

Conversion and the Nature of Jewish Identity in the 21st Century

Part Four: *Yevamot* 46b - How Did the Women Convert?

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Previous post: [Part Three: *Yevamot* 46b – Defining the Debate](#)

We will now learn through the conclusion of the Talmudic *sugya* and try to make some order out of the questions of identity that have emerged from this text. We concluded last time by noting that R' Yehoshua believes that immersion is sufficient for both men and women. The Gemara seeks to find a source for the immersion of both the men and the women.

Yevamot 46b

יבמות מו

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| [1] And from where does R' Yehoshua learn that the forefathers immersed? | [1] ורבי יהושע באבות נמי טבילה הוה מנא ליה |
| [2] Perhaps you will say from the verse Go to the nation and tell them to be holy today and tomorrow, and to wash their clothing (Exodus 19:10) ¹ . | [2] איילימא מדכתיב לך אל העם וקדשׁתם היום ומחר וכבסו שמלתם (שמות יט:) |
| [3] [For I can argue from the weaker to the stronger] If in a case in which laundry is not required, immersion is required; | [3] ומה במקום שאין טעון כבוס {טבילת בעל קרי} טעון טבילה |
| [4] [All the more so, in the context of Mt. Sinai where we have] a case that required laundry, immersion must be required? | [4] מקום שטעון כבוס {מתן תורה} אינו דין שטעון טבילה |
| [5] But perhaps [the laundry before the revelation at Sinai] was only for purposes of cleanliness. | [5] ודלמא נקיות בעלמא |
| [6] Rather [we can learn that there was immersion] from here And Moshe took the blood and sprinkled it on the people (Exodus 24:8); | [6] אלא מהכא ויקח משה את הדם ויזרק על העם - שמות כד: |
| [7] and we have a tradition that there can be no sprinkling [of blood] without immersion [in a Mikvah]. | [7] וגמירי דאין הזאה בלא טבילה |
| [8] And [according to] R' Yehoshua, how do we know that the women immersed? | [8] ורבי יהושע טבילה באמהות מנלן |
| [9] It is logical – for if they did not immerse, but what method did they enter the covenant?! | [9] סברא הוא דאם כן במה נכנסו תחת כנפי השכינה |

In lines [6] and [7] we discover a tradition that sprinkling of blood must be preceded by an immersion in the Mikvah. Since Moshe sprinkled blood on the Jewish People in chapter twenty-four of Exodus, there must have been an immersion before that moment in time. This

¹ ע' דברי הרמב"ם הלכות איסורי ביאה פרק יג הל' ג שהוא מביא את הפסוק מפרק י"ט שנדחת כאן ע"פ הגמרא. בספר נחל איתן הוא מתרץ ע"י תרגום אונקלוס על הפסוקים. המעשה רוקח מביא תירוץ חשוב שנעיין בו בעתיד בעז"ה.



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text is taking for granted that chapter twenty-four, which comes after the giving of the Ten Commandments in chapter twenty, in fact preceded that event².

At the end of line [7] one might assume that the Jewish People upon whom Moshe sprinkled the blood included both the men and the women. Although Onkelos translates this phrase “על העם” as “on behalf of the nation” and not “on the nation,” the simplest understanding of this phrase is that blood was sprinkled from the basins on the nation. Rav Saadia Goan explains the phrase according to its simple meaning.

However, the question of line [8] forces us to re-evaluate exactly what was being said in the line [7]. By asking for a source for the immersion of the women, line [8] assumes that line [7] excludes women from the category of “עם – nation.” While there may be no practical implications of this exclusion, it puts women outside of a fundamental moment of covenanting. Next time we will analyze the difficult, and sometimes painful, question of the presence or absence of women from the revelation at Sinai.

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²See the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban on [Exodus 24:1](#) for the fullness of this debate.