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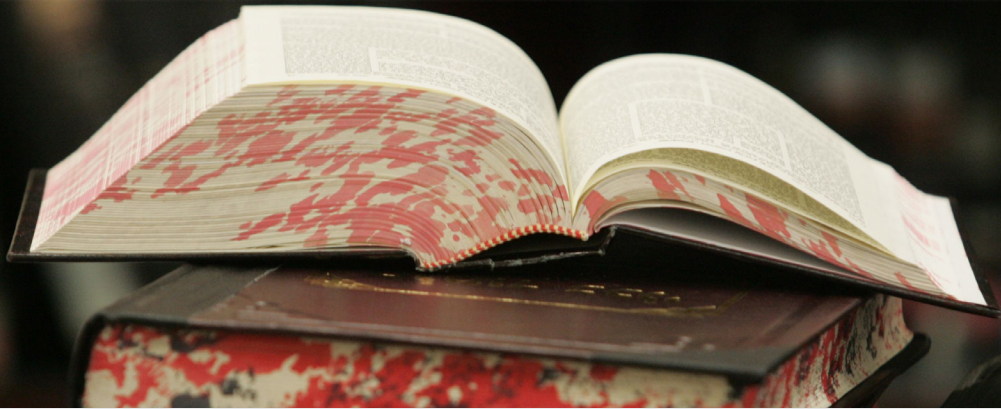
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Rus and the Three Time Rejection Rule

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Av Beth Din



In *Megilas Rus*, we read about the persistent desire of Rus the Moavite woman to convert to the Jewish faith following the death of her husband Machlon. Rus is the paradigm of a righteous convert who took upon herself all the 613 mitzvot of the Torah with full faith and enthusiasm (see *Yevamos* 47b).

The Midrash (*Rus Rabbah* 2:16) notes that Naomi, the mother-in-law of Rus, tried to dissuade her from joining the faith of Judaism on three separate occasions, using the word שבנה – “return to where you came.” Finally, after seeing how Rus steadfastly continued to cleave to her - ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה - (*Rus* 1:18), Naomi gave up her efforts to talk Rus out of conversion - ותחדל - לדבר אליה. From this exchange, the Midrash concludes that דוחין את הגר – that one should “push aside” a prospective convert three times before agreeing to accept his or her candidacy.

The notion of pushing away a prospective convert is a familiar one to Rabbis who participate in the realm of conversion. Often it

is difficult to decipher the genuine candidates from the insincere or fleeting ones, and providing discouragement is an effective method of testing a candidate’s mettle. On the other hand, the Midrash (ibid) also derives from the verse בחוץ לא ילין גר – “no Ger [stranger] needed to lodge in the street” (*Iyov* 31:32), that לעולם יהא אדם דוחה – the rejection of a convert should be a qualified one, whereby one pushes aside with the left hand and yet draws in the candidate with his right hand. The *Radal* explains that we learn from the Midrash that it is appropriate to at least “open the door” for the conversion candidate and not push aside the candidate entirely and thus permanently bolt the portal of entry to Judaism.

Similarly, the *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Yisro* 268) cites Rabbi Eliezer as noting that the approach of not closing the door completely emulates the way of Hashem who brought Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu, nearer to Judaism, and did not reject him – ואף אתה כשיבא אדם אצלך להתגייר –

ואינו בא אלא לשם שמים אף אתה קרבהו ואל תרחקה – “so too when someone comes to you for the purpose of conversion and whose motivation is for the sake of Heaven, you should bring the person closer and not turn him away.” The Midrash concludes, consistent with the previously cited Midrashic passage (from *Rus Rabbah*), by noting ומכאן אתה לומד שיהא אדם דוחה בימין – that “from here we learn that a person should reject with his left hand and bring near with his right hand.”

Perhaps this explains why the Talmud in *Shabbos* (30b – 31a) states לעולם יהא אדם ענוותן כהלל ואל יהא קפדן כשמאי – that a person should be forbearing like Hillel and not be unrelenting like Shamai – specifically in the context of how to treat conversion candidates. The Talmud recounts three stories of converts who approached both Shamai and Hillel with questionable levels of sincerity and commitment towards conversion. Shamai chased them away, while Hillel accepted their candidacy, ultimately plumbing their souls to find an inner spark of sincerity. While Shamai’s approach of rejecting the candidate certainly seems consistent with the requirement to rebuff a conversion candidate three times, Hillel demonstrated the need to perform a more balanced and nuanced approach that would leave the door open for truly sincere candidates,

even those who are not fully suitable at first glance.

Interestingly, the Talmud does not seem to record the doctrine of requiring a three-time rejection rule for conversion candidates. The rejection requirement also does not appear in the *Shulchan Aruch* or the standard commentaries thereof in the codification of the laws pertaining to converts (in *Yoreh Deah* 268-269).

Nonetheless, in the *Hilchos Gerim* of Rabbeinu Gershon HaGozer (13th century, Germany), the author writes ממאנין בו ג’ פעמים – that prior to accepting a conversion candidate, one is in fact obligated to rebuff the candidate three times. Additionally, the Midrashic commentary *Mesoros Hamidrash* cites the Talmudic passage in *Yevamos* (47a) as a source for the three-time rejection rule.

This citation to the Talmudic passage in *Yevamos* is somewhat puzzling since there does not seem to be an explicit requirement in that source regarding the need to reject a candidate on three occasions. The Talmud simply states that when a convert comes to convert, we point out to the convert that the Jewish people suffer persecution and exile nowadays. If the candidate then persists in wanting to convert, מקבלין אותו מיד – the Talmud states

that we accept him immediately. Rabbi Gedalia Feder zt"l in his book *Nachlas Tzvi* explains that the word “immediately” should be interpreted as “after refusing the candidate three times.” However, this interpretation does not seem to be obvious from the text.

Perhaps the explanation is that the discouragement of the candidate based on considerations of antisemitism constitutes one stage of “pushing away.” The continuation of the Talmudic text records that after this initial encounter, we inform the candidate about some of the lighter mitzvot and some of the heavier mitzvot, and inform the candidate that there is death by excision for eating prohibited fat or violating Shabbos once a person has converted, while beforehand these are completely permissible activities for a non-Jew (we also share the reward for mitzvot so as not to overburden the candidate), and only if he accepts these conditions, מלין אותו מיד – *we circumcise him immediately*. The explanation given is דאי פריש נפרוש – that we are happy to provide the candidate with an escape hatch to drop out of the conversion process, since קשים גרים לישראל – the existence of converts can be a hardship to the Jewish people (either because, inter alia, their lack of knowledge can serve as an obstacle for others, or because their

punctiliousness to perform mitzvot puts others to shame; see *Tosafos* to *Yevamos* 47b, and *Tosafos* to *Kiddushin* 70b). Thus, the emphasis upon the abundance of mitzvot and possibility of punishment may constitute a second form of discouragement (with a certain amount of bringing closer as well). Finally, the Talmud concludes by noting that after the circumcision is performed, we once again inform the convert about a smattering of lighter mitzvot and heavier mitzvot, and upon his immersion, welcome him as a full-fledged Jew. We can suggest that the final dose of reminding the convert of all his new mitzvah obligations constitutes the third and final stage of discouragement, following which the conversion may be performed. Thus, the three stages of pushing away are really found in the Talmudic text after all.

Even though a female candidate does not undergo circumcision and therefore there is no intermediate stage of discouragement associated with her process of conversion, the Talmud also indicates that all candidates also need to undergo an initial review to determine that they are not seeking to convert for ulterior motives (see *Yevamos* 24b; *Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Biah* 13:14; *Mishneh L'Melech*, ad locum, 14:1), and this careful scrutiny can be understood as a form of “pushing

away” as well. Thus, taken together, there appears to be ample support for the notion of three separate sessions of discouragement for all candidates, albeit in a balanced and nuanced fashion, consistent with the Midrashic literature.

Additionally, the Talmud states (*Yevamos* 109b), based on a verse in *Mishlei* (11:15) that “misfortune upon misfortune will come upon those who accept converts.” *Tosafos* (ad locum) notes that this seems inconsistent with our celebration in *Megilas Rus* of Naomi’s acceptance of Rus as a candidate for conversion, as well with the fact that the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 99b) is critical of the patriarchs for not accepting the conversion candidacy of Timna, who eventually became a concubine to Esav’s son Elifaz and the mother of our arch-nemesis Amalek. Accordingly, the *Tosafos* explain that the criticism is only heaped upon those who seek to actively recruit converts or who accept converts precipitously. However, if a sincere convert approaches us, and there is a careful path of examination, investigation, and discouragement, then יש לנו לקבלם – it is then of course appropriate to perform the conversion. In fact, the Talmud refers to the acceptance of a worthy conversion candidate as a mitzvah (see *Yevamos* 47b) that should not be delayed. Rav Yerucham Perlow

(commentary to the *Sefer Hamitzvot* of Rav Saadiah Gaon, *mitzvah* 19) suggests that performing a conversion for a righteous convert is included in the mitzvah of *Ahavas Hashem* – of loving Hashem, just as Avrohom fulfilled this mitzvah by spreading the love for Hashem in this world amongst other people.

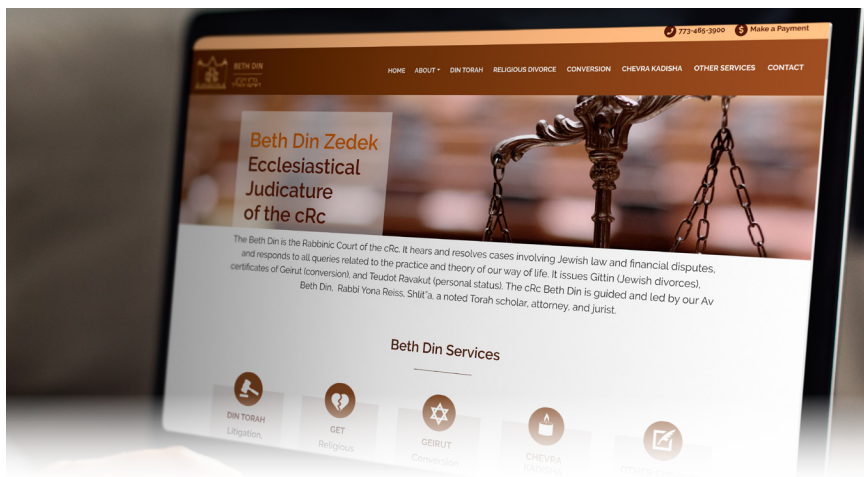
In fact, the very act of discouraging conversion candidates, to ensure that their motivations are steadfast and sincere, may very well be doing a favor to the candidates by enabling them to come closer to Hashem in the process. The Talmud in *Kiddushin* (70b) states that those who are born Jewish enjoy the benefit of Hashem reaching out to the Jewish nation to bring them closer to Him (based on a verse in *Yechezkel* 37:27), while converts need to bring themselves close to Hashem on their own initiative (based on a verse in *Yirmiyahu* 30:21; see Rashi s.v. “*b’yisroel*”). By enabling this process of the convert demonstrating initiative through measured discouragement of the convert, with the right dose of keeping the door open, those who engage in this dual task of “the left hand pushing away and the right hand bringing closer” help the righteous converts develop their special relationship with Hashem.

Along these lines, the *Chida*

explained that the reason a convert is called a גר שנתגייר – a “convert who converted,” as opposed to a “non-Jew who converted,” is because all righteous converts were destined to become converts from the time that the Torah was given at Har Sinai (see the *Ahavas Eisan’s* explanation to the Talmudic passage in *Yevamos* 48a that suggests that converts are brought to task for not converting sooner based on the Talmudic passage in *Shabbos* 146a that states that the “mazel” of all future converts was present at Har Sinai). In this way

the “pushing away” for three times should be seen as ultimately serving the purpose of bringing those who were truly destined to be Jewish closer to their destiny.

The Talmud in *Pesachim* (87b) states that Hashem sent the Jewish people into exile for the purpose of gathering all the worthy converts. May we fulfill our mandate in the diaspora faithfully to be worthy of returning to Zion speedily with all the requisite members of the Jewish nation in our midst.



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The Yom HaDin of Shavuot

Rabbi Ephraim Friedman

*Rosh Kollel, Ezra Franco Sephardic Kollel
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The *Shalosh Regolim* which we celebrate each year are designated as days of joy. The mitzvah of *simcha* on these *yomim tovim* stems from *p'sukim* in *parshas Re'eh* and is codified and defined in the *Shulchan Aruch* at the end of *hilchos Yom Tov* (*Orach Chaim siman 529*). Our *tefillos* on these days also reflect the mood of *simcha* which prevails. For example, we recite *Hallel* each day of a *regel*, we omit prayers such as *tachanun*, and joyous singing during *davening* is commonplace.

What's puzzling then, at first glance, is that on the days of *Yom Tov*, as we open the *Aron Hakodesh* to remove the *Sefer Torah* for *krias haTorah*, we recite collectively the *י"ג מידות* של רחמים. Reciting the *י"ג מידות* is typically something we associate with the days of *selichos* and *Yom Kippur*, when we are pleading to Hashem for heavenly mercy, not with times of joy when our *tefillos* take on a different tone. Why then are they recited on the *Shalosh Regolim*?

The answer is that at the same time

as the *Shalosh Regolim* are days of *simcha*, they are also days of *din*, judgment. As the Mishna states in *Meseches Rosh Hashanah* (16a) בפסח נידונים על התבואה, בעצרת נידונים על פירות האילן, בחג נידונים על המים. *On Pesach we are judged regarding our grain supply, on Shavuot, regarding the fruits of the tree, and on Succot, regarding rainfall.* Consequently, we implore Hashem on these days at a very auspicious moment, as we open the aron, to have compassion upon us and provide for all our needs in these critical areas.

Besides the simple understanding of the words, the *הקדוש של"ה* explains that *פירות האילן* concerning which we are judged on Shavuot can be understood to be referring to *חידושי תורה*. That is to say, on Shavuot as we celebrate *קבלת התורה* we are being judged as to the level of *hatzlacha* in learning and understanding Torah which we can achieve, and to what extent we will be able to uncover novel interpretations in the depths of the "sea of the Talmud." According to this interpretation, when we recite the *י"ג מידות* on Shavuot, we are

davening for spiritual growth and success. Similarly, at the same time we say another *tefillah* which includes the phrase שתזכנו לעשות מעשים טובים בעיניך וללכת בדרכי ישראל לפניך. That is, essentially, we are asking Hashem to help us do His will. On the surface, this appears somewhat odd. After all, there is a very well-known statement of רמב"ם which says הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים. Hashem doesn't control whether or not we learn Torah or do mitzvos. He leaves that up to our free will. So where is there room for prayer in these matters?

In truth, however, there really is no difficulty. It is true that Hashem leaves up to us to decide to do the right thing and to wish to accomplish a lot in learning and understanding Torah. But does that put us in control of our success? Clearly not. The most well intending individual can run into *nisyonos* (challenges) of all types which can prevent him from realizing his dreams and accomplishing his goals. More fundamentally, Torah is the wisdom of Hashem. The greatest human mind, with all its depth and profundity, is simply unable to comprehend it barring a gift from Hashem enabling it to do so. As much as one wishes to be successful in לימוד התורה, and as much as he wants to do Hashem's will, without Heavenly assistance, he will surely fall short. Just as there is a דין שמים (Heavenly judgment and decree)

with regard to how much money one will earn and all other material matters, so is there a judgment and decree regarding how much סייעתא דשמיא (Divine assistance) one will merit in Torah learning and all other spiritual matters. According to the interpretation of the של"ה, Shavuot, the day we received the Torah, is also the day when we are judged concerning how privileged we will be to learn Torah and acquire Torah knowledge and wisdom. Knowing and understanding how important *tefillah* is as a method to help merit Hashem's mercy and blessings, we take advantage of the opening of the *Aron Hakodesh* on the *Yom HaDin* of Shavuot to beseech the Almighty for the Divine assistance we need to grow in Torah.

Of course, however, it requires more than *tefillah* alone to deserve a favorable judgment. There are a number of sources in *Chazal* which demonstrate that matters which an individual exhibits a callous attitude towards or a lack of respect for, he will not be privileged to derive much gain from. One example of this is the statement of Rav Yosef (*Baba Kama* 38a) based on a *pasuk* in *Chabakuk* (3:6) which we read in the *haftarah* on the second day of Shavuot.

עמד וימודד ארץ ראה ויתר גוים. מה ראה? ראה שבע מצוות שקיבלו עליהם בני נח. כיון שלא קיימו אותם עמד והתיר להם.

The Gemara there explains that since the nations of the world were not observing the commandments which the Almighty chose for them, thereby displaying a lack of value and respect for them, they were punished so that they would no longer be rewarded even when they would fulfill these commandments. The lesson to be learned from there, is that in order for us to deserve a good measure of Divine assistance and a good judgment vis-à-vis Torah study, we must be conscientious about always showing the proper respect for it. The best way to do that is to grab every opportunity we possibly can to involve ourselves in Torah study, establish set times to learn with a chevrusa, attend shiurim, and find openings in our daily or weekly schedules to sneak in a bit more learning. If our attitude is a proper one, and our recognition of the immeasurable value of every bit of Torah learning is what it should be, we can surely find ways to “up our game,” both in terms of the amount of time we dedicate to it, and in terms of enhancing the level of our learning.

One final point. The Gemarah states that one who is obligated to fulfill a particular mitzvah will receive more reward for doing so than one who fulfills a mitzvah on an optional or voluntary basis. On the surface, this seems odd. Shouldn't the one who is doing something extra, beyond the mandatory, receive greater reward?

Tosfos in Meseches Kiddushin (31a) explains that the one who is obligated is operating under greater stress. He understands that he is dealing with something which he must do and must do right. Consequently, when he fulfills the mitzvah properly and meticulously, he receives a large measure of reward, as he is rewarded, in part, for his attitude. In contrast, the one who is not obligated is operating under an entirely different set of rules. The whole thing is “extra credit.” There's no pressure. If he does it right, fine, and if not it's also okay. Therefore, even if he does fulfill the mitzvah, the reward he receives is not on the same level. Based on this, Rav Yitzchok Blezer (from the greatest *talmidim* of Rav Yisroel Salanter; author of *Pri Yitzchok* and *Cochvei Ohr*) says although the reward for Torah study is potentially very great, in truth it's up to us. For if we approach this mitzvah with the right attitude and we are meticulous about finding every opportunity to fulfill it, then our reward will be on the level of one who is obligated. But if we approach Torah learning as if it is merely extra credit, this attitude will be reflected in the reward we ultimately receive.

This Shavuot, let us endeavor to bear in mind the full significance of the day, and make the commitment to upgrade our level of Torah learning in any way we are able.

“Anochi” - The *Tachlit* of *Mattan Torah*

Rabbi Aron Wolf
Director of Chicago Mitzvah Campaign



Surprisingly, the *Midrash Tanchuma* states that the very first word of the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the word “*Anochi*,” does not originate from לשון קודש but instead is taken from the Egyptian language.

It would be difficult to overstate how extraordinary – and perplexing - this is. The *Aseret HaDibrot* encapsulates the entire Torah, as is alluded to in the fact that the 620 letters in this passage correspond to the 613 mitzvos of the Torah plus the 7 mitzvos *deRabbanan*.

Moreover, “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*” is the first and most fundamental of all the *dibrot*, for positively establishing that our belief in Hashem is the most essential, foundational and all-encompassing message of the Torah. In addition, the word “*Anochi*,” which is the first word of this *dibrah* refers to the “I” of Hashem, the Divine essence, as it were, which is higher than all the esoteric levels that are reflected by Divine names such as “אלקים”, “י-ק-ו-ק”, etc.

Why then is the word “*Anochi*” given in Egyptian, the lowest of all seventy languages (corresponding to the

ancient Egyptian people themselves, who were infamous for being “immersed in immorality”)?

In a *sicha*, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that to make sense of this puzzle and to derive a lesson from it, we need to first explore the *tachlit* – the essential purpose and goal – of *Mattan Torah*. The Gemara states that the *אבות* learned Torah and kept all the mitzvot before *Mattan Torah*, so what fundamental change was brought about by *Mattan Torah*?

Chazal tell us that before *Mattan Torah*, the reality of existence was separated into two distinct worlds, the spiritual world and the physical world. Fusing these two worlds into one was simply impossible, because the earthly, concrete and limited nature of the physical could not possibly contain the esoteric, incorporeal and infinite character of the spiritual.

Chassidic philosophy explains that within the Divine too, there is a source for infinity and a source for finitude. The Divine source for the finitude of creation is the name “אלקים”, which has the *gematria* of 86, the same as the word הטבע – “the

nature.” Therefore “אלקים” is the only Divine name that is expressed as a plural word, corresponding to the multiplicity and bounded nature of physical reality. In contrast, the name “י-ק-ו-ק” represents the infinity of the spiritual world, the Divine level that transcends the limitations of the physical world, and of the very space-time structure itself. Therefore the name “י-ק-ו-ק” can be understood as an amalgamation of “היה” (“past”), “הווה” (“present”) and “יהיה” (“future”), for this level of the Divine is beyond all time.

The purpose of *Mattan Torah* was to make possible what was heretofore impossible – the seamless fusion of the spiritual and the physical, the levels of “י-ק-ו-ק” and “אלקים.” This became possible through the gift of *Mattan Torah*, which included G-d’s absolute essence – the Divine “I” itself. This Divine “I” is neither infinite nor finite but unifies both concepts into one impenetrable and utterly indefinable Essence.

Thus, the phrase “I am י-ק-ו-ק *Elokecha*” encapsulates the *tachlit* of *Mattan Torah*, which was to make it possible for *Bnai Yisrael* to uncover G-d’s essence in the world. How? By revealing the underlying oneness of reality, the unity of the most transcendent levels of infinity (“י-ק-ו-ק”) with the Divine source of all that is most corporeal and concrete in the physical reality (“*Elokecha*”).

This is the reason why the Egyptian word “*Anochi*” is used to denote the “I” of the Divine essence, to emphasize the point that the Divine essence is the source of all and unifies all, from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low.

With the above in mind, we may arrive at a conclusion and at a “call to action” that is utterly transformative. Yes, the Yom Tov of Shavuot reminds us about the incredible importance and privilege of learning Torah assiduously and performing mitzvot meticulously, and the more, the better! But *Mattan Torah* empowers us even more than that, for it gives us the opportunity and the responsibility to go out into the world and to reveal the essential Divine oneness at every level (even “Egypt”). And this is true not just in the outer secular world, but also on the individual level, in which the ultimate *tachlit* of *Mattan Torah* is to fuse the spiritual with the physical in our personal mundane activities such as eating, sleeping, conducting business, and so on.

By conducting ourselves in the aforementioned manner of “בכל דרכיך דעהו” – “*In all of your ways you shall know Him,*” may we merit the ultimate revelation of Divine unity in the world with the arrival of *Moshiach*, as the *posuk* states, “ביום ההוא יהיה ה’ אחד ושמו אחד.” May it be speedily in our days, *amen*.