that you were born Jewish, the only question, it would seem, is what exactly it means to live as a Jew. To this question, traditional Judaism's answer is that Socrates must (a) identify with the Jewish people and (b) strive to obey the commands God addresses to the Jewish people.

However, Socrates' situation may be more complicated than the above would imply. He or she might identify strongly with the Jewish people but reject the theological part of traditional Judaism or replace it with contrived forms of his or her own devising. Regardless of whether such a position is coherent or plausible or sustainable over the long course of a lifetime and the longer course of generations, such Jews exist. Often they make substantial positive contributions to the Jewish people; in any event, they are surely part of it. This phenomenon has been widely discussed.

The contemporary Jewish Socrates may also struggle with a different impediment. He may agree that he is a Jew by whatever criteria he recognizes, yet wonder whether and why this fact should be central rather than peripheral to his identity and way of life. Rambam already noted, if only as a juridical possibility, that one may subscribe to true religious doctrine and perform mitsvot even while distancing himself from the life, the joys, and travails of the Jewish people. He condemns such an individual as one who separates himself from the community *(poresh mi-darkhei tsibbur)*.[4]

Such practical separation from the destiny and fate of the Jewish people is hard to imagine among observant Jews, committed to Torah and mitsvot twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. It cannot be ignored as a challenge for those who are not thoroughly observant. Identity, when defined in sociological terms, is always a relative thing. Consider an individual who in no way denies his or her Jewish identity but regards it as a relatively unimportant aspect of who he or she is. Such a person might judge a non-Jewish national identity (i.e. citizenship or cultural background) or an identification with humanity as a whole, or with one's local community, or with ideological fellow travelers or even with the culture of a particular profession, to be so determinative of who one is that being a Jew is a negligible factor by comparison.[5]

[4] See, for example, *Teshuva* 3:11.

[5] I am not referring to ideological or identity claims that prohibit religious or national identification with Judaism. Forms of cosmopolitanism like that developed by K. Anthony Appiah may or may not be compatible with Judaism but are surely tolerant of robust particularistic commitment. See his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006) and *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University,

Now consider as well an individual, or a group of individuals, with little or no sense of what it means to identify strongly with a people, or those whose sense of integral personal identity is weak or fluctuating. Such a person, from time to time, or for an extended period of time, may be attracted, preoccupied, even obsessed with facets and fragments of traditional religious practice and culture. Such a person might experience this fascinated involvement as primarily social or as religious in nature (though he or she is more likely to call it "spiritual"). Yet such an individual would not identify strongly with the Jewish people, not because the Jewish aspects of their way of life are unimportant and rank far below more robust ingredients of identity, but because their entire notion of stable identity as an essential dimension of spiritual existence is undeveloped.

If our Socrates is thus unable to grasp the full meaning of the second premise, of what it means to be a Jew in the sense of strong identification with the Jewish people, two unfortunate consequences follow: Obviously such a person would not be able to identify fully with *kelal Yisrael,* regardless of his or her ability to accept the yoke of divine commandments. Moreover, to the extent that our Socrates is a thinker whose religious commitments do not go unexamined, incomprehension of the central role of national identification in Judaism will inexorably lead to puzzlement about the reality and authority of God's revelation to that one nation.

What if Socrates is not a Jew? In order to become a Jew he would have to find his way into our syllogism. He would have to accept the truth of the first premise, that being a Jew mandates a certain way of living. And he would have to make the second premise true. He would not simply discover that this premise is true, for at this moment it is not true; in order to make it true, he would have to change himself. How and why Socrates would come to accept the first premise is not our immediate concern. We may assume that he would come to this belief in the same way that a Jew from birth who did not subscribe to it might change his belief. How and why the Gentile Socrates would come to accept the second premise, that the Jewish identity is his destiny and that the commandments addressed to the Jewish people are addressed to him, is a problem distinctive to the process of conversion to Judaism.

2005). My focus here is the person who simply does not feel such commitment himself because it is comparatively weak. Alan Montefiore, *A Philosophical Retrospective: Facts, Values and Jewish Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) is a recent instructive discussion by an analytic philosopher who has no doubt about his Jewish identity, without making that identity primary in his life.

Before he became convinced of the first premise, Socrates would have reasoned as follows:

5. A human being ought to live as a human being;

6. Socrates is a human being; Therefore:

7. Socrates ought to live as a human being.

Nothing in premise 1 blocks the inference from 4 and 5 to 6 or compels the adoption of 3. In other words, Socrates may believe everything that I believe without this leading him to convert to Judaism. If you believe, correctly, that you are a human being, the only question, it would seem, is what exactly it means to live as a human being. When Socrates discovers the truth of Jewish doctrine, the consequence, for him, is not that he must become a Jew but rather that his idea of how to live as a human being changes. His way of life comes under the laws of the Torah pertaining to non-Jews; his task in life is to be a *ben Noah*. According to Rambam, he can thus become one of the "sages of the Gentiles" *(hakhmei ummot ha-olam)* and if grasps the authority of these laws as deriving from Sinai he will become one the "saints of the Gentiles" *(hasidei ummot ha-olam)*.[6] If you were a human being like Socrates, why would you want to, or feel compelled to go beyond this?

II

Belief in Judaism, and the belief that an individual who is not Jewish ought to adopt Judaism, arises from a variety of experiences and arguments, often from a combination of them. The king in the *Kuzari* had a dream in which an angel told him: "Your intention is worthy but your acts are not worthy." Socrates may be impelled to adopt Judaism through some kind of direct experience, such as a vision, that does not lend itself to further analysis. Or he may come to believe in the truth of the Torah

[6] *Melakhim* 8:11. On the text of this sentence, and discussion of its import, see Frankel edition of *Sefer Shofetim* 364 and 568. To these sources add R. Kook, *Iggerot ha-Reiyah* I, 99-100. See also, Jacob I. Dienstag, "Natural Law in Maimonidean Thought and Scholarship (on *Mishneh Torah,* Kings VIII, 11)," *Jewish Law Annual* 6 (1987), 64-77; J. David Bleich, "Judaism and Natural Law," *Jewish Law Annual* 7 (1987), 7-10 and 31-36; Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 455 n. 239.

addressed to the Jews, and hold that he can only live the right kind of life, a life that is acceptable to God, by joining himself to the Jewish people.[7]

Imagine that Socrates has developed a theological anthropology along the lines adumbrated in R. Soloveitchik's *Halakhic Man* and other writings. The way of life corresponding to the reality of God and the human condition entails a way of life in which human initiative and obedience to God stand in a dialectical relationship, where human creativity is valued even as divine otherness is taken seriously, where religious aspirations embrace the entirety of human existence, that sanctifies intellectual engagement with the fullness of the cognitive and normative realms, that fosters emotional discipline and expression, that gives spiritual significance to quotidian bodily functions, that esteems individuality while championing community. God gave this model of life only to the Jewish people. If Socrates believes that he must adopt that way of life, he must convert to Judaism. Otherwise his intention and understanding may be worthy but his real life will be wanting.

Or imagine a simpler situation. Socrates is dissatisfied with the life of a Noahide because it is too "thin." He wants to be "surrounded with commandments," either to overcome the vacuity of boredom or because he thirsts for a continual relationship to God that requires a plentitude of duties, like the *giyyoret* who told R. Wurzburger that she didn't want to wait for the hereafter to experience the World to Come. We smile at the apocryphal story of the individual who informs the Chabad missionary that she is not Jewish and is immediately invited to the van where she will be taught how to refrain from eating *ever min ha-hai*. We sympathize with the dedicated Noahide who doesn't know what to do on Yom Kippur, when all the Jews are intensely occupied with the *mitsvat ha-yom,* while he or she has no way of participating. The only solution to this psychological-spiritual quandary is *gerut*.

Or consider a non-Jew who may not yearn for the "thick" life of mitsvot, but nevertheless recognizes that real religious commitment must be absolute religious commitment. This version of Socrates may be dissatisfied with a religion that demands only the spirit and seems to dispense with the body. He does not object to such subjective religion in principle but he is worried about the inevitable corrosion of faithfulness to God

[7] For an analysis of "religious" and "national" motifs in *gerut*, see Aharon Lichtenstein, "On Conversion," *Tradition* 23:2 (1988), 1-18, reprinted as "Conversion: Birth and Judgment" in *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, (New Jersey: Ktav, 2004)189-211, and in *The Conversion Crisis: a Continuing Discussion*, ed. Emanuel Feldman and Joel Wolowelsky. (Hoboken, 2011).

that it is liable to precipitate. An influential Christian intellectual reflects:

> I was afflicted with a singular worry. Christianity—the faith of my forefathers, the basis of all my efforts to be faithful to God—was my inheritance; was it also the fuel for the neutron bomb of which American liberalism was but the trigger mechanism? Was a Christianity that accommodated interreligious marriage a religion that clothes indifference with the rhetorical dress of inclusion and tolerance?[8]

The impulse to conversion in each of these philosophical scenarios differs in nature and also in logical quality. The fully Soloveitchikian Socrates cannot be the kind of human being he wishes to be without converting. In his syllogism premise (6), "Socrates ought to live like a human being" mandates that he become a Jew. The second scenario, where the Noahide finds his life incomplete given the thinness of the Noahide laws, may reflect psychological pressure rather than logical necessity. The third case describes an individual who may believe wholeheartedly in Christianity despite his suspicion that the moral-religious survival of Christian culture requires a confrontation with Judaism.[9]

The attraction of Judaism may arise through the experience of God and/or the content of Torah. It may also be grounded via the Jewish people. I do not refer here to the case where contact with Jews leads to belief in God and in Torah but to the situation where Socrates comes to believe that it is important for him to join the Jewish people before he feels any attraction or compulsion to adopt Jewish belief.

If we are accustomed to classical models of religious conversion this sounds odd. Surely belief is logically prior to identification with the community of believers. If, as Saadia posited, our nation is a nation only by virtue of its Torah, it seems impossible to join the nation, or to want to do so, unless one has turned toward God and His Torah. It is impossible for a person to become a Jew without accepting God and Torah. Yet, from an ontological viewpoint, regardless of the psychological background, conversion to Judaism is the act of becoming a Jew, not the act of becoming a theist who subscribes to belief in Torah: willingness to accept God and Torah are prerequisites of this transformation; the obligations

[8] See R. R. Reno, *Fighting the Noonday Devil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 22.

[9] Reno himself, between the first draft of the essay and its publication, abandoned the Episcopalianism in which he was raised; he now communicates with the Roman Catholic Church.

themselves follow from the transformation.[10]

A common scenario along these lines occurs when an individual discovers that he or she has a connection to the Jewish people through an ancestor. Despite the halakhic strictures against allowing marriage as a valid motive for *gerut,* personal relations are frequently the spark for interest in Judaism, an interest that may ripen into religious identification. Likewise the mistaken belief that one was born Jewish or that one has undergone a valid conversion to Judaism.

Consider more intellectually driven stories. One may study or encounter certain aspects of Jewish history or social life and feel compelled to recognize some uncanny element in the existence of this people. This, rather than the study of Torah or the encounter with God, may prompt a journey that ends with God and Torah.

Or one may begin with a vision of the kind of community that is spiritually viable and wholesome and conclude that the Jewish people are the habitus of that community. This mode of thinking may parallel the first scenario of the Soloveitchikian Socrates, who reaches the view that Judaism is the best option for all human beings, or it may resemble the modes of thinking that speak of and to the individual seeker.

Medieval Jewish thinkers debated the source of Jewish singularity. R. Yehuda Halevi, in his *Kuzari,* considered it a natural quality inherited through the generations. The convert could join the people of Israel but not fully share in its special endowment. Rambam, by contrast, traced the election of Israel to Abraham's choice of God, which survived the spiritual oblivion of Egyptian bondage. As he notes in his celebrated correspondence with R. Ovadiah the convert, the *ger* may include himself in many liturgical performances as a "descendant of Abraham," because of his spiritual kinship to the forefather of the nation.[11]

It might be supposed that Halevi's approach is inimical to the conviction on the part of a Gentile that he is intended to join the Jewish people. It is true that a non-Jew contemplating conversion would likely find Rambam's approach more encouraging. Nonetheless, if our Socrates believes that he cannot live the best life open to him as a human being without converting to Judaism, whether he believes that Judaism is the optimal way of life for all human beings capable of it or because of more individual or subjective factors, the theory that Jewish uniqueness is linked to biological inheritance is not a deterrent. The story of the *Kuzari* is not

[10] R. Yosef Cohen, *Mikhtam le-David* on *Ketubbot* (Jerusalem, 1999) formulates this point well in his chapter on conversion of a minor.

[11] See Rambam's *Responsa* (Freimann edition), 42.

one of a person engaged in genealogical research who uncovers a fortuitous Jewish ancestor but rather that of a full-fledged Gentile seized by the conviction that his way of life is not the best.

III

The Midrash reports that Aquila the convert expressed dissatisfaction because the Torah seems to exhaust God's love for the *ger* in giving him "bread and garb (Deuteronomy 10:18)." R. Eliezer responded that providing food and clothing is no mean thing insofar as Jacob our patriarch asked for nothing more (Genesis 28:20). Aquila then turned to R. Joshua, who comforted him by interpreting bread and garb as Torah and commandments, to which he added that converts may marry off their daughters to priests, in which case the bread becomes *lehem ha-panim* and the garb the raiment of the priests in the Temple.[12]

The three tannaitic responses, R. Eliezer's and the two offered by R. Joshua, may correspond to different triggers for conversion. The initial question posed to R. Eliezer makes the experience of *gerut* wholly dependent on the personal relationship between the individual and God. R. Eliezer's answer is correct: at one level—to expect greater benefits than Jacob asked for is presumptuous; to make light of the promise of bread and garb, as Aquila does in some versions of the story, because he can already enjoy them without converting seems to reflect deficient motives. At another level, however, R. Eliezer misses the point of Aquila's question: he is not simply asking about the benefits that Judaism can offer him. He is not asking about reward. He is asking about the meaning of God's love when it is extended to the *ger*.

R. Joshua understands that Aquila cares about how Judaism can enable him to fulfill the complete range of his spiritual aspirations, and that these, in significant ways, run through his relationship to Torah and to Jewish life. He reformulates the love for the *ger* in terms of these hopes and horizons, either in terms of his own opportunity to master Torah and engage in its fulfillment, or in terms of the chance to introduce his family to the most prestigious strata of the Jewish people.

According to some parallel versions of this story, were it not for R. Joshua's intervention, Aquila might have reverted from Judaism. If we began by presenting the logic of *gerut* syllogistically, we must remember

[12] *Bereshit Rabba* 70:5. Theodor-Albeck edition 802-803. The version in *Kohelet Rabba* 7:4 switches the order of R. Joshua's two homilies.

that the truth of some premises often depends on how we grasp them and what we do to make them true. What it means to be a human being, what it means to be a Jew, and how one relates to the other depend on how we may plausibly imagine what these things are about.

IV

From Socrates to the everyday: It is a very common phenomenon that a person desires to join the Jewish people without any inclination to adopt Jewish religious tenets. Usually this is motivated by some personal connection to Jews or to the Jewish people. The absence of religious commitment in these cases is an impediment to *gerut*. Typically, the Gentile is married to a Jew and wants to affiliate with the Jewish community or to have the children raised as members of the Jewish community. Whatever commitment there is to Jewish practice or belief or affiliation does not run deep, so that ideal *gerut* is not a live option. The willingness to participate in Jewish life on the part of this potential convert or the Jewish spouse is not always negligible; hence a rabbi may be justifiably reluctant to turn him or her away with an unqualified no. One significant and especially poignant variation on this situation is where the Gentile's commitment to Jewish peoplehood is robust and thorough. Were it not for the lack of religious commitment, such a person might be regarded not merely as an adequate Jew but as a heroic Jew. Think of the secular Russian *oleh* who gives his life for the defense of the Jewish people in Israel.

There is already a huge literature on whether and how one can bridge the gap between the strong and weak commitment of such modern candidates for *gerut* to the Jewish people, that makes their joining Judaism attractive from a Zionist viewpoint, or on salvaging the Jewish identities of intermarried families, and the minimal religious identification without which such *gerut* is a mockery. It is not the aim of this paper to add to that literature. I am writing from the standpoint of the potential Socrates himself or herself. The individual I envision is not interested in an intellectually cheap or perfunctory conversion ceremony. Much of the intellectual and existential work such a person must do is identical with the task before a Jewish *ba'al teshuva* seeking religious truth. Some of it, however, is distinctive to the non-Jew considering whether Judaism is possible and or necessary for himself or herself, and has to do with one's ability to identify with a nation that one has not been born into. I believe that this particular problem may not have been crucial in the past but that it does require more careful analysis today.

V

The contemporary dimension of the *gerut* problem to which I call your attention pertains to the role of national identity, on the one hand, and the experience of commitment, on the other hand.

One component of Judaism, as we noted above, is a certain vision of communal existence. If Socrates believes that human beings flourish when they invest themselves in an organic community of destiny and fate, as opposed to a more atomistic social framework, this gives him one more reason to find Judaism attractive. A radical individualist on this question, one who defines social relations along atomistic lines and who conceives of spiritual fulfillment as a radically solitary affair, would find this aspect of Judaism an insurmountable barrier. Likewise a person for whom the social dimension is understood in radically cosmopolitan terms, in which case you stand before God not as an isolated individual but in solidarity with the human race as whole, oblivious to the claims of smaller social organisms like the nation.

Now, until fairly recently one would expect the communal Jew to also be a national Jew. In other words, a Jew who did not turn his back on the Jewish people in the name of cosmopolitanism or individualism would regard his or her identification with the Jewish people as a whole, that is to say, with the Jewish nation, as a central element in his identity. In practice this meant that secular Jews whose Jewish identification was vigorous oriented their lives around such *kelal Yisrael* realities as the Holocaust or the State of Israel. For Orthodox, believing Jews these historical bonds were also important, albeit without the same constitutive status. As to *gerut*, the Halakha mandated that the convert become acquainted with the collective history of the Jewish people, not only the sobering, perhaps deterring, story of persecution but also the glories of the shared national destiny.[13]

I am no longer sure whether this vision of non-halakhic Judaism has the power it once had. The reason has much to do with the attenuation of nationalism and nationality as morally integrative forces. Among idealistic people a century ago nationalism appeared to be a powerful spiritual rival to traditional religion. Today, for those same people, it is one more discredited "god that failed." The history of persecution and genocide is irrepressible and, for those with a good memory, raw, yet, on its own, it cannot become the foundation of a positive existence. The achievements of Jewish statehood, magnificent and, in their time, uncanny, are worldly

[13] See Rambam, *Issurei Bia* 14:1-5.

successes. They did not transform the life of the spirit or in any way alleviate its discontent. Old-fashioned Zionism, like most forms of organized Jewish life of its time, was too collectivist. Late Zionism, like most contemporary forms of public Jewish life, makes few demands on the individual and none on the spirit.

A contemporary Socrates seeking out the life of virtue today, recognizing the absence of shared goals in the public national realm, the brittleness of the will to complaint that passes for idealistic reform, the overriding materialism and spiritual mediocrity that permeates the public national culture, is most likely to invest his life and his hopes in the intimacy of the local community, cultivating one's family, being a decent, constructive neighbor, enjoying and giving enjoyment to one's friends.

Perhaps the most influential treatise of ethical theory written in the late 20th century from an explicitly theistic point of view, MacIntyre's *After Virtue,* ends with a comparison between our age and the last stage of the Roman *imperium,* "when men and women of good will... ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium"* and summons its audience to "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us."[14] It is not necessary to adopt MacIntyre's apocalyptic sense of the present crisis to reach his conclusion that the crucial arena of civility and moral and religious community is not primarily the public thoroughfare but the private lanes, where character is refined and personal charity is practiced and nurtured by the community of the committed.

In general, the Jewish stress on the everyday practice of the individual making his life within the intimate community, as opposed to the indirect engineering of large scale change, should be a strong talking point for Orthodox Judaism. Secularism and liberalism, whether in their nonviolent or militant forms, have trivialized too many individual lives and sacrificed too much of the "eternal now," treating them like so many eggs whose ultimate value is measured, as Isaiah Berlin put it, in terms of some progressive, eschatological global omelet whose advent is then endlessly deferred. Unlike even Christianity, Judaism is not tempted by the urgent need to save the world.

The contemporary Gentile Socrates, however, may turn his or her disillusionment with alienated secular collective salvation into a reservation about Judaism as well. For conversion to Judaism entails not just entry into

[14] Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 263.

an intimate community of commitment, charity, worship and study, but membership in a relatively impersonal national entity, namely the Jewish people. What can I say to this Socrates, and to the Socrates within me, for whom the association of Judaism with modern nationalism is a drawback?

It is possible to respond to this difficulty by appealing to dogma. If you take this route, you will recognize the unique destiny of the Jewish people even if it does not correspond to anything in your understanding of human society in general. However, I believe that we may offer at least a partial view of Jewish singularity, as a national entity, that is not discontinuous with the attraction of the local community as the primary focus of religious and ethical life.

It seems to me that Jewish nationality challenges some of the limitations of a more intimate religious community. The huge, alienated social bodies that matter to nationalism and cosmopolitanism fail because they are overly invested in the political grandiose and in the large-scale eschatological dream. Nonetheless, the universal historical horizons they posit are essential components of our moral and religious universe. Yom Kippur is the holiest, most intimate day of the year, but it is preceded by Rosh ha-Shana's message of universal divine sovereignty embracing, concentrically, mankind, the Jewish people, and the righteous. To discard this dimension is not to live an intimate religious life, but an insulated one.

The existence of large groups somewhere in the middle, between the human race in general, on the one hand, and the small community, on the other hand, thus reflects something important about the human condition. Michael Wyschogrod, for example, holds that Jewish singularity indirectly affirms the dignity of other national bodies.[15] But even if one takes an indifferent or hostile view of non-Jewish national entities,[16]

[15] "Because a father is not an impartial judge but a loving parent and because a human father is a human being with his own personality, it is inevitable that he will find himself more compatible with some of his children than others and, to speak very plainly, that he love some more than others. There is usually great reluctance on the part of parents to admit this, but it is a truth that must not be avoided. And it is also true that a father loves all his children, so that they all know of and feel the love they receive, recognizing that to substitute an impartial judge for a loving father would eliminate the preference for the specially favored but would also deprive all of them of a father. The mystery of Israel's election thus turns out to be the guarantee of the fatherhood of God toward all peoples, elect and nonelect, Jew and gentile." Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 64-65.

[16] For example, R. Yoel Bin-Nun, (erroneously, in my opinion,) ascribes to R. Kook the view that the Jewish nation is the only nation to which Judaism grants ontological status. See his "Nationalism, Humanity and *Knesset Yisrael*" in *The World of Rav Kook's Thought*, ed. Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg, trans. Shalom Carmy and Bernard Casper (Jerusalem: Avichai, 1991).

we may still appreciate that the Jewish people has a role to play in the universal drama, and that this work can only be accomplished if Judaism exists as a national organism, occupying a singular place on the universal historical stage, rather than as an association of like-minded small communities.

We tend to look down on the "light unto the nations" ideology that was common among modernizing Jews of the 19th century. Yet there is abiding value in some of their insights. Moses Mendelssohn, in *Jerusalem,* argues that all religion based on verbal doctrine is vulnerable to distortion and hence becomes idolatrous. A religion whose truth is expressed in communal practice is safeguarded from falsification. But such a regimen preserves true religion only when it is the heritage of one nation; it cannot succeed on a global scale. Whatever your view of Mendelssohn's particular account of the function of symbols in communication (this view is, in my opinion, an updating of Rambam's genealogy of idolatry in chapter 1 of *Avoda Zara),* and the way it is amplified by Mendelssohn's pessimism about the human condition that lies behind his skepticism about humanity's unaided prospects for religious progress, reasoning of this type explains why Judaism has a necessary role in universal human history, while still remaining separate from other nations. If Mendelssohn's philosophy was a failure, from a Jewish perspective, it was not because he failed to justify Jewish separatism in history, but because he failed to provide a sufficiently robust account of why Judaism is attractive to the individual Jew, and because his generation was too besotted by faith in progress to digest his skeptical, religiously orthodox version of enlightenment. For persons inclined to take Judaism seriously on other grounds, along the lines noted above, some such theory helps demonstrate why Judaism cannot be confined to the intimate local community, but requires a national identity that opens to the world of universal history.

Even within the parameters of a spiritual quest driven by religious and moral self-development and not oriented to the world historical horizon, the notion of faithfulness to *kelal Yisrael* as a national entity wider than one's face-to-face community may have compelling force. That is because the intimate community, whatever its irreplaceable virtues, also has its limitations. To be concerned only about others who are members of one's own community risks becoming self-centered. To be linked to other Jews, by fate and destiny, wherever they are, regardless of our shared individual biographies, is an antidote to such parochialism. As C. S. Lewis trenchantly observed in *The Four Loves*, the great defect of friendship is that it replaces universal love with the love of those with whom we have something

in common, thus degrading the imperative of love into the self-satisfactions of cliquishness and snobbery. The centrality of *Keneset Yisrael*, while affirming the importance of particular commitments, prevents the formation of a coterie, even one based on common ethical ideals and shared religious quest.

VI

As noted above, a peculiar difficulty with contemporary religious commitment is the flimsiness of contemporary commitment in general. The Christian philosopher Robert Audi recently made the analytic point that faith and faithfulness are not the same: Faith means that we trust God; faithfulness, that we are trustworthy.[17] Nonetheless, despite his distinction, the two are inextricably intertwined. To have faith is to be constant in one's faith. And for a Jew having faith means acting faithfully in accordance with it.

Writing about the Philistine wives of Samson, Rambam raised the problem of conversion without genuine commitment.[18] I call your attention not to the gap between professed commitment and practice, but to attenuation of the very conception of an absolute irrevocable commitment to a religion. The great love poem of the 20th century begins: "Lay your sleeping head my love, human on my faithless arm." Modern people frequently claim to be "spiritual" rather than "religious" and the more spiritual they are, the better than can justify their inconstancy in the name of a higher sincerity or the imperative of footloose growth, with no direction known, like a rolling stone. What the critic Greil Marcus said of Bob Dylan's 1970's transitory conversion to fundamentalist Christianity, that "it's less God than his own choice that is celebrated,"[19] captures the way many of his peers think of their personal commitments.

[17] Robert Audi, "Faith, Faithfulness and Virtue," *Faith and Philosophy* 28:3, (July 2011), 294-309.

[18] Cf. *Hil. Issurei Bi'ah*, 13:14-16.

The specter of retroactive nullification of such conversions, where the candidate for conversion does not seem to have ever entertained the idea of leading an observant life, was addressed by other papers at the Orthodox Forum conference at which this essay was originally presented. See also Yosef Zvi Rimon, "Contemporary Ashkenazi Pesak Regarding the Invalidation of Conversion," *Tradition* 46 (2013), 29-56, which also was presented at the Orthodox Forum.

[19] Quoted by Paul Genders in *Times Literary Supplement*, May 20, 2011, 26. This phenomenon has been much discussed in contemporary sociology. For a recent study that includes an Orthodox community, see Richard Madsen, "The Archipelago of Faith: Religious Individualism and Faith Community in America Today," *American Journal of Sociology* 114:5, (2009), 1263-1301.

You may argue that the phenomenon I described is not so much a lack of commitment as a lack of constancy in commitment. Most unfaithful spouses believe in marriage as an institution, which is why they bother to get married; the only problem is that they seem incapable of remaining faithful to their spouse of the moment; thus American infidelity is sometimes dubbed "serial monogamy" rather than straightforward libertinism. It is possible that a similar mechanism governs spiritual enthusiasms: at the moment of conversion the candidate sincerely affirms that this religion "is the one," only to lose his or her ardor a while later. Whether this is true, whether the present situation is best depicted as syncretism or half-heartedness or "serial monotheism," the question of constancy of commitment in *gerut* should be as great a concern as it is in nurturing the commitment of those born Jewish.

This question may pose a greater difficulty for the convert than for the born Jew. That is because the *ger*, by virtue of his having chosen Judaism, lacks the experience of inexorable obligation, the sense of being *metsuvveh ve-oseh* that is integral to our relationship with God.[20] From an experiential perspective, and perhaps even as a matter of halakhic policy, we should explore the ways in which the missing experience of ineluctable obligation can be compensated for. Such an inquiry may have value for born Jews as well.[21]

There is one halakhic paradigm for conversion to Judaism without voluntary acceptance of the yoke of the commandments. When a person who was initiated into the life of *mitsvot* as an *eved kena'ani* is freed, he must immerse himself as part of the transition to full Jewish status, but

[20] In a parallel manner, the Vilna Gaon on Ruth 2:13 suggests that because the *ger* is not originally commanded to serve God as a Jew, there is nothing objectionable in Boaz speaking of Ruth receiving reward for joining the Jewish people. If one is commanded to obey from the very first it is demeaning to speak of reward, as the person is merely doing his or her duty.

[21] It is instructive to compare this point in our discussion with a remark of Hermann Cohen in his *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972) 332. In explaining why Rambam insisted that a Gentile becomes one of the righteous of the Gentiles only if he accepts the commandments as revealed at Sinai, rather than as the products of reason, Cohen suggests: "he obligates himself only to protect against the possibility that his reason, his understanding, might one day cause him to decide differently, for instance, with regard to his abstention from idolatry in the Jewish state or from incest. If this decision were left to his own understanding, as his original decision would have been, the state would not be protected against his subjectivity." For Cohen, of course, reason is sovereign. The Noahide, who seeks the status of *ger toshav* (resident stranger) within a Jewish state must, as a political matter, commit to compliance regardless of the vicissitudes of his or her reasoning. Our concern, by contrast, assumes the importance of the content of revelation, and is further concerned with integrity of character that requires ongoing and absolute commitment.

there is no provision for *kabbalat ha-mitsvot*. R. Hayyim Soloveichik, explaining Rambam, maintains that the first initiation, when he became an *eved*, suffices: his commitment to obedience does not inherently change when he is introduced to the higher level of full Jewish identity. Rashi emphasizes that this individual has already been observing laws like circumcision and Shabbat. *Otsar ha-Geonim* cites a wider array of commandments incumbent upon the *eved*. R. Hayyim's view seems to focus on the formal aspect of *kabbalat ha-mitsvot*. Rashi may select circumcision and Shabbat because of their formal significance in marking the difference between Jew and non-Jew, or he may take these two commandments as symptoms of the thorough commitment to Judaism that has already occurred. The geonic view would appear to adopt the latter approach. Regardless of the precise analysis, it seems that under these circumstances either the formal act of accepting God's yoke at a prior stage or involvement in a significant or a broad range of commandments takes away something of the voluntary character of the conversion process. Psychologically, and perhaps halakhically as well, it makes the person the equivalent of *metsuvveh ve-oseh*.

In this connection it is appropriate to recall the question R. Moshe Feinstein posed regarding the *eved*'s Jewish commitment. R. Moshe asked whether the *eved*'s partial but quite substantial degree of halakhic obligation is a consequence of his being a member of a Jewish household who must conform to his Jewish environment, or whether the obligations the *eved* undertakes as a result of his circumcision and/or immersion for the sake of *avdut* transform his own spiritual identity and set him on the road to full Judaism that must come to fruition once he is freed from servitude. This way of looking at the trajectory of the *eved* likewise highlights the *metsuvveh ve-oseh* experience.[22]

Earlier we noted that the "thick" nature of Jewish observance, the Jew's being surrounded and immersed in practice, would make Judaism attractive to a certain kind of disciplined religious viator. In the light of our last comment, the all-encompassing nature of Jewish life would also be a force for defining commitment and keeping it strong. Rambam rules that the potential convert should be made familiar with a representative selection of commandments, including both severe and mild demands and including those that entail expenditure of money[23]. Meiri explains the need to mention less onerous duties as a reflection of the "thick" nature of Halakha: for the average Gentile, the degree to which Judaism and its demands permeates both the great and small affairs of daily life might

[22] *Dibberot Moshe*, *Yevamot* section 37.
[23] See *Hil. Issurei Bi'ah*, 14:2.

be unexpected, perhaps even disconcerting. Likewise, the potential convert may not anticipate the many charitable requirements set down by Halakha. Calling attention to these features not only apprises the candidate about the contours of Jewish practice but also helps mold the quality of commitment.[24]

Responsibility for children is another factor that encourages the stabilization of religious affiliation. If this is true of young adults in their 20's and 30's in general, it is surely a conspicuous spur to conversion. In one sense, this motivation is not ideal, since it does not speak to the religious convictions of the parents. At another level, however, when, as is the case in our culture, the very idea of constant commitment is undeveloped, there is nothing like responsibility to consolidate it. The presence of children is an incentive and opportunity for the "thickening" of religious existence.

At the outset, when we examined intellectually sincere motives for conversion, we distinguished between arguments and intuitions that make conversion necessary or inevitable, as when Socrates becomes convinced that only a "thick" religion like Judaism can be true religion, and the kind of insight that leads Socrates to conclude that Judaism is the religion best suited to his spiritual temperament or the best way to foster his own spiritual welfare, without the choice of Judaism becoming a matter of logical compulsion. The more a candidate for *gerut* views the choice of Judaism as a forced choice, a "Here I stand, I can no other," the closer the candidate is to unreserved commitment. The more his choice is experienced as a free selection from a spiritual menu the less pronounced the element of essential commitment, and the closer we are to the arbitrary and the transient. Thus the ideal kind of commitment to overcome the contemporary atmosphere of voluntary religion would be evinced by the Gentile Socrates who believes that Judaism is the ideal way of life for every person capable of adopting it.

VII

Difficult cases make hard law. The standards and motivation for *gerut* is most often addressed under less than ideal circumstances and the elements of motivation that are separated out for judgment are the ones likely to determine halakhic decisions. Within our community the desire to convert to Judaism is readily understood in utilitarian or emotional

[24] Meiri to *Yevamot* 46b. A conversation with David Novak helped me appreciate the relevance of this source to the essay.

terms but is widely found puzzling at the intellectual and theocentric level. Kalman Abrams is a fictional character, but his discomfort with *gerut* and *gerim* represents a common reaction. It is rooted not in dislike or biological chauvinism but in a narrowness and coldness about his own religious situation and a degree of confusion about what exactly the singular relationship between God and the people He has chosen is all about.

I don't know whether the experiment we have begun in this essay has practical implications in dealing with the crises surrounding conversion. We have considered the range of legitimate religious motivations that may lead a contemporary *homo viator* to Judaism. We have also examined two distinctively modern impediments to the contemporary religious wayfarer: the decline of nationalism as a natural ideology of religious communitarianism and the almost unthinking tendency to discard commitment in favor of celebration of transitory choice and re-invention. If these reflections do anything to advance our own thinking about what it means to be a Jew, I trust that the effort will contribute something to improving the *gerut* situation as well.