

READING FROM RIGHT TO LEFT BY JEFF GREEN

The question of how Jewish Israelis are to relate to historical Jewish culture – taken in the broadest sense to include religion, literature, philosophy, values and so on – is a major issue in the formation of a national Jewish society here.

This question both divides and unites the society. Although they propose incompatible answers to it, a large number of creative and thoughtful people are addressing it.

As is often the case in Jewish thought, disagreement on practical issues is related to implicit differences in principle. The stand one takes on conversion, for example, depends on whether one thinks the Jews are essentially a religious sect or a nation. Conversion is, of course, a religious act, unlike naturalization, the process by which a foreign-born person receives citizenship.

A rigorously secular Jewish Israeli could conceivably advocate a form of Jewish naturalization, nonreligious assumption of Jewish nationality, but, as far as I know, this position is not widely argued. Even secular Israelis, such as kibbutzniks who marry gentile volunteers, generally insist on religious conversion. But what does such conversion mean when the convert does not intend to live a religious life?

A book mentioned in an earlier column, *Hagiyyur, Halacha Uma'aseh* ("Proselytism, Halacha and Practice") by Menachem Finkelstein, published by Bar-Ilan University Press, argues that such a "conversion" means nothing at all. Mere physical acts – circumcision and ritual immersion for men, ritual immersion for women – have no validity without the full acceptance of the yoke of the commandments.

Another recent discussion of this question, also coming from within Orthodox

Judaism, presents a more nuanced view, though certainly not one opposed to keeping the commandments. *Giyur Vezehut Yehudit* ("Conversion to Judaism and the Meaning of Jewish Identity: a Study of Halachic Sources from the Talmud to the Present Time") by Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar, presents a number of conflicting rabbinical opinions about conversion and examines the assumptions about the nature of Jewish identity that underlie them. Sagi and Zohar are both fellows of the Shalom Hartman Institute, which published the book jointly with the Bialik Institute. Sagi also teaches at Bar-Ilan University, and Zohar teaches at the Hebrew University.

Written with clarity, wit and erudition, the book is divided into four parts: "The Convert's Motivation as a Constitutive Element of Valid Conversion," "The Necessary Elements of Conversion," "The Meaning of 'Kabalat Mitzvot' in the Conversion Ceremony," and "The Meaning of Conversion to Judaism."

Each of the first three parts contains a chronological recapitulation of the sources from the Talmud to modern times, while the fourth chapter is a summary of the arguments. Sagi and Zohar present the view advanced by Finkelstein as one rather recent trend in rabbinic opinion: the principle that prior religious conviction must motivate the convert's decision to become a Jew.

They claim that another approach is more prevalent in classical halachic thought: namely that membership in the Jewish people preceded the acceptance of the covenant at Sinai. Hence a gentile is first reborn into the Jewish people as a result of symbolic physical actions – circumcision and immersion – after which he or she is obliged to observe the commandments like any other Jew, as a consequence of being Jewish rather than as a condition for becoming Jewish.

Giyur Vezehut Yehudit is the first product of the Center for Halacha at the Hartman Institute. It will be a hard act to follow.

A NON-ORTHODOX but committed approach to Jewish law is found in *Teshuvot Va'ad Hahalacha shel Knesset Harabanim Beyisrael* ("Responso of the Halacha Committee