

ON CONVERSION

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The status of *gerut* as a subject of discussion and debate is not a recent phenomenon. For ages, indeed millennia, this topic has been implicated in a broad range of problems. Some have been disturbed by the option of *gerut*, per se. For those who have stressed the unique, inborn holiness that characterizes the Jew—for instance: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the Maharal of Prague, and the School of Habad—the ability of a non-Jew to convert aroused varied difficulties and objections. Quite apart from this primary issue, however, the problems can be further subdivided. First, how is one to treat the candidate for Judaism? This question has practical consequences in determining the actual conversion process. Shall we pursue the proselyte or avoid him? Repel with the left hand while attracting with the right or vice versa? Secondly, how should we relate to the *ger* after his conversion? Needless to say, the possibility of derision is out of the question; the Torah explicitly admonishes us: “And the *ger* you shall not deride nor oppress.”¹ And the Rabbis state: “He who derides the *ger* violates three negative commandments;”² R. Eliezer the Great numbers thirty-six distinct places—and according to one opinion, forty-six—where the Torah forewarns us to respect the *ger*.³ But beyond this, assessment of the nature of the *ger* and his integration into the Nation of Israel appears unclear—perhaps in dispute. Encouragement on the one hand and repulsion on the other; some esteemed the *ger* while others approached him with cautious apprehension.

However, the issue of relating to the *ger* is not the one I wish to address. My focus is on the process of *gerut* itself—the phenomenon,

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per se. If we wish to define and describe it, we will discover that the essence of *gerut* is its being a turning point. Its foundation is a radical transformation: an uprooting from one world to strike root in a different one. This point specifically characterizes Jewish *gerut* and distinguishes it, historically, from parallel movements in the classical world. As Arthur Darby Nock emphasized, whereas adoption of one of the religions that dominated the Hellenistic world—Orphism, Mithraism, and others—meant merely a supplement to the local tradition and not the former's total negation, Judaism (and consequently, Christianity) presents conversion as a total metamorphosis. The *ger* is compelled to abandon his past background and enter the realm of his future, for commitment to Judaism is based on Elijah's question⁴: "How much longer will you oscillate, wavering between two options?" In the words of Nock, conversion demands "renunciation and a new beginning. What was required was not merely the acceptance of ritual, but rather a willful attachment to a theology; in a word, faith: a new life in a new nation."⁵ This should not cause surprise. *Gerut*, after all, embodies—nay, constitutes—the forging of a covenant, which is, by its very nature, exclusive: ". . . And the two of them made a covenant"⁶—to the exclusion of others. Nonetheless, the question still arises: what type of turning point? How does it take effect and in what manner is it realized and manifested?

It seems to me that in *gerut*,⁷ both in the process and in the outcome, there exist two elements that are to some extent parallel, to some extent complementary, and to some extent contradictory. On the one hand, *gerut* is grounded in a profound revolution. In its ideal form, its root, is a longing for holiness; its core, desire for the *ein-sof*, gravitation to a sublime and exalted ethic, striving for a world wholly good and wholly true. "David called himself a *ger*, as it is said:⁸ 'I am a stranger *ger* in the land.'⁹ Of course, he was not a *ger* in the strict Halakhic sense (although he was descended from proselytes); rather, in the realm of religious experience, he had penetrated the soul of the *ger* and related to it: "as a hart panting after water brooks, so my soul pants after You."¹⁰ Here is the essence of *gerut*: a craving that can dislodge one from the society of one's youth and which finds expression in the overcoming of the confines of group and nation.

The source and character of this element are, to be sure, apt to change. In certain cases, its essence is reaction to a sullied past, a renunciation of a life filled with iniquity or deprived of meaning and purpose. In this form, *gerut* is included in *teshuvah*, repentance; it is precipitated by regret over the past, abandonment of sin, and resolve for the future. At other times, the motive propelling the proselyte is the glow of the future, rather than the sordidness of the present. The potential *ger*, despite his being in a setting that is not necessarily

defiled, but merely defective, sees himself as isolated, “in a dry and thirsty land, without water.” In his anguish he pleads: “O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You: my soul thirsts for You, my flesh longs for You.”¹¹ At the practical level, as the Rambam put it, the *ger* desires “to enter the covenant and to be absorbed under Divine aegis, and to accept for himself the yoke of the Torah.”¹² But categorizing the different types of *gerut* is merely a matter of detail. The fundamental motive here is one—a religious experience, a spiritual effervescence—sometimes feverish, oftentimes tranquil; in short, the birthpangs of a Jewish soul. This creation is private and personal—if you will, even subjective. Essentially, it is the *ger*’s intimacy with the Holy One. “The king has brought me into his chamber,” and no stranger will trespass into the inner sanctum. Nothing is more a matter of the heart than *gerut*, and, in the channels of the heart, can there be room for external involvement?

This principle finds expression in a simple, yet famous, halakhah: “A *ger* is like a newborn babe.”¹³ We customarily associate this statement with several laws: a *ger* is not aligned genealogically to his father, nor does he inherit from the latter (according to Biblical injunction); and, according to Resh Lakish, he does not fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and to multiply through the children born to him while he had been a gentile.¹⁴ However, these are only consequences; it behooves us to understand and grasp the concept itself, in its literal context. The *ger* returns to the source, penetrating the secrets of ontological reality, and, while standing on the threshold of a new life, ruminates over the mystery of existence and is involved in a superior creation: he is born and gives birth at once.

The validity of this comparison is pronounced (albeit with an emphasis on the “converter” more than on the convert) in its aggadic formulations: “Whoever brings another person under the wings of *Shekhina* is considered as having created him, shaped him, and brought him into the world.”¹⁵ To be sure, this refers to the educator of a Jewish child, but how much more so should it apply to *gerut*? In the well-known words of the Sifre¹⁶ regarding Avraham our Patriarch: “And you shall love . . . like the love of humanity Avraham your forefather had, as it is written: ‘and the souls that they had acquired in Haran.’ Now if all people united to create a small gnat and give it a soul, they would not succeed. What then does this verse mean? Rather, it teaches that Avraham was converting people and bringing them into the Jewish faith.” And in *Bereshit Rabbah*,¹⁷ the same passage concludes: “Rather, to teach us that one who brings the non-Jew closer to Judaism and converts him, it is as if he had created him.”

Until now we have dealt with only one aspect of *gerut*: subjective and intimate, confined to the relationship of the *ger* to his Creator, centered around an internal experience and spiritual nascence, linked to *teshuvah*, repentance, which, in the Rambam's celebrated formulation,¹⁸ is also defined as personal metamorphosis and new creation ("And he alters his name, as if to say: I am another, and I am not the same person that committed those deeds")—symbolized by birth.

However, there is yet a second aspect to *gerut*: objective, formal, communal. If the *ger* is, on the one hand, a partner in the dialogue taking place in the depths of his soul, he, on the other hand, simultaneously becomes the subject of public assessment, participating—albeit, to be sure, not in an emotional vacuum—in a crystallized ceremony. Here, the emphasis is not upon process, including all the adventures and the apprehension implied in the word, but rather on procedure. To his knocking on the door, he hears the response: Let us presume that your spiritual pilgrimage has prepared you sufficiently for *gerut*; but if you want to realize it, you must still follow these steps in order to be accepted.

This element, too, finds expression and symbolic representation in a halakhah. "Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yohanan: a *ger* requires the presence of three people, for *mishpat* (judicial process) is written with reference to a *ger*."¹⁹ For the same reason, since Halakhah deems *gerut* a form of legal procedure, conversion cannot take place at night;²⁰ and the Rambam saw this as the source of the gemara's prohibition against the *ger's* ritual immersion (*tevilah*) on the Sabbath and Holidays: ". . . since *gerut* requires a Beth Din, we immerse him (the *ger*) neither on the Sabbath nor on Holidays nor at night; although if he was immersed, then he is a *ger*."²¹ This is not merely a matter of supernumerary piety. In the opinion of some commentators, led by the Ramban,²² *tevilah* at night is ineffective even *post factum*. Even according to the Rambam, we may assume, as did the *Maggid Mishneh*, that it is valid *a posteriori* only because, in certain cases, juridical procedures may be concluded at night.²³ This assumption is clearly borne out by the Rambam's formulation with respect to the need for three judges:²⁴ "[If] he immersed privately, and converted with no witnesses, or even in front of two persons, he is not a *ger*." Many Rishonim took issue with him on this point and sanctioned private *tevilah*—this, however, not because they valued the necessity of a Beth Din any less, but rather because they deemed a Beth Din's presence as mandatory only at the time that the *ger* accepts the normative onus of *mitsvot*, and not during the immersion ceremony.²⁵ As for the requirement of having a Beth Din at one of the stages of *gerut*, all commentators but one—an

opinion quoted by Tosafot²⁶—recognized its role as indispensable; *gerut* consists of an actual *din*, a judge and his subject.

Between the elements of birth and adjudication, there exist two distinctions that, from a logical standpoint, are completely separate—and in fact, one could probably find one in the absence of the other—but actually tend to arise concomitantly. Until now, I have accentuated one point, that of process—spiritual and private on the one hand, formal and communal on the other. Beyond this, however, the goal differs no less than the path. Birth emphasizes a spiritual creation; the legal aspect, a social affiliation. The potential *ger* appears on society's rostrum and presents himself as a candidate for citizenship in "the kingdom of priests and the holy nation," knocking not only on Heaven's door but also on the gates of Keneset Yisrael, the Jewish people. He is not content with being brought by the king into his chamber; the *ger* strives to "climb the datepalm and take hold of its twigs" as well.²⁷

Upon initial consideration of the two features of *gerut*, we are certainly inclined to see the yearning of the potential *ger* as the essence of *gerut*, and the judicial process as merely a validation, an endorsement. To a degree, this inclination is correct, but only to a degree. The legal aspect of *gerut* and the attachment to Keneset Yisrael involved in it are not solely an issue of a seal of approval. Keneset Yisrael does not merely mediate between the *ger* and the Almighty. She is a participant and not just a broker; a concerned party and not just an agent of God. In the encounter of the I and Thou that is established through *gerut*, the *ger* meets two Thou's: The Lord of the Universe, and his nation, Israel. Not, God forbid, the latter alone; such an attitude borders on idolatry. Surely, he confronts Keneset Yisrael solely in the light of its being "holy unto God, the first of His harvest." In this context, however, there is a very real encounter.

This point is reflected in the procedures of *gerut* itself, especially as the Rambam delineated them:²⁸ "How are *gerim* accepted? When one comes from the Gentiles to be converted to Judaism, and [the Beth Din] finds no pretext [for his conversion], they say to him: 'What has led you to such conversion? Don't you know that Israel is presently afflicted, oppressed, attacked, preyed upon, and that misfortunes befall her?' If he responds, 'I know, and I am not worthy,' they accept him immediately." The question arises: what is the nature of this declaration? Although it is mentioned in the Gemara,²⁹ it can there presumably be understood as a part of the investigation determining the sincerity of the *ger*. However, the Rambam here explicitly deals with the stage at which the *ger's*

sincerity has already been demonstrated. If so, what is the need for this lengthy discourse?

Actually, the answer is quite simple. Let us ask ourselves what will happen if a potential *ger* declares himself ready to accept every one of the 613 commandments, committing himself to rigorous observance of *mitsvot*, minor as well as major. However, as to any sort of attachment to the nation, he refuses to accept even a minimal degree of allegiance. He does not share in its present adversities, does not identify with its past, and does not yearn for its future. What is to be his status? We may answer unequivocally, on the basis of the Rambam's words in the Laws of Repentance. Among those transgressors who, "for their tremendous wickedness and sinfulness," do not inherit a share in the World to Come, the Rambam numbers "those who separate themselves from the ways of society." And, characteristically, he details: "He who separates himself from the public, although he may have never violated a law, if he stands aloof from the community of Israel, and does not partake in their communal observances, nor share in their calamities, nor fast on their fasts, but rather goes his own way as anyone of the local populace, as if he were not one of them—no share in the World to Come awaits him."³⁰ This being so, in our case the verdict is crystal-clear: there has not been a total, comprehensive acceptance of *Ol Mitsvot*. The prospective *ger* has readily committed himself to the entire Torah, excluding only involvement in the community—yet this exclusion is hardly a trivial matter.

In light of this decision, we no longer need to wonder about the declaration concerning Israel's situation at the *gerut*. It is not solely an inquest into the motivation for conversion. The declaration by the Beth Din is a stage in the fulfillment of *gerut* per se and relates to the commitment implicit within it.

Within this context, the individual and the community encounter each other along a very wide front. The *ger* does not meet and identify with the present nation alone, but with its past and future as well. Once again, it is the Rambam who underscores this point. The Mishnah states:³¹ "The *ger* must bring [his first fruits], but he does not utter [the accompanying declaration], for he cannot say 'that God has sworn to our fathers to give us'; and if his mother was Jewish, he brings [the first fruits] and utters [the declaration]. And when [the *ger*] prays privately, he says 'the Lord of Israel's forefathers'; and when he is in the synagogue, he says 'the Lord of your forefathers.'" In contrast, the Rambam rules in accordance with the view of R. Yehudah in the Jerusalem Talmud:³² "The *ger* himself brings [the first fruits] and makes the declaration. Why? [God spoke to Avraham:] 'For I have made you a father unto a multitude of

nations’—hitherto you were the father of Aram, and herewith you are the father of all nations.” And, in the Rambam’s own wording:³³ “The *ger* brings [the first fruits] and makes the declaration, since it was spoken to Avraham, ‘I have made you a father unto a multitude of nations’; here he was made the patriarch of all those in the world who [ever] become Jewish.”

In this formulation, the opinion of R. Yehudah does not identify the *ger* with a specific history, for it is possible to view the attachment to Avraham as direct, exclusive of Keneset Yisrael’s mediation. If so, one may ask (as the Ramban already hinted³⁴): the mention of Avraham is understandable, but how shall a *ger* describe Yitzhak and Yaakov as his “forefathers”? The Rambam, however, already dealt with this issue, in his famous responsum to R. Ovadiah Ger Tsedek. He opens with an explanation that is in keeping with the thrust of his words in the *Mishneh Torah*:

The fundamental point here is that it was Avraham our father who instructed the nation, enlightening them and informing them of the true faith, and of God’s unity and singularity. It was he who repudiated idol worship and violated its worship, nullifying it, bringing many to accept God, teaching and instructing them, commanding his sons and future descendants after him to remain faithful to the Way of God, as it says in the Torah: ‘For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord. . . .’ Therefore all who embrace Judaism until the end of all generations, and all who profess the unity of the Lord’s Name as is directed in the Torah, are like the pupils of Avraham of Blessed Memory and are members of his household, all of them; it was he who brought them to this positive juncture, and, as he did to the members of his own generation with his skills of oratory and pedagogy, so he has reclaimed all those who would convert in the future, through the testament he left his children and his descendants. The result is that Avraham our forefather was the father of his legitimate progeny who follow the path forged by him, and he, too, is father to every *ger* who converts.

Up to this point, the Rambam has discussed the direct link to Avraham, and, on the basis of his thesis, he concludes:

But [saying] ‘You (God) took us out of Egypt’ or ‘that [God] has performed miracles for our ancestors,’ if you want to alter the wording and say ‘that You took Yisrael out of Egypt,’ or ‘the miracle You have wrought for Yisrael’—say it [in such a way as you please].

However, he promptly goes one step further:

And if you do not change (the wording), there is no loss at all, for after having entered the Jewish fraternity and accepted Judaism, there is no difference between you and us, and all the miracles that were wrought were wrought for us and for you. This is Isaiah’s intention in the verse:³⁵ “Neither let the son of the stranger, that has joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, ‘The Lord has

surely separated me from his people. . . . There is no distinction or incongruity between you and us in any respect.³⁶

The words are self-explanatory: in the aftermath of his admission into Keneset Yisrael, the *ger* identifies with its past, with triumphs as well as failures, no less than he does with the present; with eschatological vision as with current vibrant reality. The *ger* is born both as a servant of God and as a citizen of the nation, and hence the appropriateness of a Beth Din to judge and accept him.

We can, if we wish, discern the duality of *gerut* reflected in various manifestations over the generations. If we focus on the process of *gerut*, we may note three prominent phases. The first is symbolized by Avraham Avinu. Avraham, our Rabbis informed us,³⁷ is called “the forerunner of *gerim*”—and not merely in a symbolic sense. The Mekhilta³⁸ describes Avraham’s circumcision as an actual proselyte’s *berit milah*, not only as a fulfillment of God’s command. Clearly, his *gerut* highlights the first aspect of *gerut*, per se. It is an individual process, *in toto*, for it is characterized by singularity. He is lonely by nature. “Avraham was a *yahid*—Avraham was singular,” exclaims the Gemara.³⁹ The significance of this quality is further stressed in the well known adage by which Rabbi Yehudah interpreted Avraham’s title *Ivri*—“the whole world on one side, and he alone on the other.”⁴⁰ When was he more solitary than at conversion? His *gerut* was conducted purely on the level of a direct attachment to the Creator, striving and yearning for the Absolute on the one hand, and following a direct, Divine bidding on the other: “And the Lord said to Avraham, ‘And you shall observe My covenant, you and your descendants after you for all their generations.’”⁴¹ This verse introduces the commandment of *milah*, but, in its original context, it appeared as an injunction for *gerut*. This *gerut* is exclusively birth. *It’aruta di-le-tata ve-it’aruta di-le-ela*—“arousal from below and arousal from above”—but without brokers. Neither judge, nor judicial procedure; only the birth of a world and the creation of a soul. It is epitomized in an interpretation by the Midrash Tanhuma on the verse “and I shall make you a great nation”: “‘I will transform you’ is not the chosen word here, but ‘make,’ for I am creating in you a new person, similar to what is said: ‘and God *made* the heavens,’ ‘and God *made* the two lights.’”⁴²

The second stage consists of a singular phenomenon: the period from the exodus from Egypt to the revelation at Sinai. Here, of course, the communal dimension of *gerut* was added: the Torah portrays the day of *Mattan Torah* as a “Day of Assembly.”⁴³ The meaning of that *gerut* is not exhausted merely in attachment to the Creator, but includes the formation of a “righteous nation that keeps faithfulness.”⁴⁴ The legal charter, however, is missing. There is

neither a judging nor judged congregation; rather, a people standing together on the threshold of emergence into the world, and entering, without mediator or midwife, the world of eternal life as the lot of God's inheritance.

However, what transpired at Sinai was a unique event. From that time on, in the third stage, the *ger* requires both birth and *mishpat* in order to identify with Keneset Yisrael even as he clings to the Sovereign of the universe. Within this framework, although both components are compulsory, there may, in all likelihood, be certain cases wherein the social aspect is primary. If Avraham Avinu is the *ger* of birth *par excellence*, we may perceive another Biblical convert as a prototype for a predominantly legal-social conversion. This element is symbolized by Ruth, not so much because of emphasis upon formal procedure as because of the stress on interpersonal union as the impetus behind *gerut*. Doubtless she accepted upon herself the yoke of the Torah and *Malkhut Shamayim* unconditionally—"and your God is my God." But from the verse's description it is quite clear that, most significantly, she was animated by love for Naomi, and through Naomi, for all Israel: "And Ruth said, 'Entreat me not to leave you. . . .'"⁴⁵ The source of the internal pressure is bared to all. This point is similarly stressed in Boaz's description. "And Boaz answered and said to her, 'It has been fully related to me, all that you have done to your mother-in-law since your husband's death: how you left your father, your mother, and the land of your birth, and went to a people unknown to you before.'" Only in the next sentence does he mention the purely spiritual element: "May God reward your deed, and may it be a full reward from God, the Lord of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."⁴⁶

Whatever the examples, the central fact for us today⁴⁷ is that, from Sinai, an intrinsic dualism exists within the framework of *gerut*: spiritual nativity as a servant of God at a certain level, on the one hand, and standing for judgment as servant and peer, on the other. The Halakhah insists upon both aspects. In keeping with the general spirit of Halakhah, the internal experience alone does not suffice. Contrary to the modern *zeitgeist* that tends to define religion as a purely subjective reality, Halakhah strives to interweave the external and the internal. Wary of founding the spiritual life upon castles in the air, Halakhah relies upon defined actions and firm limits—and demands them. Even in a non-social framework, Hazal assumed, almost axiomatically, the necessity of an objective act in *gerut*. "And [according to] Rabbi Yehoshua," asks the Gemara. "where do we see that the matriarchs performed *tevilah*?" The answer is immediate: "It is dictated by logic: for in its absence, how could they have become

Jewesses at all?"⁴⁸ If such is the case with the matriarchs, then all the more so after the giving of the Torah, when *gerut* assumes the added dimension of entrance into Keneset Yisrael. On the other hand, one need hardly stress that integration into the nation, be it rooted in the most sublime self-dedication, is insufficient. *Gerut* means, first and foremost, a religious-spiritual turning. The procedure of *gerut* comes in the wake of such a transformation but not in its stead. The conversion consists of formal stages, but they are not *pro forma*. Moreover, the Halakhah stresses the interlacing of this turning into the actual act of *gerut* itself. Acceptance of the laws must occur twice: once before the *tevilah*, at which time, according to the Rambam, the Beth Din discourses at length on the tenets of Judaism, "the unity of God and the prohibition against idolatry,"⁴⁹ and also informs him of some of the more lenient and more stringent commandments; and again, during the *tevilah*, when "three stand over him and inform him of some of the lenient commandments and some of the strict commandments a second time while he stands in the water."⁵⁰ What is the nature of this second declaration? Are we worried that over a short period of time the *ger's* commitment has lapsed? It is solely in order to weave the acceptance of the *mitsvot* into the act of *tevilah* itself, to supply the *tevilah* with the specific character of a *tevilah* of *gerut*, to integrate the spiritual intent with the formal act.

It would be pleasant to assume that there is no conflict between these two themes; that the selfsame act effectively subsumes both domains. A single *tevilah* is doubly efficacious. It climaxes protracted spiritual birth, culminating in emergence into the Jewish world, and, as definitive judgment, confers citizenship of Keneset Yisrael. It thus serves simultaneously as the apex of a spiritual pilgrimage and as the essence of a social quest.

This would be agreeable, but I doubt if such a flattering assumption can be conscientiously maintained. We should not make light of the difference between these two factors. Each is distinct in its very essence—one rooted in nature, the other in legality. Of course, birth, too, even in its biological form, constitutes a phenomenon that concerns Halakhah; it is defined and quantified: emergence of most of the fetus, of its head, its forehead,⁵¹ and according to the Rambam, even of most of its forehead, is an actual halakhic measurement.⁵² This is, however, nothing more than coincidental. Intrinsically, birth lies outside of the juridical field, except that the law must pass judgment upon it. *Gerut*, however, is actual *mishpat*—and here lies the duality. This duality may in fact become, especially in today's prevalent mood, antinomy—and this, not only according to the view of romantic individualism that stresses the contradiction of law and nature and emphasizes absolute privacy in the spiritual

realm. Even a traditional sensibility appreciates the breach of the *sanctum* when the *ger* bares his innermost soul *coram populo*, with three strangers present in the delivery room. Recognizing and valuing modesty, it encourages concealment over revelation. Itself, a “spring shut up, a fountain sealed,”⁵³ it senses that the juridic presence and framework are likely to undermine the religious-esthetic moment at that most sublime instant. The *ger* is eager to soar,—and three judges clip his wings, subjecting him to their examination.⁵⁴ In candor, we must further admit that the combination of these two factors may produce paradoxical results. Suffused with an effervescence and longing that characterizes the end of a lengthy internal struggle and a supreme purification, the *ger* may stand trial in front of judges (even laymen according to some⁵⁵) possessing a routine if not indifferent religious sensitivity. In his heart, burning fire; in theirs, perhaps dimming embers.

Nevertheless, the Halakhah has insisted on the need for birth and *mishpat* together—and with good reason. The duality in *gerut* is not an isolated fact. It is an inherent part of the fundamental duality of religious life in general. The life of the devout, both in its universal form, and, to a sharper degree, in its specific Jewish form, is dual as well. On the one hand, it is the realm of the individual, purely: the *sanctum sanctorum*, innermost of the inwards. Within the man of faith, as Rav Soloveitchik, *shlita*, stressed in his essay,⁵⁶ loneliness reverberates. His relation to the Creator takes place in intimacy. His ideal experience is, in the famous words of Plotinus, “the flight of the alone to the alone.”⁵⁷ “Religion,” defined Whitehead, “is solitariness. . . . If you are never solitary, you are never religious.”⁵⁸ But on the other hand, religion has always developed in a congregational setting. Its historical existence is dependent at every stride and step on communal ritual and shared faith. This cannot be explained solely in the manner of Durkheim and his school, who view society as the source of religion, in the sense that religion grows and develops only in response to social needs and demands, so that, in the final analysis, it is society itself that is served in one form or another.⁵⁹ This doctrine is open to criticism even from a purely sociological standpoint. I, for one—far from an expert in the field—am inclined to accept Malinowski’s contention, that Durkheim’s approach ignores some important phenomena, and may even be based on a distorted sense of some fundamental concepts.⁶⁰ In any case, from a Jewish perspective, the issue is clear. Religion, as described by Durkheim, has been categorized halakhically: it is *avodah zarah*, idol worship, no less evident when the idol is the society or the state, than when it is a statue or a graven image. However, the public dimension of religion relates even to proper piety and worship. Even the service of God, for

its own sake, recognized as an independent goal, not adulterated as a means to the achievement of the demands of an apotheosized society, is rooted in the community as well as the individual. Herein lies the duality of religion: at once, a personal and social phenomenon.

This duality stems from Man's complex situation and fate. Man has a relationship to eternity and to the temporal. Therefore, two obligations and two destinies confront him. One is self-improvement, a catharsis of the soul in preparation to encountering the Divine Presence in the world of beatitude. With this thought R. Moshe Chaim Luzatto opens his book, *Mesillat Yesharim*:

The cornerstone of piety, and the root of sincere service is the resolution by every man of his duty in life . . . for this reason Man was put in this world, so that, taking advantage of the opportunities and faculties that come his way, he may reach the place destined for him, that is, the next world.

From this perspective, man has no interest in the society that will evolve from him and his progeny. "All generations," said the historian Ranke, "stand equidistant from eternity."⁶¹

Man, however, has a second mission. He is not only a creation of eternity, but a child of history. Judaism, specifically, stressed this destiny. Greek philosophy, in general, minimized the importance of history. For Plato and his school, this world is nothing more than a meager shadow, a reflection of an image of the world of ideas which alone have true metaphysical permanence. To the Stoics, the annals of history are merely a repetitious cycle, barren of innovation. In contrast, Judaism insisted that history is decisively important, its events effecting major changes, generating real turning points. For Judaism, history is a process, with a beginning and end, spanning "world to world," from the specific moment of initial creation until the realization of the vision in which "God will be one and His Name one." Such a relationship mandates that Man, who finds himself in the framework of history, bears an obligation towards it. However, every effort to discharge it removes Man from his domain of privacy, for the process of history is, by its very nature, collective. Therefore, insofar as religion seeks to hasten eschatological fulfillment directly⁶²—and how can it shirk such a responsibility?—it must necessarily infiltrate the life of the community. From this perspective, society is not seen as merely an avenue or backdrop to the attainment of individual spiritual values. The group's life and progress are transformed into a field of operations for the individual, and into one of his destinies. "It is not incumbent upon him to finish the work"—but the task is, nonetheless, his.

This duality—of the private and communal life concomitantly, of simultaneous attachment to eternity and the temporal—is re-

flected in every person's life. We can, however, find an especially salient example in the lives of humanity's elect—the prophets. Who can match the prophet in striving for superior sanctity? Who, as much as he, yearns to be alone with his Maker? Who, as he, is lonely, “consecrating himself, separating himself from the popular course followed in darkness?”⁶³ Who, more than the prophet, is preoccupied with self-creation? “And when the spirit descends upon him, his soul mingles in the upper spheres of the angels called *Ishim*, and he is transformed into a different person, aware that he is no longer as he was, but rather elevated above all wise human beings, as is said to Saul: ‘and you will prophesy with them and become a different person.’”^{64,65} Is the prophet, then, detached from reality, indifferent to the course of human events? Not at all. On the contrary, Scripture portrays the prophet primarily as a fighter, a leader, as one who is concerned for his nation's fate and character. The flame that burns in his heart, shut up in his bones, turns into a fire that consumes wickedness, purifying the world. Again, who can match the prophet, in becoming a partner to the Almighty not only in the act of Creation, but also in the fashioning of generations, in molding history as in shaping nature? But this activity forces him to abandon his solitude and join the life of his generation. God, claim the Kabbalists, created the world by *tsimtsum*—withdrawal; Man, on the contrary, can become God's partner in creation only through expansion.⁶⁶

Until now, we have dealt with the duality of religious life in its universal context. However, in a Jewish context, the problem is even more acute. *Keneset Yisrael* is not merely a socio-political setting in which every individual strives to pave his own path to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*. Nor is it an embellished means, or fertile field, for the prodding of universal human history. It is defined as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,”⁶⁷ its whole being and autonomy depending upon its character as a people serving God. And we may underscore nation—not a chorus of individuals or an assembly of persons—but a nation: ‘the people in its entirety.’

In Halakhah, this point is stressed in several spheres. Most important, of course, is the dictum that “all Israel are responsible for each other.”⁶⁸ But the notion is reflected—and perhaps more noticeably—in other areas as well. Thus, the Ramban states that if *Kelal Yisrael* were to congregate at a specified time to bring a sacrifice in partnership, such a sacrifice would not be a *korban tsibbur*, a public offering of all Israel, but a sacrifice of partners, for here they do not appear as a unitary group but as an assemblage of individuals.⁶⁹ Moreover, the character of full-fledged *tsibbur* is such that it transcends the confines of time and space. A later generation,

suggests Rav Papa, may offer a bull for a transgression through ignorance (*par he'alem davar*) of a previous generation, even if there exists not one member of that generation that perpetrated the sin, "for there is no death for the *tsibbur*."⁷⁰ The Congregation of Israel, from the revelation at Sinai until the millennium, constitutes a single organic unit—if you will, at once metaphysical and social—that is destined to be "holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His produce."⁷¹ "Not with our ancestors did God forge this covenant, but with us, today, here, all of us alive."⁷² Not with our ancestors alone, adds Rashi.⁷³ For as much as the individual is embedded in Kelal Yisrael and does not just float within it, the communal element assumes a significant role in his spiritual life, based both on the character of the nation and on his drawing closer to its future. This fact intensifies the duality in the life of the Jew.

Hence, the tension of the dialectic inherent within *gerut* is sharpened even further. A real gap exists between, for example, *gerut* and the parallel term "conversion," as understood by many Gentile scholars. Christian discussions describe a phenomenon totally different from the Jewish conception. In the most famous of these descriptions—two chapters devoted by William James to the subject in his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*⁷⁴—we read page after page, impressed by a delicate and sensitive analysis, yet we sense that the subject is not *gerut* at all, but the psychology of *teshuvah*, repentance. Since, in fact, James promises a religion with pretension to universality, there is no significant *religious* place for entry into the congregation or community; hence, there is hardly a difference between repentance and conversion. In Jewish *gerut*, *le-havdil*, the communal point is fundamental. For the *ger*, his day of entry into the covenant is, as for the whole nation at Sinai, "a day of Assembly."⁷⁵

And so, I conclude with that with which I began: the problematic. We may not ignore the duality, even the antinomy, in *gerut*. It is not ours to resolve the issue, but to clarify it. We shall overcome it only insofar as we shall recognize it—being sensitive to it at the practical level, and pondering it on the theoretical plane; if we fuse empathy with elucidation. It is not for us, nor do we desire—God forbid—to choose between the two factors. Both are essential, but our obligation is to understand and balance their relationship. The tension within *gerut* exists, but, acknowledging its existence, we may be able to control it. When the *ger* grasps the scope and the complexity of his commitment, and when the members of the Beth Din are attentively attuned to the possible stirrings of his heart—out of a mutual sensitivity to the majesty and the tones of the event, the gap is steadily bridged.

Proper understanding shall only issue, however, if we place the matter in the proper framework: the duality in *gerut* is indispensable and dialectical. It is inherent in the nature of religious life in general—both in its universal form and, principally, within the structure of Keneset Yisrael. The dialectic that exists between the individual and the community in religious life is reflected in the duality of the *gerut* process, in which the two separate factors meet in mutual relationship. Insofar as a conflict exists between them, it does not stem from the blurring of terms and experiences, but is rather the result of the richness of Jewish life, with all its fertile consequences and variegated nature. The gate matches the home.

NOTES

1. Shemot 22:20; compare *ibid.* 23:9 and Vayikra 19:33.
2. *Bava Metsia*. See also the Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, the beginning of the ninth *shoresh*, (in Rav Heller's edition, pp. 19–20), in which he explains, in light of his opinion of multiple warnings for one commandment, that the transgressor does not violate three actual negative commandments, but rather only one, which is merely "strengthened" by the repetition of the admonitions. But in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Mekhirah* 14:15–17, the Rambam sets down that one does transgress three negative commandments, literally. However, his words there require further explanation, in their own right, for it appears that in reference to a *ger*, he ruled that all who vex the *ger* either verbally or financially violate both *issurim*, whereas for a vexing Jew, he made a distinction between the two. See also the problem raised by the discussion in the gemara, *ad loc.* The Rambam's commentators have dealt with this extensively in their comments to the *Mishneh Torah*, *ad loc.*
3. See *Bava Metsia*, 59b and the sources cited in the notes of Rav Chaim Heller on the *Sefer ha-Mitsvot loc. cit.*
4. I Melakhim 18:21.
5. Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933), p. 12.
6. Bereshit 21:27.
7. My approach here is phenomenological, and I am dealing with types. Of course, from a sociological standpoint, the issue must be dealt with entirely differently, but the two approaches are not mutually exclusive.
8. Tehillim 119:19.
9. Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, *Mishpatim*, Portion 18; in the Horowitz-Rabin edition, p. 312.
10. Tehillim 42:2. I quote the verse in light of the explanation of the words that are in the Targum: מרנג דר—“that desires.” The Septuagint translates, likewise, ἐπιποθεῖ, and from there, the Vulgate, *desiderat*. But Rashi accepted the interpretation of Dunash, that the verb refers to the ram's cry; the *Midrash Shoher Tov* there, following in the same vein, understood the whole psalm as placed in a time of exile and calamity.
11. Tehillim 63:2.
12. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:4. His three-way division is of fundamental importance, but this is not the place to analyze it.
13. *Yevamot* 22a.
14. On genealogy, see *Yevamot* 22a and 97b; on inheritance, *Kiddushin* 17b; and concerning reproduction, *Yevamot* 62a. In the same vein, Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish argued whether the firstborn son of a *ger* born after his father's conversion is considered the firstborn for inheritance as well. Similarly, the halakhah is cited with respect to the acquittal of the *ger* for all his transgressions prior to his conversion; see *Yevamot* 48b and *Sanhedrin* 71b. The breadth of the halakhah as regards genealogy depends upon a dispute amongst the Rishonim as to whether a son of a *giyoret* (female proselyte), conceived and

born after the conversion, is forbidden from marrying his mother's daughter, born prior to the mother's conversion, who herself converted before the son's birth. Rashi is of the opinion that it is only forbidden by Rabbinic injunction, since by Torah law, he has no attachment to a daughter born as a non-Jewess. However, Rabbenu David forbids it even according to the Torah, evidently assuming that *gerut* severs all relationships that exist at the time of the *gerut*, but does not discard the attachment of the *ger* to his family totally. See *Hiddushei ha-Ran* on *Sanhedrin* 58a, s.v. *ger*.

15. *Tosefta Horayot*, 2:7.
16. *Va-et'hanan*, Piska 32.
17. Portion 39:14; in the Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 379.
18. *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 2:4.
19. *Yevamot* 46b.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:6. The simplest understanding of the Talmudic passage in *Yevamot* 46b bases the prohibition against immersion on Sabbath and Holidays upon "Tikkunei Gavra"—improving the state of a person—similar to the prohibition against sprinkling water on those ritually unclean on Sabbath and Holidays (see *Pesahim* 65b). Apparently, it has no juridical basis. But the Rambam, perhaps because he understood that the gemara, at the end of its discussion, reversed itself—related *tevilah* back to juridical roots.
22. See *Hiddushei ha-Ramban* on *Yevamot* 46b, where he deliberates the point, but ultimately concludes that a second *tevilah* is required by day.
23. See *Yevamot* 104a and *Sanhedrin* 34b.
24. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:7.
25. See *Yevamot* 45b, Tosafot s.v. *mi*. According to their understanding of the text, that the *tevilah* of menstruants serves as the model for *tevilah* of *gerim*, some basis for their opinion may be found within it. However, the Rambam understood that the *tevilah* of menstruants is nothing more than an indicator that the entire procedure of *gerut* has already taken place—as implied by his mentioning other indications as well ("a *giyoret* who has been seen performing Jewish customs, consistently, e.g. she immerses herself after her menstrual cycle, she separates *terumah* from her dough, etc.")—see *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:9; and according to this, that Talmudic reference proves nothing.
26. *Kiddushin* 62b, Tosafot. s.v. *ger*. Rav Yitzchak Alfasi (the Rif) in *Yevamot* 45b, likewise distinguishes between *le-khat'hila* (the proper way of performing a commandment) and *di-avad*. In the opinion of the Tur (*Yoreh De'ah* 268), if one immersed in the presence of two judges, married a Jewess and had a son, then the son is a Jew, for his father's immersion was acceptable *di-avad*. According to this, the Rif's position corresponds to the opinion of Tosafot, and it was indeed interpreted as such by the *Shiltei ha-Gibborim*, *ad loc.* However, close analysis of the Rif's wording indicates, *prima facie*, that the Rif is discussing whether a different *gerut* had been performed prior to this one; he does not deal with Beth Din as validating the act of *gerut* in this *tevilah*. If so, then his opinion corresponds to that of the Rambam, who presumably based himself upon the Rif. See the Bah in Section 268, who argues in this vein convincingly.
27. On these two sides of *gerut*, see the work of my master, Rav J. B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*, in *Ish ha-Emunah* (Jerusalem 1968), pp. 95–99, especially in the footnotes. The Rav there sees the two aspects of conversion as embodied in the two covenants that evolved from two historical events, the Exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai. The major thrust of this article is based on the essential cornerstone laid down in that work, but I will not go into the stages of *gerut* here.
A different interpretation of the character of circumcision and *tevilah* was suggested by Rav Yosef Engel in the *Gilyonei ha-Shas*, *Yevamot* 46a. Compare also the *Milhamot Hashem* of the Ramban, *Shabbat* 135a.
28. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 14:1.
29. *Yevamot* 47a.
30. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:11. However, Rashi *Sanhedrin* 47a, s.v. *mi-darkhei tsibbur*, explains, "Such as an apostate." On the connection of the Rambam to this topic, see *Kol Dodi Dofek*, p. 96.
31. *Bikkurim* 1:4.
32. *Ibid.* But the Tosefta reads (*Bikkurim* 1:2): "Rabbi Yehudah says: All the *gerim* bring the first fruits but do not utter the declaration; the sons of Keni, Moshe's father-in-law, bring

the first fruits and utter the declaration." Rishonim have already discussed the issue; see the sources cited in *Tosefta Ki-Peshutah* by Rabbi Saul Lieberman, pp. 823–825.

33. *Hilkhot Bikkurim* 4:3.
34. In his *hiddushim* to *Bava Batra* 81a.
35. Yeshayahu 56:3. The text reads, however, "shall surely separate me."
36. The Rambam's Responsa, Blau edition. no. 293; II:549. It is worth noting that according to his view, there may, *prima facie*, be a halakhic ramification. A *ger toshav* may trace himself to Avraham (and if we presume, as did the Ramban, *loc. cit.*, that "the three patriarchs of the world were like Avraham," then he may trace himself to Yitshak and Yaakov as well), but he may not say "who took us out of Egypt."
37. *Sukkah* 49b.
38. See above, note 6.
39. *Sanhedrin* 93a.
40. *Bereshit Rabbah* 42:13; in the Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 414.
41. *Bereshit* 17:9.
42. *Lekh Lekha*; Buber edition, p. 31.
43. *Devarim* 9:10.
44. Yeshayahu 26:2.
45. *Ruth* 1:16.
46. *Ruth* 2:11–12. Despite this emphasis, we needn't be surprised that Ruth described and perhaps perceived herself as an alien (*nokhriyyah*). Even if we discount the possible explanation of the word as applying only to her roots, and not to her present state, we may readily intuit that although she desired to identify with Keneset Yisrael, her social-personal integration was yet incomplete. However, the famous description of Keats, who ruminates that the nightingale's is "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,/ She stood in tears amid the alien corn" (*Ode to a Nightingale*, ll. 65–7) is purely conjectural and has no basis in the text.
47. Needless to say, in the previous section I do not mean to suggest that changes occurred in the laws of *gerut*, but rather refer to changes in the atmosphere surrounding it, with varying emphases in specific cases, and perhaps in specific periods.
48. *Yevamot* 46b. Rabbi Yehoshua holds that *tevilah* without *milah* is sufficient, *post facto*, for *gerut*.
49. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 14:2. In the gemara (*Yevamot* 47a), only a description of the *mitsvot* is mentioned. Presumably, during the course of the exposition, theological rudiments were to be discussed; nevertheless, the Rambam's express reference is noteworthy.
50. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 14:6; based on *Yevamot* 47b.
51. See *Niddah* 28a; *Berakhot* 46b.
52. *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 10:6. He refers there to a live fetus; with respect to a miscarriage—to exempt the child who follows from the title of firstborn—the Rambam necessitated the whole forehead (*Hilkhot Bekhorim* 11:15). In the former case, the law of birth takes effect through the emergence of the head in its own right; hence, even most of the forehead, which is considered most of the head, is sufficient. In the latter case, since there is no person, the head is considered nothing more than the representative of most of the body, and most of the head no longer suffices (from Rav J. B. Soloveitchik).
53. *Shir Hashirim* 4:12.
54. On the basis of his experience in dealing with *gerim*, Rabbi Ze'ev Gotthold has pointed out to me that in numerous cases, *gerim*, facing a most confusing transitional period in their lives, found spiritual support in the Beth Din's presence. In his opinion, most *gerim* view it as supporting rather than as interference. Yet perhaps, ideally speaking, the contradiction persists, and I am inclined to assume that it is a factor in many specific instances.
55. See the opinion of Rabbi Netanel in the Tosafot, *Kiddushin* 62b, s.v. *ger*, and in the *Hiddushei ha-Ramban* on *Yevamot* 46b. It should be pointed out that the term "laymen" in this context has a specific halakhic sense, referring to those who have not been formally or technically ordained, and is not to be understood in its usual sense.
56. See above, note 24.
57. *Enneads* 6:9.
58. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York, 1927), p. 17.
59. See Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes Elementaires de la Vie Religieuse* (Paris, 1912), *passim*.
60. See Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion* (Garden City, New York, 1948), esp. pp. 54–60.

61. Quoted in Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London, 1957), p. 89.
62. Of course, in an indirect manner we may bring *ge'ulah* closer by serving God in the strictly private domain, for it brings in its wake an increase in divine assistance.
63. *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:1.
64. I Shemuel 10:6.
65. Rambam, *loc. cit.*
66. Of course, from time to time, the prophet requires withdrawal in order to prepare himself for prophecy. But the fulfillment of his task necessarily demands expansion.
67. Shemot 19:6.
68. *Shevuot* 39a.
69. *Milhamot Hashem, Berakhot*, Chapter 3. In his commentary on the Torah (Vayikra 1:2) he assumes that this is Rashi's opinion, but there, he himself leans towards assuming that "if the *tsibbur* desires to set aside funds for a voluntary sacrifice, and money is raised [for that purpose] as *shekalim* are similarly collected for daily and additional sacrifices, then this would be a *nidvat tsibbur*."
70. *Horayot* 6a. After some discussion, the gemara reaches the conclusion that there is no source for this law and it is likely that another generation cannot atone for a previous one unless there remain extant some members of that prior generation. This notwithstanding, the notion of a link between generations remains valid. Even according to the conclusion, it is not the individual persons remaining who sacrifice the atonement, but the whole *tsibbur*. The need for some remnant is just a stipulation required of a sacrifice for a transgression, that there be present "offerers" who have a direct connection to the offering. In any case, the position that "there is no death in the *tsibbur*" has been already established. Thus the halakhah pertaining to a "*hattat* (sin-offering) whose owners have died"—i.e. that it can be neither offered nor redeemed but must graze until it dies—does not apply to a *hattat tsibbur*, as its "owner" never dies. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Pesulei ha-Mukdashim* 4:1.
71. Yirmiyahu 2:3.
72. Devarim 5:3.
73. *Ibid.*; see the two interpretations of Ibn Ezra *ad loc.*
74. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902), chapters 9–10. A similar bent is evident in some of those who followed James: e.g., A. C. Underwood, *Conversion: Christian and non-Christian* (New York, 1925); W. Bryn Thomas, *The Psychology of Conversion* (London, 1935); Robert O. Ferm, *The Psychology of Christian Conversion* (Westwood, New York, 1959). To a degree, this notion is incorporated into a general emphasis on the subjective that is an outgrowth of dealing with the psychological side of the issue, and that is noticeable, in particular, amongst Protestant authors. However, it exists even among those whose bent lends more importance to the formal, objective points, e.g., Catholics. In a different sense, it is essential to Catholics even more than to Protestants, since universalism is at the core of Catholic theology.
75. The concept of a religious *tsibbur* as a distinct social, organic unit is not, of course, foreign to Christianity, and it served from its inception as one of the fundamental points in the formative molding of the Church, as idea and institution. Moreover, another central dimension was added during the Protestant Reformation, as national churches evolved, at which time the concept actually served as a major bone of contention, especially in England. But this concept never paralleled that of Keneset Yisrael, even at the time of the Reformation. Even in the writings of the Anglican Church Father Richard Hooker (*Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book 8), the idea of an ecclesia was, in essence, universal, and sought primarily to search and find, within this framework, room for a national entity, despite its being, relatively speaking, an artificial unit.

On the other hand, in earlier societies, the interweaving of religion and nation—or religion and city-state—was the norm, both encompassing the same group. But this is effective only in a polytheistic framework, wherein the idol and its worship were limited to a specific place and community. This bears no similarity whatsoever to our conception which, in comparison with polytheism, is, of course, thoroughly universal.