

May a convert use a name other than “Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu?”

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Question: May a convert choose to use a name other than Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu v'Sarah Imanu? If a proselyte had a halachically valid conversion, but the rabbi allowed a patronymic other than “ben/bat Avraham Avinu” is it acceptable to continue using that name, or must the convert change his/her name?

Response: There is a clear tradition that converts are named ben/bat Avraham Avinu. In the Shulhan Arukh it states: בגט גר כותב: פלוני בן אברהם אבינו. In a convert's get is written: Ploni son of Avraham Avinu.”¹ The Rosh in a teshuva states, אלא כך נוהגין לכתוב בכתובות, ושמו המובהק כותבים, ואב המון גוים הוא אבי כלם “thus it is our custom to write in ketubbot or gittin of converts: Ploni ben Avraham, and his preferred name is written, and he is the father of a great nation, father of all.”²

Reasons for using the patronymic Avraham Avinu

R. Isaac Klein states “The patronymic ben or bat Avraham Avinu is insisted upon for purposes of identification.”³

From looking at the various teshuvot on the subject, it is clear that identification means simply identifying the correct person, not that there is any other reason to identify a convert. The Tur elaborates on this concept. The Tur states על אחד ששמו יוסף בן שמעון והמיר אביו והבן היה לו לגרש ולא רצה להזכיר שם אביו וכתב יוסף בן שמואל שהגט פסול שהרואה אומר “regarding one who's name is Yosef ben Shimon, and the father converted (to another religion) and they were estranged and the son did not want to mention his father's name, and he wrote ‘Yosef ben Shmuel’ the get is invalid, for one who sees it will say ‘someone else divorced her, for her husband's name is Yosef ben Shimon, and this was Yosef ben Shmuel.’”⁴

There are many reasons to prefer naming proselytes after our father Abraham. For one reason, in many places throughout rabbinic literature, Abraham is referred to as “Avraham Avinu,” Abraham our father. However, Jacob is also referred to as “Yakov Avinu.” There are additional reasons to prefer Abraham in particular:

¹ Shulhan Arukh Even HaEzer 129:20

² Rosh, Clal 15:4

³ Isaac Klein, A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, p. 445

⁴ Tur, Even HaEzer 129

- 1) Circumcision, a ritual required of male converts, is referred to as the “covenant of Abraham our father.”⁵
- 2) Abraham is called תחילה לגרים, the first of the proselytes.⁶
- 3) The midrash teaches Abraham and Sarah actively welcomed converts to the Jewish people: וכך נאמר ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן אמר רבי חוניא אברהם היה מגייר אנשים ושרה הנשים ומה ת"ל אשר עשו בחרן מלמד שהיה אברהם אבינו מכניסן לביתו ומאכילן ומשקן ומאהיבן ומקרבן ומגיירן ומכניסן תחת כנפי השכינה “Therefore it is said, And the souls which they made in Haran. R. Hunia said: Abraham used to convert the men and Sarai the women. Then why is it stated, which they made in Haran? It teaches that Abraham our father used to bring them into his house and give them food and drink and be friendly to them and attract them and convert them and bring them under the wings of the Shechinah.”⁷
- 4) In the Torah when God changes Avram’s name to Avraham it says ולא יקרא עוד את שמו אברם והיה שמו אברהם כי אב המון גוים נתתיך 'Abram.' Your name shall be 'Abraham,' for I have made you the father of many nations.”⁸ This can be understood as meaning Abraham is the father of those of the nations who come and join the Jewish people.

It is not clear when it became common practice to name converts after Avraham Avinu; this usage does not appear in the Talmud or Midrashic literature. We do know it was accepted as normative by the 16th century (see above reference to the Shulhan Arukh), and much earlier Rambam says converts can consider themselves descendants of Avraham Avinu.

Reasons a proselyte might prefer to choose another name

Some converts have reported that they have a stronger sense of identification with biblical characters other than Abraham and Sarah. If a convert feels a particularly strong connection with Ruth and her journey, for example, she may feel herself a “spiritual descendant” of Ruth, and prefer to call herself “bat Rut” instead of “bat Sarah.” Allowing a convert to select a name that resonates more strongly with him or her may have the beneficial effect of increasing the sense of comfort he or she has with their new Jewish identity.

Unfortunately, in spite of the efforts of our rabbis to educate our congregants about how wonderful it is when someone chooses, of his or her own free will, to join the Jewish

⁵ See, for example, Bavli Yoma 85b

⁶ Bavli Chagigah 3a

⁷ Shir Hashirim Rabbah I:22

⁸ Genesis 17:5

people, converts not infrequently find themselves encountering prejudice from some of their fellows who were born Jewish.

The Talmud cautions us not to oppress the convert: In the Mishnah in Bava Metzia we find “if he was the son of converts, do not say to him ‘remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it is written ‘do not wrong or oppress the stranger (Exodus 22:20).’”⁹ The Gemara continues and warns us “אם היה גר ובא ללמוד ... אם היה גר ובא ללמוד תורה שנאמרה מפי הגבורה ... If he is a proselyte and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, ‘Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!’”¹⁰ Thus we learn from the Talmud that to remind a convert, or the child of a convert, of their former status is a violation of oppressing the stranger. The Gemara continues with a discussion of how really terrible it is to publicly embarrass someone—going so far as to say “כל המלבין פני חבריו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים” anyone who embarrasses (lit. ‘whitens the face’) of his fellow in public is as if he spilled blood.”¹¹

The Shulhan Arukh affirms the requirement not to oppress converts: “צריך לזהר ביותר באונאת הגר, בין בגופו בין בממונו, לפי שהזהר עליו בכמה מקומות One needs to be especially careful about oppressing the convert, whether himself or monetarily, therefore we are cautioned about this in several places (in the Torah).”¹²

A convert therefore may wish to choose a name other than ben/bat Avraham Avinu v’Sarah Imanu – especially in these days when many people are called to the Torah by the name of both the father and mother – to help avoid being identified as a convert every time they have an aliyah to the Torah.

Yet another potential reason for choosing a different name is that in this day and age many people finding their way to Judaism discover they have some Jewish ancestry several generations earlier. They may wish to restore a feeling of connection to their Jewish past by seeking a direct connection to an earlier Jewish ancestor.

Historical Precedent and Sources Permitting Other Names

The Beit Yosef provides an alternative to using the name Avraham Avinu. The Beit Yosef on the Tur brings a teshuvah from the Mintz, R. Moses ben Isaac (15th century Ashkenaz) which says: “מצאתי שצריך שיכתוב בלשון דלישתמע מיניה שהוא גר כגון שיכתוב הגר או בן אברהם אבינו” “I found that one needs to write in language that implies that the person is a convert, for example write “*hager*,” the convert, **or** son of Avraham Avinu (emphasis

⁹ Talmud Bavli Bava Metzia 58b

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 228:2

added).”¹³ This teshuvah clearly says that even in a get it is sufficient to identify the person as a convert, without necessarily also naming them after Avraham Avinu.

That the concern with a convert’s name is related to identifying the correct person is reaffirmed in a contemporary responsum from the Beit Din of the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem: בגט גר כותב פלוני בן אברהם אבינו. ובב"ש ס"ק לט ואם לא כתב אבינו צריך לכתוב הגר, ואם לא כתב גר פסול דמשמע שהוא בן אברהם. “In a convert’s get Ploni ben Avraham Avinu is written. And if Avraham Avinu is not written, ‘the convert’ needs to be written, for if ‘the convert’ is not written the get is pasul, as it could be implied that he was the son of [a person named] ‘Abraham.’”¹⁴ While the Beit Din of Jerusalem clearly anticipates that the convert is at least named “son of Abraham,” the message is reaffirmed that the concern for naming converts “ben Avraham Avinu” is for identification purposes.

Tosefta Gittin 6:4 (cited by Tosafot to Bavli Gittin 34b) goes even further: it says גר ששינה שמו בשם הגוים כשר (וכן אתה אומר כשר) וכן אתה אומר בגירה גיטין הבאין ממדינת הים אע"פ “a convert who changed his name to a gentile name [the get] is kosher, and thus you say regarding gittin that come from overseas, that even though the names are like gentile names, they are kosher, because Jews who are overseas have names like Gentile names.”¹⁵

One could argue that even insisting on identification as a convert in official documents such as ketubbot and gittin is unnecessary since if a person is commonly known by a name, it is unlikely that he or she will be confused with someone with a similar because the identifier marking the person as a convert is missing. We choose not to make that argument here because there is a greater halachic basis for identifying the person as a convert in official documents than there is for insisting on the name Avraham Avinu.

We do have records of converts using names other than ben/bat Avraham. In his teshuvah “On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children,” Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner shows that using the name “ben/bat Avraham” is just a custom. R. Reisner writes:

“Yet even the standard custom is simply that, as evidenced by many historical converts who did not carry the name בן אברהם (son of Abraham). Thus, in *Yevamot* 101b the *amora* Rav Samuel son of Judah reports about himself: ואנא גר (“I am a convert”), yet he is named בר יהודה (son of Judah), as Rashi explains it, after his natural father who converted together with him. Similarly, among many converts working in the early Jewish printing trades we find alongside Jacob son of Abraham and Moses son of Abraham the names of Jacob son of Gedalya, Moses son of Gedalya and Moses son of Jacob.”¹⁶

¹³ Beit Yosef, Even HaEzer 129:20, quoting Moses ben Isaac

¹⁴ Piskei Din Yerushalayim, Dinei Mamonot u’birurei Yahadut 5 page 201.

¹⁵ Tosefta Gittin 6:4

¹⁶ Avram Reisner, On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children (Proceedings of the CJLS 1986-1990, p. 168)

Rabbi Reisner concluded that adopted children who are converts, or children of a Jewish father, do not need to use ben/bat Avraham.¹⁷

Another interesting example of a convert using a name other than ben Avraham Avinu is found in a commentary in the Tosafot on the name of the *amora* Bar He He: בר הי הי יש מפרשים שגר היה והיינו בן אברהם ושרה שנתוסף ה"א בשמן "Bar He He to Hillel. There are those that explain he was a convert, and Abraham and Sarah added the letter he to their names..."¹⁸

Conclusion

Even if it is *minhag*, not strict *halacha*, one might argue that ever since R. Yosef Caro codified the use of the name Avraham Avinu in the *Shulhan Arukh*, the use of that name has become a longstanding tradition that we should be reluctant to change.

It is good to honor tradition. However, in this case, we have a clear understanding of why the tradition came about—it was to make sure that converts were accurately identified in documents. This need can be fulfilled in other ways, by simply identifying the person as a convert in any official documents.

The “default” position should continue to be that a convert will be named Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu v’Sarah Imanu, both because it is a long standing tradition, and because it is good to encourage a connection our father Abraham, who is the spiritual father of us all. However, we need not strictly insist on it since there are alternative ways to make sure there is no confusion in identifying a convert in official documents.

Psak Din

- 1) Converts should be encouraged to follow the tradition of using the patronymic Avraham Avinu as he is the spiritual father of us all.
- 2) If a convert chooses a different name, it is preferred that in any official documents, such as *ketubbot* or *gittin*, that the convert be identified as הגר or הגיורת in order that there will not be any possibility of confusion in identifying the person, as described in the *teshuvah* from the Mintz.
- 3) In accord with the Reisner responsum mentioned earlier, children who are converted and adopted into a Jewish family may certainly use the patronymic and matronymic

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 174

¹⁸ Tosafot Chagigah 9b

of his adopted parents, and need not use בְּנֵי אֲבוֹתָם אֲבִינוּ.¹⁹ The same is the rule for people of patrilineal descent (children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother who underwent conversion). Such persons also do not need to be identified as הגר or הגיורת in official documents.

- 4) And certainly, בדיעבד, after the fact, if a convert had received a name other than Ploni ben/bat Avraham Avinu at the time of a halachic conversion, there is no requirement for the person to change his or her name, providing that he/she is identified as a convert in any official documents such as ketubbot or gittin.

¹⁹ Reisner, op. cit., p. 174.