



COURAGEOUS CONVERTS

A Roman prince outwits his uncle to study Torah, an Italian priest studies his way to a new life, and a Polish noble meets an old Jew studying Talmud on a Paris park bench—learn about their journeys to Judaism and what came next.

Moses receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai. Illustration from *The Rothschild Mahzor*, a beautifully illuminated manuscript created in Italy in 1490. JTS Library, MS 8892, fol. 139r.

I. JUDAISM AND CONVERSION

Welcome to an exploration of the fascinating and colorful lives of some of Jewish history's greatest and most colorful heroes.

Told through original sources, historic documents, multimedia, and music, the adventures of these remarkable characters will entertain us, and the lessons we learn from them will educate us about who we are as a people, and the role we are supposed to play.

Our first lesson focuses on the theme of converts to Judaism. Religions are often associated with a sustained effort to attract larger numbers of adherents. Today's lesson delves into Judaism's unique and nuanced approach to the topic of the conversion of non-Jewish individuals, and resolves its paradoxical views through uncovering deeper perspectives.



The holiday of Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah, the event that “converted” us into the Jewish people. Celebrating the theme of conversion, it is customary to read the biblical book of Ruth, which relates the story of the conversion of Ruth, the ancestor of King David, to Judaism. The image shown here is the opening of the Book of Ruth, in the *Tripartite Mahzor*, c. 1322. At this time, there was a convention in Jewish art of using animal features to replace the faces of some or all humans. British Library, Add MS 22413, fol. 071r.



TEXT 1

Righteous of the Nations

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Teshuvah* 3:5

חֲסִידֵי אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם יֵשׁ לָהֶן חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

The righteous individuals among the nations
have a share in the World to Come.



TEXT 2

Conversion Applications

Tosafot, *Yevamot* 109b

רָעָה אַחֵר רָעָה תֵּבֵא לְמִקְבְּלֵי גֵרִים. אָמַר רַב יִצְחָק,
דְּהִינוּ הֵיכָא שְׂמַשְׁיָאין אוֹתָן לְהִתְגִּיר אוֹ שְׂמִקְבְּלִין אוֹתָן
מִיד. אֲבָל אִם הֵן מִתְאַמְצִין לְהִתְגִּיר יֵשׁ לָנוּ לְקַבְּלָם.

We do not attempt to convince people to convert
to Judaism, and we do not immediately accept
anyone that asks to convert. There will be
severe Divine consequences for any Jew that
proselytizes. However, we do accept non-Jews
that are persistent in their desire to convert.

RABBI MOSHE BEN MAIMON
(**MAIMONIDES, RAMBAM**)
1135–1204

Halachist, philosopher, author, and physician. Maimonides was born in Córdoba, Spain. After the conquest of Córdoba by the Almohads, he fled Spain and eventually settled in Cairo, Egypt. There, he became the leader of the Jewish community and served as court physician to the vizier of Egypt. He is most noted for authoring the *Mishneh Torah*, an encyclopedic arrangement of Jewish law; and for his philosophical work, *Guide for the Perplexed*. His rulings on Jewish law are integral to the formation of Halachic consensus.

TOSAFOT

A collection of French and German Talmudic commentaries written during the 12th and 13th centuries. Among the most famous authors of *Tosafot* are Rabbi Yaakov Tam, Rabbi Shimshon ben Avraham of Sens, and Rabbi Yitzchak (“the Ri”). Printed in almost all editions of the Talmud, these commentaries are fundamental to basic Talmudic study.



TEXT 3

Converts from Sinai

Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai,
Midbar Kedemot, Maarechet Gimmel, ch. 3

כִּי זֹאת לְפָנִים מִמַּעַמַּד הַר סִינַי שֶׁקִּבְּלָנוּ הַתּוֹרָה שָׁם
נִמְצָא נֶפֶשׁ הַיֵּגֶר הַזֶּה הֵבֵא אַחֵר זְמַן רַב מֵאִד לְהַתְגִּיר. וְכִמּוֹ
שֶׁאֲמָרוּ זְכוּרֹנָם לְבִרְכָּה דְּנִפְשׁוֹת הַיֵּגֶרִים עֲמָדוֹ בְּמַעַמַּד הַר
סִינַי. וְנִמְצָא שֶׁמֵּאֵז הַיָּמִים נֶפֶשׁ זוֹ עֲמָדָה וְנִשְׂאֵת בְּמַעַמַּד
הַנִּפְלֵא שֶׁל הַר סִינַי, אֲלָא דְּאִשְׁתַּהוּי אִשְׁתַּהִי עַד הַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

Our sages teach that when we received the Torah at Mount Sinai all those years ago, the soul of the convert who would join us only many generations later was already present (TALMUD, SHABBAT 146A). This soul was at the incredible event at Mount Sinai, although its actual joining our people was deferred until now.

**RABBI CHAIM YOSEF
DAVID AZULAI
(CHIDA)
1724–1806**

Talmudist and noted bibliophile. Born in Jerusalem, scion to a prominent rabbinic family, he studied under Rabbi Chaim ibn Atar. A prolific writer on various Jewish topics, his *Shem Hagedolim* is particularly famous, chronicling short biographies of Jewish authors with overviews of their works. He traveled extensively in Europe to raise funds on behalf of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel, and died in Italy.



The introductory page to the Shavuot prayers in the *Rothschild Weill Machzor*, depicting Moses presenting the Torah to the Jews at Mount Sinai. This *machzor* was handcrafted in Italy, c. 1450, by the famed scribe and artist Yoel ben Shimon. National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 4450=8, p. 205.

II. ONKELOS

The Jewish approach to conversion and its view of converts can be better understood through an analysis of historic conversion cases. One such high-profile case involved an individual known to us as Onkelos, whose story takes us back to the early second century. Given the tragic destruction of the second Temple some fifty years earlier (70 CE) and Israel's subjection to Roman oppression, Onkelos's conversion was particularly remarkable.



1.1 A COIN MINTED by Rome in 129 CE to celebrate Hadrian's visit to the Land of Israel (Judaea).



1.2 A COIN MINTED by the Roman colony in occupied Jerusalem, depicting a bust of Hadrian and the plowing of the boundary of the city with an ox and a cow. The Latin inscription translates as "Colony of Aelia Capitolina, founded."



TEXT 4

Conversion Journey

Midrash, *Tanchuma*, Mishpatim 5

עקילס הגר בן אחותו של אדריאנוס, הָיָה מְבַקֵּשׁ
לְהִתְגִּיר וְהָיָה מִתְיָרָא מִן אֲדִרְיָנוֹס דְּדוֹדוֹ. אָמַר
לוֹ: אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת סְחוּרָה. אָמַר לוֹ: שָׂמָא
אַתָּה חֹסֵר כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב, הֲרִי אוֹצְרוֹתִי לְפָנֶיךָ.

אָמַר לוֹ: אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת סְחוּרָה לְצֵאת לַחוּץ לִידַע
דַּעַת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, וְאֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ לְמַלֵּךְ בֶּהָהָא לַעֲשׂוֹת. אָמַר
לוֹ: כָּל פְּרָקְמִטָּיָא שְׂאֵתָהּ רוּאָה שְׂפָלָה וְנִתְּוִנָּה בְּאַרְצָא,
לָךְ עֵסֶק בָּהּ, שְׂסוּפָהּ לְהִתְעַלּוֹת וְאַתָּה מְשִׁתַּפֵּר.

בָּא לוֹ לְאַרְצָא יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְמַד תּוֹרָה.

לְאַחַר זְמַן מִצְאוּהוּ רַבִּי אֶלְיעֶזֶר וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ,
רְאוּהוּ פְּנֵיו מְשִׁתְּנוֹת. אָמְרוּ זֶה לָזֶה: עֲקִילָס
לומד תורה. כִּיּוֹן שָׂבָא אֶצְלָם, הִתְחִיל לִשְׁאֹל
לָהֶם שְׂאֵלוֹת הֶרְבֵּה, וְהָיוּ מְשִׁיבִין אוֹתוֹ.

עָלָה אֶצֶל אֲדִרְיָנוֹס דְּדוֹדוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ: וְלָמָּה פָּנֶיךָ מְשִׁתְּנוֹת.
סְבוּר אֲנִי שֶׁהִפְסִידָה פְּרָקְמִטָּיָא שְׁלָךְ אוֹ שָׂמָא הֵצֵר לָךְ
אֲדָם? אָמַר לוֹ: לֹא. אָמַר לוֹ: אַתָּה קָרוֹב לִי וְאֲדָם מֵצֵר לִי.
אָמַר לוֹ: וְלָמָּה פָּנֶיךָ מְשִׁתְּנוֹת? אָמַר לוֹ: שְׂלַמְדְתִּי תּוֹרָה,
וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׂמִלְתִּי אֶת עֵצְמִי. אָמַר לוֹ: וּמִי אָמַר לָךְ
כֵּן? אָמַר לוֹ: בֶּהָהָא נִמְלַכְתִּי. אָמַר לוֹ: אֵימָתִי. אָמַר לוֹ: בְּשַׁעָה
שְׂאֵמְרִתִּי לָךְ מְבַקֵּשׁ אֲנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת סְחוּרָה, וְאַמְרִית לִי, כָּל
פְּרָקְמִטָּיָא שְׂאֵתָהּ רוּאָה שְׂפָלָה וְנִתְּוִנָּה בְּאַרְצָא, לָךְ וְעֵסֶק

TANCHUMA

A Midrashic work bearing the name of Rabbi Tanchuma, a 4th-century Talmudic sage quoted often in this work. “Midrash” is the designation of a particular genre of rabbinic literature usually forming a running commentary on specific books of the Bible. *Tanchuma* provides textual exegeses, expounds upon the biblical narrative, and develops and illustrates moral principles. *Tanchuma* is unique in that many of its sections commence with a Halachic discussion, which subsequently leads into nonhalachic teachings.

בָּהּ, שְׂסוּפָה לְהִתְעַלּוֹת. חֲזַרְתִּי עַל כָּל הָאֲמוֹת וְלֹא רָאִיתִי
אִמָּה שְׂפִלָּה נְתוּנָה בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנִשְׂרָאֵל, וְסוּפָה לְהִתְעַלּוֹת. . . .
אָמַר לוֹ סְקַנְדְּרוֹס: אִם כֵּן מָה תַּעֲשֶׂה, טָמְנָהּ,
הוֹאִיל וְהִתְגִּיר הֶרְגָּהּ. אָמַר לוֹ: עֲקִילֵס בֶּן אַחֲוֵי
עַד שֶׁהוּא בְּמַעֵי אִמּוֹ הָיָה רָאוּי לְהִתְגִּיר.

Onkelos the Convert was the son of Hadrian's sister. He wished to convert, but he was afraid of his uncle Hadrian. Onkelos told Hadrian, "I want to engage in business."

"If you're lacking gold and silver," Hadrian replied, "my treasury is open for you."

Onkelos said, "I wish to travel abroad on business in order to become acquainted with other people. I would like your advice about what investments to make."

Hadrian replied, "When you see merchandise that is valued lowly and disregarded, invest in it. Eventually, its value will rise and you will make a profit."

Onkelos traveled to the Land of Israel and studied Torah. A while later, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua met Onkelos and noticed that his countenance was changing. They told each other, "Onkelos is studying Torah!" As Onkelos became close to these scholars, he began asking them many questions, and they supplied him with explanations.

Onkelos returned to his uncle Hadrian. Hadrian asked him, “Why has your countenance changed? Your business must have failed, or maybe someone is oppressing you?”

“No, I am your relative, no one would oppress me.”

“So why has your countenance changed?”

“I have studied Torah, and even circumcised myself.”

“Who advised you to do such a thing?”

“I consulted with you.”

“When?”

“When I asked you what merchandise to invest in. You advised me, ‘When you see merchandise that is valued lowly and disregarded, invest in it. Eventually, its value will rise.’ I traveled among all the nations of the world and I could not find a nation as lowly valued and disregarded as the Jewish people. This nation is destined to rise.” . . .

Hadrian’s adviser told him, “Since Onkelos has converted, you should kill him.” Hadrian replied, “My nephew Onkelos was destined to convert from the moment he was conceived!”



TEXT 5

Thwarted Missions

Talmud, Avodah Zarah 11a

אונקלוס בר קלונימוס אגיר, שדר קיסר גנדא
 דרומאי אבתריה. משכינהו בקראי, איגור.
 הדר שדר גנדא דרומאי אחרינא אבתריה. אמר להו: לא
 תימרו ליה ולא מידי. כי הוּוּ שְׁקֵלוּ וְאֶזְלוּ, אמר להו: אימא
 לכו מלתא, בעלמא נפיורא נקט נורא קמי פפיורא,
 פפיורא לדוכסא, דוכסא להגמונא, הגמונא לקומא,
 קומא מי נקט נורא מקמי אינשי? אמרי ליה: לא. אמר
 להו: הקדוש ברוך הוא נקט נורא קמי ישראל, דכתיב:
 (שמות יג, כא) "וה' הלך לפניהם יומם וגו'". איגור פלהו.
 הדר שדר גנדא אחרינא אבתריה, אמר להו: לא
 תשתעו מידי בהדיה. כי נקטי ליה ואזלי חזא
 מזוזתא דמנחא אפתחא, אותיב ידיה עלה ואמר
 להו: מאי האי? אמרו ליה: אימא לן אתא.
 אמר להו: מנהגו של עולם, מלך בשר ודם יושב
 מבפנים ועבדיו משמרים אותו מבחוץ, ואלו הקדוש
 ברוך הוא עבדיו מבפנים והוא משמרן מבחוץ,
 שנאמר: (תהלים קכא, ח) "ה' ישמר צאתך ובואך
 מעתה ועד עולם". איגור. תו לא שדר בתריה.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

Onkelos the son of Kelonimus converted to Judaism. The Roman emperor sent a troop of Roman soldiers to seize him and bring him to the emperor. However,

Onkelos attracted them to Judaism with Torah passages that he cited for them, and they converted.

The emperor dispatched a second troop of Roman soldiers after Onkelos and ordered them to avoid discussions with him. As the soldiers arrested Onkelos and led him away, he said to them, “Let me tell you something trivial: A minor official holds a torch in front of a high official, the high official holds a torch for a duke, a duke for the governor, and the governor for the emperor. Now, does the emperor hold a torch before the common people?” “No,” the soldiers replied. Onkelos continued, “Yet G-d* holds a torch in front of the Jewish people, as the Torah states, ‘G-d went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead the way for them, and by night in a pillar of fire, to provide light for them!’ (EXODUS 13:21).” The entire troop converted to Judaism.

The emperor dispatched a third troop of soldiers to arrest Onkelos. He ordered them not to talk to Onkelos at all. As the soldiers were leading Onkelos away, he saw a *mezuzah* affixed to a doorpost. He placed his hand on the *mezuzah* and turned to the soldiers, asking, “What is this?”

“You tell us!” the soldiers replied.

*Throughout this book, “G-d” and “L-rd” are written with a hyphen instead of an “o” (both in our own translations and when quoting others). This is one way we accord reverence to the sacred Divine name. This also reminds us that, even as we seek G-d, He transcends any human effort to describe His reality.

Onkelos explained to them, “It is standard practice throughout the world for a mortal king to sit inside his palace while his servants guard him from the outside. But not so the G-d of Israel! His servants, the Jewish people sit inside their homes while *He* guards *them* from the outside! Thus it is stated, ‘G-d shall guard your departure and your arrival, from now and to eternity’ (PSALMS 121:8).” When the soldiers heard that, they also converted to Judaism. Consequently, the emperor sent no more soldiers after Onkelos.

**EXERCISE 1.1**

Can you identify theological points in Onkelos’s words that won over the Roman soldiers?



TEXT 6

A Monumental Translation

Talmud, Megilah 3a

תרגום של תורה אונקלוס הגר אמרו
מפי רבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע.

The Aramaic translation of the Torah was composed by Onkelos the convert, who had learned it from Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

Onkelos's translation of the Torah contains a significant degree of interpretation. The Lesson Appendix explores some examples of Onkelos's interpretive efforts.



1.3 A PAGE FROM THE VERY FIRST PRINTED EDITION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE. The text of the Torah appears in the center of the page, flanked by Onkelos's translation in the side margin. The commentary of Rashi appears on the top and bottom margins. The appearance of Onkelos in a column alongside the text of the Torah remains standard in Hebrew Bibles until today.

CHAMISHAH CHUMSHEI TORAH,
BOLOGNA, 1482. U.S. LIBRARY
OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON,
D.C., BS1222 1482, P. 93

III. OVADIAH THE CONVERT

Another unusual historical case of conversion to Judaism is that of Ovadiah the Convert in the early twelfth century. Ovadiah had been an Italian priest; his original name was Johannes of Oppido Lucano.



1.4 The first extant page from Ovadiah's autobiography.

LIBRARY OF THE HUNGARIAN
ACADEMY OF SCIENCES,
KAUFMANN MS 134, FOL. 1R



TEXT 7

Ovadiah's Birth

Autobiography of Ovadiah the Convert*

[...] וּשְׁמוֹ אֹפִידִי. וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה וּשְׁמָהּ מְרִיא, וַתֵּהָרֵם
מְרִיא וַתֵּלֶד לְדְרֵוּ אִשָּׁה שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּיוֹם אֶחָד, אֶת
הָרֵאשִׁיטוֹן כְּחֻקַּת הַנָּשִׁים לְבִנְיָהּ וַיִּקְרָאוּ שְׁמוֹ רוֹיִירִיוֹס
הוּא רֹגִיר. וְאֶת הַשֵּׁנִי, וַאֲחֵרִיתוֹ יְבֵא רֵאשִׁוֶּנָּה, וּבְעֶצֶב
רַב יָלְדָה אֹתוֹ אִמּוֹ, וַתִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ יוֹהָנֵס, הוּא
גִּוְאָן. וַיִּגְדְּלוּ הַנְּעָרִים וַיְהִי רוֹיִירִיוֹס אִישׁ דּוֹרֵשׁ חֶרֶב
וּמִלְחָמוֹת, וַיְהִי יוֹהָנֵס אִישׁ דּוֹרֵשׁ דַּעַת וּבִינָה בְּסִפְרִים.

[...] whose name is Oppido. He took a wife
named Maria, and Maria conceived and bore
unto Dreux her husband two sons on the same
day—the first born according to the usual manner
of women as to their children, to whom they
gave the name Rogerius, that is, Rogier. As for
the second, his lower parts came out first, his
mother bearing him with great pain; she gave him
the name Johannes: this is Giovan. The youths
grew up; Rogerius became a man who sought the
sword and warfare, whereas Johannes became a
man seeking knowledge and wisdom in books.

*The Hebrew transcriptions and translations of the documents related to Ovadiah the Convert are based on the work of Professor Norman Golb, published on johannes-obadiah.org, with corrections and editing for clarity. Words in the manuscript that were undecipherable are represented by bracketed ellipses.



TEXT 8

Shocking News

Ibid.

וַיְהִי בַּעֲתָהּ הַהִיא, וְאַנְדְּרִיאָס אַרְכִּי אֶפִּי־סִכְפָּס הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל
 אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְיָנָה בָּאֲרִי, נָתַן הָאֱלֹקִים אֶהֱבֵת תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה
 בְּלִבּוֹ, וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶרְצוֹ וּכְהֻנָּתוֹ וְכָל כְּבוֹדוֹ וַיָּבֵא אֶל מִדְיָנָה
 קִסְטָנְטִינְיָא. וַיִּמָּל אֶת בָּשָׂר עֲרֻלָּתוֹ וַיַּעֲבְרוּ עָלָיו צָרוֹת
 וְרָעוֹת. וַיָּקָם וַיִּבְרַח לְנַפְשׁוֹ מִפְּנֵי הָעַרְלִים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים אֹתוֹ
 לְהַרְגוֹ וַיִּמְלִטְהוּ ה' אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיָּדָם בְּטַהֲרָה, ה' שׁוֹמֵר
 גֵּרִים, בְּרוּךְ ה' לָעַד. וְרַבִּים עוֹלִים אַחֲרָיו וְרוֹאִים אֶת מַעֲשָׂיו
 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה, וַיָּבֵאוּ גַם הֵם בְּבְרִית אֱלֹקִים חַיִּים . . .
 וְכָל חֲכָמֵי אֱדוֹם יִכְלְמוּ הַשׁוֹמְעִים שְׁמוֹעָתוֹ. וַיִּשְׁמַע
 יְהֹנָס אֶת דְּבָרָיו, וְהוּא עוֹדְנוֹ נָעַר בְּבֵית דְּרוֹנָס אָבִיו.

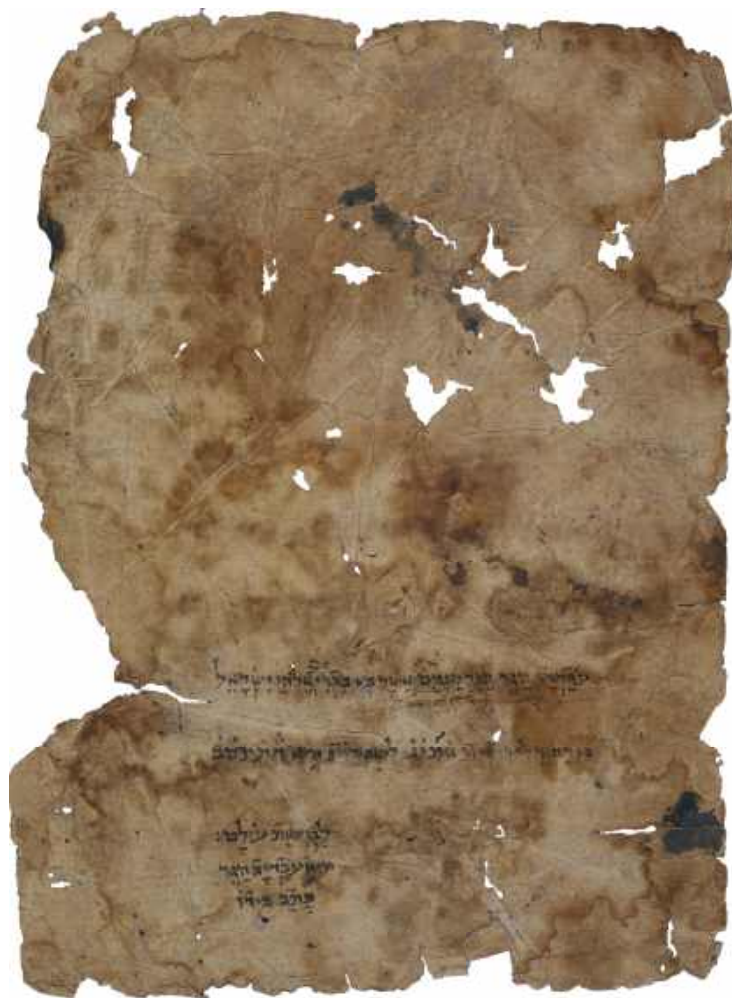
It happened at that time regarding Archbishop
 Andreas, the high priest of the city of Bari, that the
 L-rd put the love of the Torah of Moses into his
 heart. He forsook his land, his priesthood, and all
 his glory and came to the city of Constantinople,
 where he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin. He
 endured sufferings and hardships; he arose and
 fled for his life from before the Gentiles seeking to
 slay him; but the L-rd G-d of Israel saved him from
 their hands in purity. The L-rd protects proselytes,
 blessed be the L-rd forever! Many went up after him
 and, observing his deeds, they did as he had done—
 they also entered the covenant of the living G-d. . . .

All the sages of Edom [Christendom] were ashamed when they heard the report about him. Johannes heard of the events concerning him while he was still a youth in the house of Dreux his father.

**1.5 OVADIAH'S
HANDWRITTEN
INSCRIPTION** on a
siddur he had copied
by hand. The date
recorded corresponds
to 1102 C.E.

“Ovadiah the Norman
Proselyte who entered
the covenant of the G-d
of Israel in the month
of Elul, year 1413 of
the era of Documents
which is 4862 of the
era of Creation—he,
Ovadiah the
Proselyte, has
written [this
prayer book] with
his own hand.”

KLAU LIBRARY, HUC
MS 1008, FOL. 1R





TEXT 9

The Conversion Process

Rabbi Baruch ben Yitzchak of Aleppo,
certification of conversion for Ovadiah the Convert

כָּל מְקוֹמוֹת כְּנִסוֹת וּמִדְּרָשׁוֹת אֲשֶׁר יִגִּיעַ אֲלֵיהֶם
הָאֲגָרָת הַזֹּאת יִפְרֹס עֲדִימוֹ רַבִּי שְׁלֹמוֹת.

בָּא לְעִירָנוּ עִם אֲגָרָת מִתְלִמִּידֵי חֲכָמִים הַשּׁוֹכְנִים
בְּאַרְצוֹתָיו, וְהִגִּידוּ לָנוּ כִּי מִמְשַׁפַּחַת גְּדֻלָּה הָאִישׁ
הַזֶּה, וְאָבִיו שֶׁר גְּדוֹל הָיָה, וְהָאִישׁ הַזֶּה בָּקִי בְקָרִיאַת
סְפָרֵיהֶם, וּמִפְּנֵי בִינְתּוֹ מָמָה שֶׁקָּרָא בְּסִפְרֵי טְעוּתָם
שָׁב אֶל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל לִבּוֹ וּבְכָל נַפְשׁוֹ
וּבְכָל מְאֹדוֹ, וְנִתְגַּיֵּר בְּבֵית דִּינוֹ שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

וְכֹאֲשֶׁר בָּא לְהִתְגַּיֵּר הוֹדִיעָנוּ כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל דּוֹוִיִּים
וְדַחוּפִים וּמִשְׁעֲבָדִים וּמְטָרְפִים, וְאָמַר הוּא לְמוֹדִיעָיו,
וְכִי אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּזוּיִים וּמְחַרְפִּים, וְאָף
עַל פִּי כֵּן אֵינִי כְּדַאי לָהּ [. . .] בָּהּ בִּישְׂרָאֵל.

וְכֹאֲשֶׁר נִרְאָה כִּי מֵאַהֲבָה בָּא, הוֹדִיעָנוּ
מְקַצֵּת מִצּוֹת קְלוֹת וּמְקַצֵּת מִצּוֹת חֲמוּרוֹת,
וְהוֹדִיעָנוּ עֲנֹשׁ שֶׁל מִצּוֹת . . .

וְכֹאֲשֶׁר קָבַל אֶת כָּל הַתְּנָאִים, מָלוּ אוֹתוֹ מִיד, וְכֹאֲשֶׁר
נִתְרַפָּא הִטְבִּילוּהוּ. וְיֵהוּ שֶׁם שְׁנֵי תְלָמִידֵי חֲכָמִים
עוֹמְדִים לוֹ עַל גִּבּוֹ. וְגַם הוֹדִיעָנוּ מְקַצֵּה מִצּוֹת קְלוֹת
וּמְקַצֵּת מִצּוֹת חֲמוּרוֹת, וּבִכְנֹן נַעֲשֶׂה כִּישְׂרָאֵל לְכָל דְּבָר.

וְעַתָּה אַחֲרֵינוּ, בְּרוּכִים תִּהְיוּ לְשָׁמַיִם, הֵיוּ זִהְרִים בְּכָבוֹד
הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְאֵל תִּמְעִיטוּ [. . .] אֲשֶׁר נָהוּג בּוֹ וְהִזְהָרוּ

**RABBI BARUCH
BEN YITZCHAK
OF ALEPPO
11TH-12TH CENTURIES**

Little is known about Rabbi Baruch ben Yitzchak, other than his position as rabbi in the scholarly community of Aleppo, Syria. Rabbi Baruch wrote commentaries to a number of Talmudic tractates, but all that survives from them are quotes included in later works.

מֵאוֹנָאֵת דְּבָרִים שְׁלֹא יִתְאַנֶּה מִדְּבָרֵי [. . .] הַמָּקוֹם עַל אוֹנָאֵתוֹ
וְעַל לַחֲצוֹ, דְּתַנּוּ רַבָּנָן: הַמְּאַנֶּה אֶת הַגֵּר עוֹבֵד בְּשִׁלְשָׁה לְאוּיָן . . .

הָאֲגָרָת הַזֹּאת כָּתַב אוֹתָהּ בְּיָדוֹ רַבִּינוּ בְּרוּךְ, הָרַב הַגָּדוֹל
וְהַמְּבָהֵק נֹט מִשׁ בֶּן רַבִּינוּ יִצְחָק נִשְׁמָתוֹ יַעֲדוֹ, וְיִכְתֹּב
רַבִּינוּ בְּרוּךְ אֶת הָאֲגָרָת הַזֹּאת לְהִיּוֹתָהּ בְּיַד עֲבָדֶיהָ הַגֵּר
אֶצֶּל כָּל קְהֵלוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הוּא הֹלֵךְ אֲלֵיהֶם.

[To] all places of worship and study unto
whom this letter shall reach, may they be
granted myriad measures of peace.

This man, the bearer of our letter, came to our city
with an epistle from sages who dwell in his lands. They
told us that this man is of a great family, that his father
was an important officer, and that this man [Ovadiah]
is expert in the reading of their [Christian religious]
books. Because of his understanding of what he read
in their erroneous books, he returned to the L-rd of
Israel with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his
strength, and became a proselyte in a law-court of Israel.

When he came to convert, they informed him that
the Israelites were in sorrow, oppressed, despised
and scorned; he said to his informants, "Do I not
know that the Israelites are despised and scorned?
If only I would be worthy to join Israel!"

After it was discerned that he came out of love, they
informed him of some lenient and some severe

commandments, and they informed him of the punishment for [infractions of] the commandments. . . .

When he accepted all of the conditions, they circumcised him immediately, and when he was healed they ritually immersed him. There were two sages there, standing on either side of him, and they also reminded him of some lenient and some severe commandments. Thus was he made an Israelite for every matter.

And now, O our brethren, blessed may you be unto Heaven, be careful of the honor of this man [. . .] Take care that you not injure him with words, that he be not injured by words of [. . .] for the L-rd has warned against injury and oppression toward him, as our rabbis taught: “He who wounds the feelings of a proselyte transgresses three negative injunctions.” . . .

This letter was written in his own hand by our master Baruch, the great and outstanding master, may he be guarded by Heaven, son of our master Yitzchak, may his soul rest in peace. Our master Baruch wrote this letter that it might be kept by Ovadiah the Convert [for use] in all communities of Israel to which he might go.



1.6 OVADIAH'S CONVERSION
CERTIFICATION from Rabbi
Baruch ben Yitzchak of Aleppo.

BODLEIAN LIBRARY, MS.
HEB. A. 3, FOL. 1A



QUESTION

Do any features of Ovadiah's conversion certification document strike you as strange? What may be the explanation for these features?



TEXT 10

Tribulations and Deliverance

Autobiography of Ovadiah the Convert

וַיֵּלֶךְ עֲבֹדְיָה הַגֵּר מֵעִיר מַכְסִין, וַיָּבֹא עַד רְחוֹבוֹת אֲשֶׁר
עַל נְהַר פֶּרֶת. וַיָּבֹא עֲבֹדְיָה הַגֵּר אֶל מְדִינַת עַדִינָה הַיָּא
בְּגִדְד בִּירַת הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים, וַיָּבֹאוּ עָלָיו צָרוֹת [. . .]
וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ הַגּוֹיִם לְהַמִּיתוֹ וְה' אֱלֹהִים [. . .] הִצִּילֹו.

וַיָּבֹא עֲבֹדְיָה הַגֵּר [. . .] וַיַּעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי פֶתַח בַּיִת הַכְּנָסֶת
[. . .] הַיְשִׁיבָה. וַיָּשֶׁב הַמְּשָׁרֵת אֶת עֲבֹדְיָה הַגֵּר בְּבֵית
אֲשֶׁר הִיהוּדִים יִתְפַּלְּלוּ בּוֹ וּמִזִּזְנוֹת הַבֵּיָאָה לוֹ.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי כֵן וַיֵּצֵאוּ יִצְחָק רֹאשׁ הַיְשִׁיבָה לַהֲיוֹת עֲבֹדְיָה הַגֵּר
עִם הַנְּעָרִים הַיְתוּמִים לְלַמְּדוֹ תוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עֲבָדוֹ וְדַבְּרֵי
נְבִיא הַנְּבִיאִים בְּמִכְתָּב הָאֱלֹקִים וּבִלְשׁוֹן הָעֵבְרִיִּים.

Ovadiah the Convert then went from the city of
Maksin and came to Rechovot, which is upon

the river Euphrates. Then Ovadiah the Convert came to the city of Adinah, which is Baghdad, capital of the Ishmaelites. There came upon him tribulations and [...] the Gentiles sought to slay him, but the L-rd G-d [...] saved him.

Ovadiah the Convert came [...] and he stood before the doorway of the synagogue [...] the academy. The servant installed Ovadiah the Convert in the house in which the Jews would pray, and they brought him provisions.

It happened thereafter that Yitzchak, the head of the academy, directed that Ovadiah the Convert be with the orphan youths, in order to teach him the Torah of Moses, the words of the greatest of the prophets, in the script of the L-rd and the language of the Hebrews.



Chacham Ezra Dangoor, the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad, stands in the ancient Great Synagogue of Baghdad in 1923. Also known as the Shaf ve'Yativ Synagogue, local tradition maintains that it was built on the site of the original synagogue built by the exiles from the Land of Israel after the destruction of the First Temple.



TEXT 11

A Shavuot Song

Ovadiah the Convert, "Who Stood upon Mount Horeb"

מי על הר חורב העמיד, ענין קשב עמוד עמדי פמשה.
 מי מדבר הנהיג עדרי, מן האכילי גם עלי בארי פמשה.
 מי רצה עליון חנון ומרחם, רחש שוב
 על הרעה הנחם פמשה.
 מי חז חזיון חוק עדות, חזה במראה ולא בחידות פמשה.
 מי זאת התורה למד ושינו, זכה ויבא בתוך הענין פמשה.
 מי קם ארבעים יום בשמים, בלא לחם ובלא מים פמשה.
 אל האלקים עדתי קומי, כי בא אורו וכבוד ה' עליה זרח.
 קומי אורי כי בא אורו וכבוד ה' עליה זרח.

Who stood upon Mount Horeb, heard the
 order "Stand with Me!" like Moses?

Who in the desert led My flock, fed them manna,
 recited My praises at the well, like Moses?

Who appeased Me with "Oh merciful and
 forbearing," asking Me repeatedly, "reconsider
 the bad consequences decreed," like Moses?

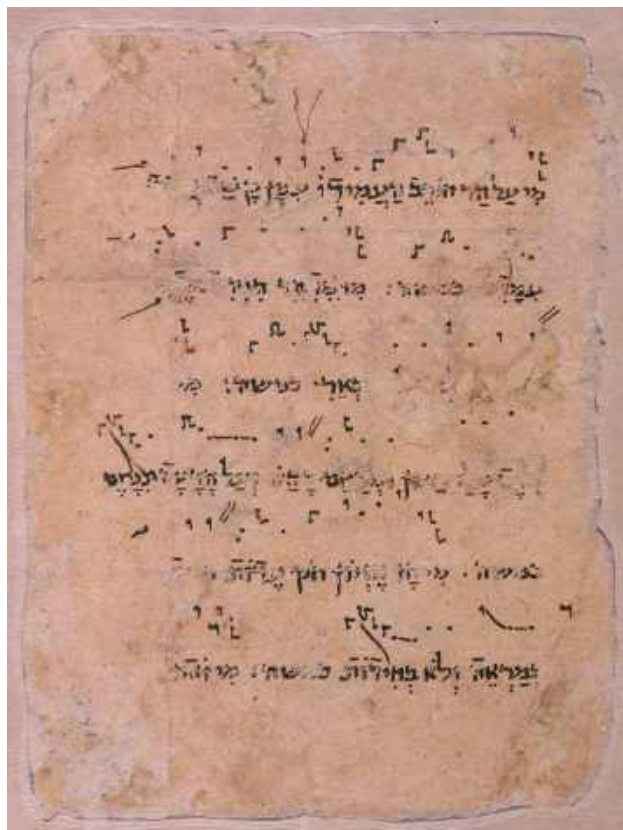
Who beheld prophetic visions, the
 Torah and its laws, witnessed in full
 vision, not by parable, like Moses?

Who is the one who taught and drilled the Torah,
merited to come within the cloud, like Moses?

Who stayed for forty days in Heaven, with
neither bread nor water, like Moses?

Arise, my congregation, turn to G-d, “for your light has
come, and the Glory of the L-rd has shone upon you!”

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the Glory
of the L-rd has shone upon you” (ISAIAH 60:1).



1.7 A SONG FOR SHAVUOT
with musical notes, written
by Ovadiah the Convert.

JTS LIBRARY, ENA 4096B, RECTO

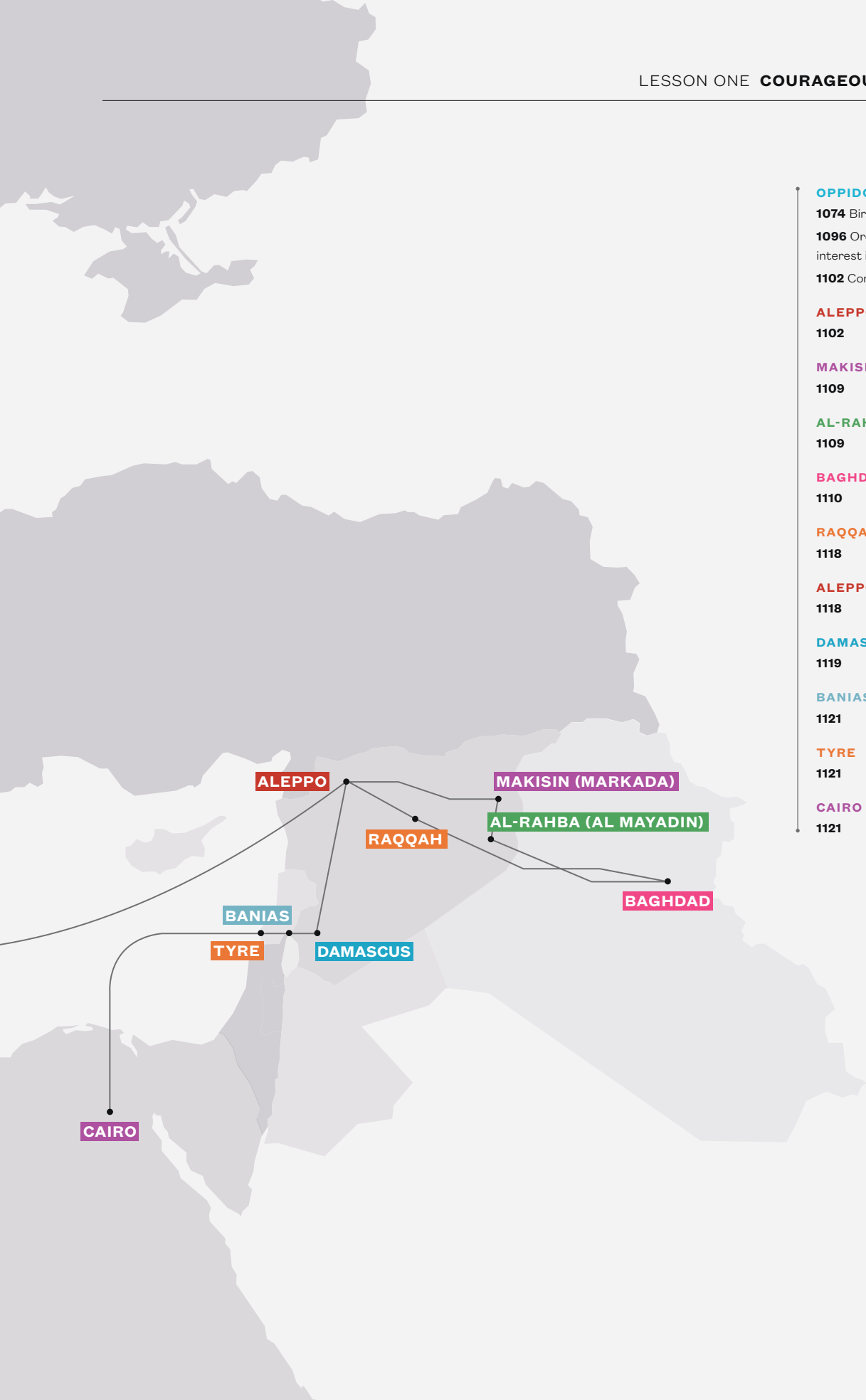


OPPIDO LUCANO

Stations in the Life of Ovadiah the Convert

This map charts the life events and wanderings of Ovadiah the Convert, from his birth in southern Italy to his final years in Cairo, Egypt.

Note: Most of the dates are estimates.



OPPIDO LUCANO

- 1074 Birth
- 1096 Ordained as priest, interest in Judaism begins
- 1102 Conversion to Judaism

ALEPPO

1102

MAKISIN (MARKADA)

1109

AL-RAHBA (AL MAYADIN)

1109

BAGHDAD

1110

RAQQA

1118

ALEPPO

1118

DAMASCUS

1119

BANIAS

1121

TYRE

1121

CAIRO

1121

IV. AVRAHAM BEN AVRAHAM

The above cases illustrate the steep prices that converts to Judaism have historically paid for their beliefs. Onkelos and Ovadiah fled their homelands to save their lives, but other converts did not manage to escape persecution. In the following case, a famous convert paid the ultimate price—and he did so willingly and happily.



TEXT 12

Secret Discovery

Aizik Meir Dik, *Gerei Hatzedek*, pp. 3–4

ה' אֶלְפִים תע"ט. הָיָה אָדוֹן אֶחָד בְּמִדְיַת פּוֹלִין שָׁמוּ
פֶּאָטאַצְקע. וַיְהִי לוֹ בֶּן חָכֶם, עַד שֶׁהָיָה קָטָן בְּעֵינָיו
לְמוֹדֵי הָאֶקְדֶּמֶק מוֹיִלְנָא. וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתוֹ אָבִיו לָעִיר פֶּרִיז
לְלַמֵּד שָׁם. וְגַם בְּמִדְיַת זַאמוֹט הָיָה אָדוֹן אֶחָד שָׁמוּ
זַאָרעִמְבֶּע, וַיְהִי לוֹ גַּם בֶּן חָכֶם, וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתוֹ שָׁם לְלַמֵּד.
וַיִּתְחַבֵּר יַחַד הַנְּעָרִים בְּאַהֲבָה רַבָּה וַעֲצוּמָה מְאֹד.

וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם, וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם לְטִיֵּל בְּגִנַּת בֵּיתוֹ, וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ
זָקֵן לוֹמֵד בְּסֵפֶר אֶחָד בְּחֶשֶׁק נִמְרָץ, עַד שֶׁנִּתְפַּעֲלוּ
מְאֹד מְלֻמוּדוֹ. וַיִּשְׁאַלוּ אוֹתוֹ מָה שֵׁם הַסֵּפֶר וּמָה
פֶּתוּב בּוֹ, אִם עֲנִינִי זַאמוֹנָה, אוֹ חֻקְמָה אַחֲרֵת. וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהֶם הַזָּקֵן, זֶה הַסֵּפֶר הוּא תוֹרַת ה' צְבָאוֹת . . .

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו הַזָּקֵן הַנִּכְבָּד, לָמַד גַּם עִמָּנוּ הַסֵּפֶר הַיָּקָר
הַזֶּה, כִּי גַם אֲנַחְנוּ חִפְצִים לְלַמֵּד תוֹרַת אֱמוּנָת.

וַיַּעַן הַזָּקֵן וַיֹּאמֶר: בְּנֵי יִידִי, לֹא אוֹכֵל לְלַמֵּד עִמָּכֶם
הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה כִּי אַתֶּם אֵינְכֶם מְבִינִים הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה

AIZIK MEIR DIK
1807–1893

Writer and publisher.
A resident of Vilna,
Lithuania, Aizik Meir
Dik wrote short stories
and novels in both
Hebrew and Yiddish.
A pioneer in his field,
Dik is considered
the first professional
Yiddish author.

וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ הַקְדוּשָׁה. וְעוֹד, שְׁגִזְרַת הַמַּלְכוּת הוּא שְׁלֹא
תִּלְמְדוּ הַסֵּפֶר הַזֶּה כִּי הוּא נִגְדַּ אֱמוּנַתְכֶם.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו עוֹד, שָׁמַע נָא הַזָּקֵן אֲשֶׁר קִנִּיתָ חֻכְמָה,
הֲלֹא הַבּוֹרָא יִתְּבַרֵךְ שְׁמוֹ חֶלֶק גַּם לָנוּ בְּבִינָה. חֲמַל
נָא עָלֵינוּ וְלִמּוֹד עִמָּנוּ הַתּוֹרָה הַנִּכְבְּדָה הַזֹּאת. וְאַל
תִּירָא, וְלִבְבְּךָ אַל יִרֶךְ מִן הַמַּלְכוּת, כִּי לֹא נִגְלָה
סוּדָךְ, וְנַעֲשֶׂה זֹאת בְּעֶבֶר לְהוֹצִיא יָקָר מִזֹּלָל.

וַיִּרְחַם הַזָּקֵן עֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּלְמַד עִמָּהֶם. וּבְמִשָּׁף זְמַן חָצִי
שָׁנָה לְמִדּוֹ וְהִבִּינוּ כָּל הַתּוֹרָה, וַיִּדְּעוּ בְּרוּרוֹת כִּי אֱמוּנַת
יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא הָאֱמֻנָתִית וַיִּקְצוּ מִפְּנֵי אֱמוּנָתָם.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ, מָה אֲנַחְנוּ יוֹשְׁבִים פֹּה עַד מִתְּנוּ. הֲבֵיא
נִתְחַכְמָה וְנִסְעֵ לְאַמְשְׁטֶרדָם, וְשָׁם נַעֲשֶׂה אֶת חִפְּץ לִבֵּנוּ.

The year was 5479 [1719]. A Polish nobleman named Potocki had a brilliant son. The local university in Vilna was no longer sufficient for the boy, so his father sent him to study in Paris. At the same time, a nobleman in the region of Samogitia named Zarembe also had a brilliant son—and he was also sent to study in Paris. The two young men became very close friends.

One day, as the two young men were strolling in a garden, they happened across an old man reading a book, engrossed in study. Impressed by the way the old man was studying, the young men asked, “What

is the name of the book you are studying? What are its contents? Theology, or some other subject?”

The old man told them, “It is a book of the Divine Torah.” . . .

“Please teach us from this precious book,” the young men asked the venerable elderly scholar. “We also wish to learn this Torah of truth.”

“My dear children,” the old man responded, “I cannot teach you from this book because you will not understand its contents and style. Also, you are forbidden from studying this book by law, because it is contrary to your religion.”

“Listen to us, wise old man,” the young students said. “G-d has blessed us with great intelligence; have mercy on us and teach us this dear Torah. Do not be afraid of the government—we will keep it secret. Please do this for us and show us the light.”

The old man had mercy on the students and studied with them. They studied Torah for six months and understood it well. They recognized that the Jewish religion is the truth and could no longer tolerate their religion.

“Can we just stay here all our lives?” they asked each other. “Let us travel to Amsterdam, and there we will convert.”



TEXT 13

Confrontation and Capture

Ibid., pp. 21–22

וְהַצַּדִּיק הַנִּחְמָד פֶּאֶטְאָצְקִי נָסַע מֵאַמְשְׁטֶרְדָּם
 לְמִדְיַנַּת לִיטְא . . . וְלֹא בָטַל מִן הַתּוֹרָה וְהָעֲבוּדָה אֶף
 רְגַע. כִּי לְבוֹ הָיָה הוֹמָה כַּיָּם בְּתוֹרַת ה', וְסִגְף עֲצָמוֹ
 בְּכָל מִינֵי סְגוּפִים. קָצָרָה הִרְיָעָה מִלְּסַפֵּר שְׁבָחוֹ.
 וּבָעֵת תְּפִלָּתוֹ שָׁטְפוּ מַעֲיָנָיו נַחֲלֵי דְמָעוֹת וְגִיל.
 וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיֵּלֶךְ הַצַּדִּיק בְּתַמִּימוֹתָיו וְצִדְקָתוֹ לְבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת . . .
 וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה נָעַר אֶחָד בֶּן חֲמִשָּׁת אַרְוֵר רוֹקֵד וּמַצְחִק
 וְצוֹעֵק מוֹל הָאָרוֹן הַקּוֹדֵשׁ בְּהוֹלִילוֹת וְקִלּוֹת רֹאשׁ, כִּי הִשְׁלִיךְ
 הַכּוֹבֵעַ מֵעַל רֹאשׁוֹ. וַיַּחֲר לוֹ מְאוֹד, וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בְּגִעְרָה, הוּא
 עַז פָּנִים! מִדּוּעַ אֵינְךָ יָרָא מִפְּנֵי אֱלֹקִים לַעֲמֹד בְּבֵיתוֹ מוֹל
 אָרוֹן קֹדֶשׁ וְרֹאשְׁךָ מְגֻלָּה. שִׁים הַכּוֹבֵעַ עָלֶי רֹאשְׁךָ . . .
 וַיֵּלֶךְ [הַרְשָׁע אָבִי הַנָּעַר] לְשֹׁר הָעִיר וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו,
 יָדַע תִּדְעַ שְׁבֹן הַדּוּכּוֹס פֶּאֶטְאָצְקִי הֵנָּא אֶבֶד הוּא
 יוֹשֵׁב בְּעִירָנוּ בְּבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ וְהוּא הַמִּיר דָּתוֹ לְדַת
 יְהוּדִית, וְהוּא מְבַזֶּה וּמְשַׁקֵּץ מְאוֹד אֶת אֲמוֹנַתְכֶם.
 וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח אַנְשִׁים לְתַפְשֹׁהוּ בְּטָרֵם יְבָרַח מִפָּנָיו.
 וַיַּעַשׂ הַשֹּׁר כֵּן, וַיָּבֵא עִם שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וַיְסוּבוּ אֶת
 הָעִיר וַיִּתְּפְשׂוּהוּ וַיְשִׁימוּהוּ בְּבֵית הַסֵּהַר בְּכַבְלֵי בְרָזָל.

The righteous Potocki traveled from Amsterdam
 to Lithuania. . . . He spent every moment of his
 time engrossed in Torah study or prayer. His heart
 was completely devoted to Torah and he would

fast and subject his body to afflictions. His praises cannot adequately be told in writing. During prayer, his eyes would pour with rivers of tears.

One day, this holy man came to the synagogue . . . and saw a young man, the son of the local tailor, laughing, shouting, and wildly throwing his hat in the air in front of the synagogue's holy ark. Potocki was very upset and he scolded the young man, "You insolent fellow! Why aren't you showing respect for G-d? How can you stand in the synagogue in front of the ark with your head uncovered? Put your hat back on! . . .

The young man's wicked father was enraged, and he went to the local nobleman and told him, "You should know that the lost son of the great nobleman Potocki is in our town, sitting in the synagogue. He has converted to Judaism, and he sharply denigrates your religion. Send officers to arrest him before he flees."

The nobleman did as the wicked man advised him. He brought three hundred officers and they surrounded the town. They arrested Potocki and placed him in prison, bound in iron shackles.



TEXT 14

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Ibid., pp. 27-28

וַיֵּצֵאוּ מִשְׁפָּטוֹ לְמִשְׁחָה לְשׁוֹנוֹ מֵעַרְפוֹ וּלְשָׂרְפוֹ בְּאֵשׁ בְּיוֹם
 שְׁנֵי שָׁל חַג הַשְּׁבוּעוֹת, יוֹם מַתֵּן תּוֹרָתֵנוּ. כֵּן אַז עָלְתָה
 לְמָרוֹם, וַיְהִי בְיוֹם הַהוּא אֶבֶל גָּדוֹל לַיהוּדִים, אֶבֶל יָחִיד עָשׂוֹ
 לָהֶם עַל מוֹת יָחִידָם, מְסֻפָּד תַּמְרוּרִים. כִּי כָל אִישׁ הַתְּפִלָּל
 בְּבֵיתוֹ בְּיָחִיד בְּדַמְעוֹת שְׁלִישׁ. וְכָלֶם הִשְׁגִּיחוּ מִן הַחֲלוּנוֹת
 וּמִן הַחֲרָפִים, וְכֹאשֶׁר הִבִּיאוּהוּ לְמָקוֹם הַמְּשַׁפֵּט הָאֵיר פָּנָיו
 כְּשֶׁמֶשׁ, וְהוּא הָלַךְ בְּשִׂמְחַת לֵבָב כְּהוֹלֵךְ בְּחִלְלִי אֶל הָרָה'.

The ruling was given: Avraham's tongue should be ripped out of his mouth and he should be burned at the stake on the second day of Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah. He indeed rose to Heaven on that day, and the Jewish people mourned bitterly the murder of this special man. All the Jews of Vilna prayed at home on that day, pouring copious tears. They peered through the shutters and saw him being led to the stake, his face shining like the sun. He went joyfully, like a man dancing toward G-d's mountain.



TEXT 15

Final Prayer

Siddur, Morning Prayers

אָבֵל אֲנַחְנוּ עָמָה בְּנֵי בְרִיתְךָ, בְּנֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱהָבָה,
שְׁנִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָּו בְּהַר הַמֹּרִיָּה; זָרַע יִצְחָק יַחֲידוֹ, שְׁנַעֲקֵד
עַל גְּבִי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ; עֲדַת יַעֲקֹב בְּנֶה בְּכוֹרֶךָ . . .
לְפִיכָךְ אֲנַחְנוּ חֵיבִים לְהוֹדוֹת לָּךְ, וּלְשַׁבַּח וּלְפָאֵר וּלְבָרֵךְ
וּלְקַדֵּשׁ וּלְתַן שָׂבַח וְהוֹדָיָה לְשִׁמְךָ. אֲשֶׁרִינוּ, מֵה טוֹב
חֻלְקֵנוּ, וּמֵה נְעִים גּוֹרְלֵנוּ, וּמֵה יָפָה יְרֻשָּׁתֵנוּ. אֲשֶׁרִינוּ, שְׂאֵנוּ
מִשְׁכִּימִים וּמַעֲרִיבִים עָרֵב וּבֹקֵר וְאוֹמְרִים פְּעַמִּים בְּכָל יוֹם:
שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד . . .
קִדַּשׁ אֶת שְׁמֹךְ עַל עַם מְקֻדְּשֵׁי שְׁמֹךְ, וְקִדַּשׁ אֶת שְׁמֹךְ
בְּעוֹלָמְךָ, וּבִישׁוּעָתְךָ תָּרִים וְתַגְבִּיֵה קִרְיָנוּ, וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ
בְּקִרְוֵב לְמַעַן שְׁמֹךְ, בְּרוּךְ הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ שְׁמוֹ בְּרַבִּים.

But we are Your nation, the people of Your
Covenant: the children of Abraham Your
beloved, to whom You swore on Mount
Moriah; the descendants of Isaac, his only
son who was bound upon the altar; the
community of Jacob, Your firstborn. . . .

Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to thank,
praise, and glorify You, to bless, to sanctify, and
to offer praise and thanksgiving to Your Name.
Fortunate are we! How good is our portion, how
pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage!

SIDDIR

The siddur is the Jewish prayer book. It was originally developed by the sages of the Great Assembly in the 4th century BCE and later reconstructed by Rabban Gamliel after the destruction of the Second Temple. Various authorities continued to add prayers, from then until contemporary times. It includes praise of G-d, requests for personal and national needs, selections from the Bible, and much else. Various Jewish communities have slightly different versions of the siddur.

Fortunate are we who, early in the morning
and in the evening, twice each day, declare:

Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our
G-d, the L-rd is One! . . .

Sanctify Your name in Your world upon the people
who hallow Your name. Through Your salvation,
our King, raise and exalt our strength, and deliver
us speedily for the sake of Your name. Blessed is
He who sanctifies His name among the multitudes.



**1.8 THE GRAVE
OF AVRAHAM
BEN AVRAHAM**
in the old Vilna
Jewish cemetery.
This cemetery was
destroyed by the
Soviets in 1950.

**TEXT 16**

A Contemporary Report

The London Magazine, or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer,
volume 22 (1753), p. 342

From Wilna in Poland, June 11, we have an instance equally shocking of popish [Catholic] revenge against a Jew, as follows: The court of judicature in this city pronounced sentence a few days ago against an apostate, named Raphael Sentimany, a native of Croatia, who after being educated in the christian religion, renounced it at the age of 12 years, embraced Judaism, and took the name of Abraham Isacowicz.

While he was in prison, several zealous priests daily visited him, shewing him the heinousness of the crime of apostasy, and exorting him to repent and return to the church; and for a day or two they had some hopes of reclaiming him: But they soon found themselves mistaken; he was so hardned, that neither the torments he was to suffer, nor the offer of a pardon, could make any impression on him.

The 9th instant he was led to execution: Being arrived under the gallows, the executioner plucked out his tongue, and flung it into the fire before his face; and then, with his hands tied behind him, he was thrown alive into a heap of blazing faggots [sticks]. When his body

was consumed, the ashes were scattered in the wind. This poor wretch suffered death with great resolution; not so much as a groan, or the least sign of fear having escaped from him.

From Wilna in Poland, June 11, we have an instance equally shocking of popish revenge against a Jew, as follows : The court of judicature in this city pronounced sentence a few days ago against an apostate, named Raphael Sentimany, a native of Croatia, who after being educated in the christian religion, renounced it at the age of 12 years, embraced Judaism, and took the name of Abraham Ifacowicz. While he was in prison, several zealous priests daily visited him, shewing him the heinousness of the crime of apostasy, and exhorting him to repent and return to the church ; and for a day or two they had some hopes of reclaiming him : But they soon found themselves mistaken ; he was so hardned, that neither the torments he was to suffer, nor the offer of a pardon, could make any impression on him. The 9th instant he was led to execution : Being arrived under the gallows, the executioner plucked out his tongue, and flung it into the fire before his face ; and then, with his hands tied behind him, he was thrown alive into a heap of blazing faggots. When his body was consumed, the ashes were scattered in the wind. This poor wretch suffered death with great resolution ; not so much as a groan, or the least sign of fear having escaped from him.

1.9 THE ORIGINAL
NEWS REPORT in
The London Magazine.

V. CONCLUSION

The concept of conversion has relevance to all of us, even those who were born Jewish.



TEXT 17

All for the Converts

Talmud, Pesachim 87b

לֹא הִגְלָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבֵין
הָאוֹמוֹת אֲלָא כְּדִי שְׂתוּסְפוּ עֲלֵיהֶם גֵּרִים.

G-d exiled Israel among the nations only
so that converts would join them.



TEXT 18

Self-Conversion

Rabbi Dovber of Lubavitch, *Torat Chayim*, p. 121b–c

לֹא גָלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבֵין אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם רַק שְׂתוּסָף
עֲלֵיהֶם גֵּרִים . . . הָעֲנִין הוּא דָּאִין הַכּוֹנֶה דְּוָקָא
עַל גֵּרִים מְמֹשׁ, אֲלָא עַל כָּל אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

שְׂגוּפוֹ וְנִפְשׁוֹ הַטְּבָעִית נִמְשָׁף מֵהִיכָלוֹת דְּקִלְפַּת נִגְה
דְּעִשְׂיָה שְׂמַעְרָב טוֹב וְרַע כּו'. . . וַיֵּצֵר הָרַע שׁוֹלֵט
בּוֹ מִנְעוּרָיו, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב "וְכָל יֵצֵר מִחֲשִׁבַּת לְבוֹ רַק
רַע כּו'" (בְּרָאשִׁית ו, ה), וְלֹא טוֹב כָּלֵל, וְכִידּוּעַ.

**RABBI DOVBER
OF LUBAVITCH
(MITELER REBBE)
1773–1827**

Rabbi Dovber was the eldest son of and successor to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and greatly expanded upon and developed his father's groundbreaking teachings. He was the 1st Chabad rebbe to live in the village of Lubavitch. Dedicated to the welfare of Russian Jewry, at that time confined to the Pale of Settlement, he established Jewish agricultural colonies. His most notable works on Chasidic thought include *Shaar Hayichud*, *Torat Chayim*, and *Imrei Binah*.

וְאִמָּנָם מִצַּד נִשְׁמָתוֹ הָרִי חֶלֶק ה' מִמֶּשׁ הוּא, בְּצֻלָּם
 אֱלֹקִים, וְנִקְרָא אָדָם כּו'. וְלִזְאֵת פֶּאֶשֶׁר הָאָדָם מִהִפּוֹ לְבוֹ
 וְנִפְשׁוֹ הַחוּמְרִית בְּכָל מִדּוֹתָיו בְּאַהֲבָה וְיִרְאָה לֵה' לְבַדּוֹ
 בְּאֵמֶת, וְגַם כָּל מַחְשְׁבוֹתָיו וּמַעֲשָׂיו, וּמִקְבֵּל עַל מַלְכוּת
 שָׁמַיִם שְׁלֵמָה בְּתוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת, זֶהוּ הַנִּקְרָא גֵר בְּאֵמֶת,
 כְּגוֹי שֶׁנִּתְגַּיֵּר וְקִבֵּל עָלָיו מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם שְׁלֵמָה.

Our sages taught that G-d exiled Israel among the nations only so that converts would join them (TALMUD, PESACHIM 87B)... Beyond the literal meaning of actual converts, this teaching also has a deeper meaning that is relevant to every Jew.

Our bodies and natural instincts are a blend of good and bad. . . . Our natural condition from our youngest age is that we are controlled by our negative inclination, in the spirit of the verse, “Every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil” (GENESIS 6:5)—and not good at all.

However, we were created in the Divine image—our soul is a veritable piece of G-dliness. We are therefore empowered to *transform* our hearts and natural instincts so that they are devoted solely and truly to love and awe for G-d. We are also empowered to harness all of our thoughts and actions to this end, and thereby fully accept the Divine yoke of Torah and *mitzvot*. When we accomplish this, we are “converts,” having transformed ourselves and completely accepted Divine authority.

Notable Converts through the Ages

↓ 14TH CENTURY BCE
Midian

JETHRO

Jethro was a leading pagan priest in ancient Midian (now part of Saudi Arabia). Long before G-d sent Moses to redeem the Jewish people, Pharaoh tried to execute young Moses, who fled to Midian, where he married Jethro's daughter Zipporah. Much later, after Jethro learned of the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, he abandoned his paganism and joined the Jewish nation—led by his son-in-law Moses—in the Sinai Desert. The Torah records Jethro's advice to Moses regarding the structure of the judicial system; his counsel continues to shape the Jewish legal process today.

↓ 10TH CENTURY BCE
Moab

RUTH



Ruth was born into the royal dynasty of Moab, an ancient kingdom in what is now southern Jordan. The biblical Book of Ruth records that when a famine ravaged Israel, a Jewish man named Elimelech moved to

Moab with his family, where Ruth married one of his sons. After the death of Ruth's husband and father-in-law, her mother-in-law Naomi decided to return to Israel. At great personal sacrifice, Ruth insisted on accompanying Naomi and joining the Jewish people, famously declaring, "Your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d" (Ruth 1:16). In reward for her devotion to Judaism, she merited to become the ancestor of King David.

Image: Opening of the Book of Ruth, from the *Tripartite Mahzor*, c. 1322. British Library, Add MS 22413, fol. 071r.

↓ 8TH CENTURY
Khazar Empire

KHAZARS



The Khazars were a Turkic people who established a major empire in the area that is now southern Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Their empire thrived for 300 years, until its fall in

969. Multiple ancient sources attest to a mass conversion of Khazars to Judaism in the 700s or early 800s. According to these sources, Khazarian King Bulan gathered scholarly representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for a religious debate. The Jewish representative prevailed and Bulan converted to Judaism, along with his people. This saga served as the historical background for Rabbi Yehudah Halevi's classic work of Jewish philosophy, known as *Kuzari*.

Image: A copy of a letter discovered in the Cairo Geniza, supposedly sent by a Khazar Jew to Rabbi Chasdai ibn Shaprut of Córdoba, Spain in the mid-10th century.

↓ 13TH CENTURY
Land of Israel

OVADIAH

In the thirteenth century, a man of Arabic origin converted to Judaism and adopted the Hebrew name Ovadiah. He settled in Jerusalem and corresponded with Maimonides regarding matters of Jewish law. One of his inquiries became famous for its import for all converts; he asked whether he could recite the standard Jewish prayer formulation—"the G-d of our forefathers"—despite his non-Jewish ancestry. Maimonides informed him that voluntary converts to Judaism are genuine spiritual descendants of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, and the phrase "the G-d of our forefathers" is therefore appropriate.

↓ **8TH CENTURY BCE**
Edom

OBADIAH THE PROPHET

Obadiah was a convert to Judaism from ancient Edom (now part of southern Israel and Jordan). He served as the palace administrator for the evil King Ahab of Israel. When Ahab and his wife Jezebel attempted to massacre all of G-d's prophets, Obadiah risked his life to hide 100 prophets in caves and to feed them. Subsequently, Obadiah himself became a prophet and G-d chose him to relay a prophecy of the downfall of Edom and the Ultimate Redemption of the Jewish people. His prophecy is recorded in the biblical Book of Obadiah.

↓ **1ST CENTURY BCE**
Land of Israel

SHEMAYAH AND AVTALYON



Judaism during the Second Temple era and became leading sages, rising to the honored ranks of president and chief justice respectively of the Sanhedrin (high court). Together, they steered the Jewish nation through the turbulence of civil strife, and they served as the teachers of the famous sage, Hillel.

Image: The graves of Shemayah and Avtalyon in the village of Gush Chalav (Jish) in northern Israel.

Shemayah and Avtalyon were descendants of the Assyrian king Sennacherib. They converted to

↓ **1ST CENTURY CE**
Adiabene

QUEEN HELENA



that is now northern Iraq. After the death of her husband King Monobaz I, Helena and her sons King Izates and King Monobaz II converted to Judaism. Helena moved to Jerusalem in her later years, where she was renowned for her generosity, importing food to feed the city during a famine. Her burial cave and palace in Jerusalem have been rediscovered by archaeologists.

Image: The "Tombs of the Kings" in Jerusalem, believed to be the burial site of Queen Helena.

↓ **1751-1793**
England

GEORGE GORDON



Lord George Gordon was born in London, England, to a Scottish noble family. He was elected to the British Parliament in 1774, and became a strong critic of the government and an advocate for American independence. Originally a staunch Protestant, Lord Gordon led an anti-Catholic movement, resulting in the "Gordon riots." In 1787, he shocked England again when he converted to Judaism and adopted the name Yisrael bar Avraham. Ever the controversialist, Gordon published an attack on the queen of France, Marie Antoinette, for which he was sentenced to five years in prison. Lord Gordon lived the last years of his stormy life in prison, where he was known for his unflinching devotion to Jewish law and generosity toward his fellow inmates.

Image: Lord George Gordon after his conversion to Judaism.

↓ **1899-1973**
Japan

SETSUZO KOTSUJI



Setsuzo Kotsuji was born in Kyoto, Japan, a descendant of a long line of Shinto priests. In his youth, Setsuzo became a monotheist and converted to Christianity. His interest in the Bible led him to study Hebrew, and he became a professor of Bible and Hebrew at Tokyo University. When Japan conquered Harbin, China, Kotsuji became a government envoy to the local Jewish community, and his interest in Judaism deepened. During World War II, thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe arrived in Japan on transit visas, and Kotsuji successfully lobbied and bribed officials to allow them to stay. He worked to counter the anti-Jewish propaganda the Germans were spreading in Japan, and was imprisoned as a result. In 1959, Kotsuji traveled to Israel, where he was warmly welcomed by the rabbis and students of the Mir Yeshiva whom he had saved during the war. He converted to Judaism and took the name Avraham. After taking ill, he spent his final years in Brooklyn, where the grateful Jewish community cared for his needs.

Image: Setsuzo Kotsuji (second from left) with leaders of the Jewish refugee community in Japan during World War II.

KEY POINTS

Narratives

- 1 Onkelos was born into the Roman royal family shortly after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the first century CE. Attracted to the revolutionary Jewish concepts of a single G-d Who cares for His people and guides them, Onkelos risked his life to convert to Judaism. He became the author of the first translation of the Torah, a monumental work studied until today.
- 2 Long-lost documents uncovered in the Cairo Genizah capture the fascinating story of an Italian priest named Johannes who converted to Judaism in the early twelfth century. Johannes became Ovadiah, and was forced to flee his home country in order to live as a Jew. He endured wanderings and difficulties in his life, but he enriched Jewish worship with his liturgical music.
- 3 Valentine Potocki was the brilliant young son of a Polish nobleman who converted to Judaism in the mid-eighteenth century. Known by the Jewish name Avraham ben Avraham, he was arrested by the authorities in Lithuania and sentenced to death. He steadfastly refused offers to save his life if he returned to Christianity, and he went to his execution joyfully. The story of his incredible dedication and sacrifice has inspired generations of Jews.

General Points

- 1 Unique among world religions, Judaism does not believe that non-Jews need to join it, and potential converts are actively dissuaded. Nevertheless, Judaism does accept converts who are persistent, with the understanding that these people possess a latent Jewish soul.
- 2 Converts to Judaism are considered to possess particularly powerful souls. Over the generations, converts have made unique contributions to Jewish life.



APPENDIX



EXERCISE 1.2

Highlight the differences you notice between the literal translation of the verse and Onkelos's rendering of it, and explain what you believe may be the reason for the change.

TEXT 1: Exodus 19:20

LITERAL TRANSLATION

וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל הָרִי סִינַי אֶל
רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה'
לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל רֹאשׁ הָהָר
וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה.

G-d descended upon Mount Sinai,
to the peak of the mountain, and
G-d summoned Moses to the
peak of the mountain, and Moses
ascended.

ONKELOS'S RENDERING

וַאֲתִגְלִי ה' עַל טוֹרָא
דְּסִינַי לְרִישׁ טוֹרָא וַקְרָא
ה' לְמֹשֶׁה לְרִישׁ טוֹרָא
וּסְלִיק מֹשֶׁה.

G-d revealed Himself on Mount
Sinai, at the peak of the mountain,
and G-d summoned Moses to the
peak of the mountain, and Moses
ascended.

DIFFERENCE

REASON

TEXT 2: Exodus 7:5

LITERAL TRANSLATION	
וַיֵּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי אֲנִי ה' בְּנֹטְתִי אֶת יָדִי עַל מִצְרַיִם וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתּוֹכָם.	And the Egyptians will know that I am G-d when I raise My hand over Egypt and bring the Israelites out of their midst.
ONKELOS'S RENDERING	
וַיֵּדְעוּן מִצְרַאִי אֲרִי אֲנָא ה' כִּד אֲרִים יֵת מַחַת גְּבוּרָתִי עַל מִצְרַיִם וְאַפִּיק יֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבִּינְהוֹן.	And the Egyptians will know that I am G-d when I raise My powerful strike over Egypt and bring the Israelites out of their midst.
DIFFERENCE	
REASON	



EXERCISE 1.3

Highlight the differences you notice between the literal translation of the verse and Onkelos's rendering of it, and explain what you believe may be the reason for the change.

TEXT 3: Exodus 23:19

LITERAL TRANSLATION

רֵאשִׁית בְּכוּרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ
תָּבִיא בֵּית ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לֹא
תִבְשֹׁל גְּדִי בְחֵלֶב אִמּוֹ.

The best of the first fruits of your
soil you shall bring to the house of
G-d your L-rd. You shall not cook a
kid in its mother's milk.

ONKELOS'S RENDERING

רֵישׁ בְּכוּרֵי אֶרֶץ תִּיתִי
לְבֵית מִקְדָּשׁ דֵּה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ
לֹא תִיִּכְלוֹן בֶּשֶׂר בְּחֵלֶב.

The best of the first fruits of your
soil you shall bring to the temple
of G-d your L-rd. You shall not eat
milk [mixed] in meat.

DIFFERENCE

REASON

DIFFERENCE

REASON

TEXT 4: Leviticus 23:40

LITERAL TRANSLATION	
וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפַּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ עֵבֶת וְעֵרְבֵי נָחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים.	And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the beautiful tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before G-d your L-rd for seven days.
ONKELOS'S RENDERING	
וּתְסַבּוּן לְכוֹן בַּיּוֹמָא קְדָמָא פִּירֵי אֵילָנָא אֶתְרוּגִין לוּלָבִין וְהַדְסִין וְעֵרְבִין דְּנַחַל וּתְחַדּוּן קִדְם יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ יוֹמִין.	And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruits of the <i>etrog</i> tree, <i>lulavim</i> , <i>hadasim</i> , and <i>aravot</i> of the brook, and you shall rejoice before G-d your L-rd for seven days.
DIFFERENCE	
REASON	