

## Reaffirming Patrilineal Descent

### *Shabbat Vay'chi 5786*

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Seven years ago, our friends at Congregation Agudath Achim joined the Conservative Movement, having previously identified as Orthodox. Orthodox Judaism does not recognize Reform or Conservative conversions, and I always advised our conversion candidates that ours would be the only Central Arkansas congregation where their Jewish status would be recognized. However, I had long been taught that the Conservative Movement **does** recognize Reform conversions, provided that traditional conversion rituals have been observed: The new Jew must be admitted to the covenant by a *בית דין*, a religious court composed of three knowledgeable, practicing Jews; must immerse in the *מקוה*, a ritual bath; and, for men, enter *ברית מילה*, the covenant of circumcision.

I was thrilled that our sister congregation would recognize the Jewish status of folks who had converted to Judaism here and would permit us to utilize their *מקוה* for immersions, shortening the round-trip drive to and from the nearest *מקוה* available to us from five hours to twenty minutes!

In those early days of being a Conservative synagogue, though, before Rabbi Biller came to lead them, Agudath Achim leadership wanted to be sure that they were faithful to Conservative Judaism, which was new to many of them. They sought counsel from the congregational organization they had recently joined, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Soon, I began to hear from a rabbi with that organization. In email correspondence, he asked questions about our conversion process, which I was confident would satisfy Conservative Judaism. The questions continued in a way I didn't understand, though, and I began to sense that my Conservative colleague didn't want to tell me what he was **really** asking. I assured him that I could handle whatever it was, and he suggested that we talk on the phone.

Now, connected voice-to-voice, my colleague told me that he was concerned that he might offend me, but to assure the folks at Agudath Achim that they could accept our conversions with fidelity to Conservative Judaism, he had to ask about **my** Jewish status and that of the other members of our **בית דין**, our panel of three knowledgeable Jews who accepted the converts. What he was **really** asking was

whether I had been born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism myself, and the same question for other members of the panel. I assured him that, yes, we all met those criteria, and he proceeded to reassure our friends at Agudath Achim.

I first learned why it mattered that a person's **mother** was Jewish when I was a Confirmation student in 1979. Rabbi Samuel Karff, שליט"א, explained that he was working to adopt a new official Reform answer to the question, "Who is a Jew?" In practice, he told us, a person born to either a Jewish mother or father, raised Jewish, was Jewish in his eyes, and most Reform rabbis agreed. However, we were saddled with a traditional definition that treated only those born to Jewish mothers as Jewish.

Four years later, "The Central Conference of American Rabbis declare[d] that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status ... is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people."<sup>i</sup>

This declaration was not universally accepted. Even within the Reform Movement, many, particularly outside the United States, joined Conservative and Orthodox Jews in worrying that the Reform rabbinate of creating a rupture in כלל ישראל, the unity of the Jewish people, since there would now be even more Jews who would be considered Jewish in part of the Jewish world but not in others. For Reform Jews, though, it was simply a matter of gender equality, a binding principle for us.

For me, like my mentor, Rabbi Karff, there is no such thing as a “patrilineal Jew.” The only appropriate term to describe such a person is “Jewish.” Our patriarch, Jacob, seems to have agreed. In this week’s Torah portion, on his deathbed, Jacob blesses each of his sons, making no distinction between those born to Rachel and Leah, his presumably “Jewish” wives, on the one hand, and those born to their handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah, on the other. One could even ask if Rachel and Leah, born to idol-worshipping parents, are “Jewish.” According to Rabbi Samuel Eliezer Eidels, Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah all converted to Judaism before their marriages to Jacob.<sup>ii</sup> However, there’s no hint of conversion

in the Torah, and no concern about the status of Jacob's children. Membership in the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah is clearly passed through fathers, not mothers, in the Torah. The idea of Jewish status passing through the mother is an invention of our rabbinic sages, in the same texts that invalidate marriage between a Jew and a person who is not officially Jewish.<sup>iii</sup> Since Reform Judaism embraces couples in such marriages, it's no surprise that we embrace their children as Jewish if they do!

I have never urged parents to bring their children to the מִקְוֶה because only the father is Jewish. If we believe that men and women are equal in all respects, our actions should align with our words, and no Jew should be treated differently from another solely based on the gender of a Jewish parent.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, though, has given us food for thought in her new book, *Heart of a Stranger*, which our Al Barron Book Club plans to discuss Sunday afternoon. The Senior Rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York, Rabbi Buchdahl was raised Jewish from birth by her Korean Buddhist mother and her American Jewish father. She began to question her Jewish status during her college

years, and she was blessed to meet Rabbi Elliot Dorff, a leading Conservative Movement thinker.

Rabbi Buchdahl “asked Rabbi Dorff what he thought of” the Reform rabbinate’s patrilineal descent “ruling. He said he appreciated the Reform Movement’s desire to accept all children of intermarriage, but objected to framing conversion as something remedial,” that is, a step to take to resolve a purported “problem” with the child’s Jewish status. “Instead, he preferred that conversion be viewed as a positive act of commitment or *recommitment*, something to seek.” Rabbi Buchdahl “countered” that it didn’t *feel* positive to suggest...conversion of someone with a Jewish father, who had been raised Jewish all her life. It seemed like a negation of the Jewish life they had already been living. He responded that [Rabbi Buchdahl’s] lens on conversion reflected the Christian understanding, which stems from the Latin *converso*, meaning “a turning around” or “complete change...But Rabbi Dorff said that Judaism sees *giyur* [, Hebrew for conversion,] differently: not as a total transformation, but as an acknowledgement and embrace of the soul that has always been in you. That perspective was not only a

clarification but a gift,” Rabbi Buchdahl writes, “I could now understand [immersion in the מקוה witnessed by a בית דין as a reaffirmation of the Jew I always was.”<sup>iv</sup>

I resonate to Rabbi Buchdahl’s acceptance of Rabbi Dorff’s encouragement that she go to the מקוה. Our converts often do experience conversion as an affirmation of who they have always been. They often find immersion to be meaningful in ways they never expected. I will continue not to require or even suggest that Jewish children of Jewish fathers whose mothers are not Jewish go through the formalities of conversion, but Rabbi Buchdahl’s words encourage me to make that choice available.

This week, we complete our reading of Genesis for 5786, and we say, חזק חזק ונמחזק, “Be strong, and let us strengthen one another,” or, “We go from strength to greater strength.” For some among us who have been Jewish all their lives, immersion in the מקוה may be an experience of going from strength to ever greater strength. And let all of us affirm that the embrace of people who have come to their

Jewish life in a variety of ways—through one or both parents or through conversion—strengthens our congregation and the Jewish people.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/status-of-children-of-mixed-marriages-1983/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Leibel Gniwisch, “The Story of Bilhah and Zilpah in the Bible,” *Chabad.org*, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/4936938/jewish/The-Story-of-Bilhah-and-Zilpah-in-the-Bible.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4936938/jewish/The-Story-of-Bilhah-and-Zilpah-in-the-Bible.htm),

<sup>iii</sup> Mishnah Kiddushin 3:12.

<sup>iv</sup> Angela Buchdahl, *Heart of a Stranger: An Unlikely Rabbi’s Story of Faith, Identity, and Belonging*, New York: Viking Press, 2025, p. 127.