

Ask the Rabbi

Submitted question #1:

What makes a person a Jew?

The Rabbi's answer:

Fundamentally, the term “Jew” refers to an Israelite – a person whose lineage can be traced to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (renamed Israel). That seems clear enough until one begins to ask the following questions:

1. Who today can trace his or her lineage back more than a few generations? Both secular and Temple birth records have long been lost. DNA testing gives evidentiary support for the continuity of Jewish lineage, but does not prove Jewish identity.
2. Even assuming that one can trace his or her lineage to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who can guarantee that someone in the family tree was not cut off from his people as a result of his not being circumcised or his having committed some act of covenantal disobedience? These are not circumstances that can show themselves in DNA testing.
3. Even assuming that one could trace his or her lineage and be assured that no one in the family line was cut off, should the descent be patrilineal, matrilineal, or either? There is biblical evidence for all three, but in today's Jewish world, Orthodox and Conservative Judaism count Jewish lineage only through the mother, while Reform Judaism counts it through either parent. That means that “Who is a Jew?” is decided differently according to whether one is Orthodox or Conservative on the one hand, or Reform on the other.
4. Finally, how does Jewish conversion affect identity? The majority of Rabbinical Judaism today professes that a Gentile can convert to Judaism and thereby become a Jew, or a proselyte who can bear Jewish children. But the Orthodox do not recognize non-Orthodox conversions, the Conservatives do not recognize Reform conversions, and I think only the Pope recognizes Reconstructionist conversions. {smile!}

All this seems to fly in the face of the premise that being a Jew is a matter of descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but there are a few biblical arguments for conversion, one of which is the example we read in [Esther 8:17](#): *“In every province and city where the king's order and decree arrived, the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a holiday. Many from the peoples of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews had overcome them.”*

Messianic Judaism is split on the legitimacy of conversion, largely because of Paul's remarks in first letter to the Corinthians and to the Galatians:

[1 Corinthians 7:17-20](#): *“Only let each person live the life the Lord has assigned him and live it in the condition he was in when God called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the congregations. Was someone already circumcised when he was called? Then he should not try to remove the marks of his circumcision. Was someone uncircumcised when he was called? He shouldn't undergo b'rit-milah. Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised*

means nothing; what does mean something is keeping God's commandments. Each person should remain in the condition he was in when he was called."

Galatians 5:1-6

What the Messiah has freed us for is freedom! Therefore, stand firm, and don't let yourselves be tied up again to a yoke of slavery. Mark my words - I, Sha'ul, tell you that if you undergo b'rit-milah the Messiah will be of no advantage to you at all! Again, I warn you: any man who undergoes b'rit-milah is obligated to observe the entire Torah! You who are trying to be declared righteous by God through legalism have severed yourselves from the Messiah! You have fallen away from God's grace! For it is by the power of the Spirit, who works in us because we trust and are faithful, that we confidently expect our hope of attaining righteousness to be fulfilled. When we are united with the Messiah Yeshua, neither being circumcised nor being uncircumcised matters; what matters is trusting faithfulness expressing itself through love.

Our apostolic covering, *Tikkun International*, recently grappled with this and on May 29, 2009, published "The Status of Gentiles in Messianic Judaism," in which is stated:

Conversion is considered an acceptable option only for those K'rovei Yisrael Messianic Gentiles (whether their k'rov identity has been formalized or not) who are either already married to a Jew, betrothed or engaged to a Jew, legally adopted by a Jew, or who have a Jewish grandparent and wish to re-acquire their Jewish identity. Conversion should include declaration or oath before witnesses, and we recommend tevilah in keeping with the custom of our people. For men, conversion requires brit milah (covenant circumcision).

Tikkun does not preclude or oppose the self-description of "Jew" by those who have been converted under reputable Jewish auspices; some in our midst have already undergone such conversions. While we discourage conversions under non-Messianic auspices for a number of reasons, if such a conversion has occurred, we will not object to calling such a person in our midst a Jew if he or she so desires. No Tikkun congregation is obligated to participate in the conversion of Gentiles, but we should respect the status of persons who have received conversion under any reputable and suitable Jewish authority.

So dear questioner: You asked "What makes a person a Jew?" **Please let us all know when you find out!**