

WHEN DID RUS CONVERT?

Two critical questions which need to be answered are whether Orpah converted, and when did Rus convert. The Megillah appears to contain contradictory statements regarding these issues.

Machlon and Kilyon were scions of the line of Yehuda and Nachshon ben Aminadav and each had the potential to be the ancestor of Dovid HaMelech. It is inconceivable that they would marry Moavi women who had not converted. This statement is supported by the words of Naomi when she told Rus, “return after your sister-in-law.”²¹⁷

The two women would only be called sisters-in-law if they had both converted according to Jewish law. However if the two women had already converted, how could Naomi encourage them to return to their roots in Moav and forsake Judaism? And if Rus had already become Jewish, why did Naomi only teach her the core principles of the religion as they walked together to Eretz Yisrael?²¹⁸

The issue is complicated and requires a lengthy discussion. The following is a brief approach.

The Megillah records the marriages of Machlon and Kilyon with the words, “and they took for themselves Moavi women. The name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the second was Rus.” The following verse records, “and both of them also died, Machlon and Kilyon, and the woman (Naomi) remained without her two sons and her husband.”²¹⁹

The Midrash and Tosefos²²⁰ say that Machlon and Kilyon did not convert their wives or make them ritually immerse prior to their weddings. Anaf Yosef explains that the Midrash learns this fact from the Megillah’s description of them as “Moavi women.” It was prohibited for the men to marry Rus and Orpah and they were punished for doing so.

217. 1:15

218. Rus Rabbah 2:22-24 and Yevamos 47b elucidate details of the conversation between Naomi and Rus, from which we learn rules of how to discourage a potential convert

219. 1:4-5

220. Rus Rabbah 2:9, Midrash Tanchuma Behar, Tosefos to Kessubos 7b

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Chapter Nine: A Parting Kiss, a Tumultuous Fall, and a Curse

The Gemara²²¹ analyzes the actions and intentions of Elimelech and his sons, and says that the names of the sons refer to their sins. The name Kilyon is derived from the word *kelayah* — extinction. This is an allusion to Kilyon's death due to his sin of leaving Eretz Yisrael and for marrying Orpah, a Moavi woman. The Gemara notes that Machlon is also known as Seraph, from the word *sereifah* — burning, because he deserved to be killed by Hashem in this way due to his actions.

The Zohar²²² says that Rus did not convert at the time she married, but throughout her marriage she learned the ways of a Jewish house and some relevant laws (from her husband and mother-in-law). She only converted later when she accompanied Naomi and stated, “your people are my people and your G-d is my G-d.”²²³

The Zohar Chadash²²⁴ suggests an approach which can resolve these issues. It says: heaven forbid that Machlon married Rus when she was not Jewish! Rather both she and Orpah converted at the time of their marriages, but it was unclear if their motives were sincere. (Perhaps they were motivated by the prestige and honor of marrying into a prominent Jewish family who had wealth and a royal lineage.)

The Zohar Chadash continues and explains that Orpah acted as a committed Jew while married to Kilyon because she was under the fear of her husband. However her lack of sincerity was revealed following his death when Naomi gave her the chance to turn back. She accepted the offer and returned to her previous ways, demonstrating that her original conversion had been insincere and therefore was invalid.

Rus demonstrated the exact opposite, that her desire had always been sincere. Following the death of her husband she cleaved to the Torah and to Naomi out of her free will.

The Rambam in Mishneh Torah²²⁵ discusses the rule of a non-Jew who converts to Judaism for ulterior motives. If he is converted by a reputable *beis din*, his conversion remains intact and binding even if he later returns to his non-Jewish ways.

The Rambam contrasts this to a non-Jew who wishes to join Judaism for the wrong intentions and receives a private conversion through one person but not through a

221. Bava Basra 91b, explained by Iyun Yaacov, Maharsha

222. Balak

223. Rus 1:16

224. Rus

225. Hilchos Isurei Biah 13:14-18

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beis din. He notes that Shlomo HaMelech and Shimshon married non-Jewish women after converting them to Judaism. However the wife of Shimshon, and some of Shlomo's wives, were not sincere in their acceptance of the Torah and Mitzvos, as their later actions showed when they regressed to their original non-Jewish behaviors. The Rambam notes that the verses continue to refer to them as non-Jews for this reason

(A similar statement can be applied to Orpah. She was converted by Kilyon, an individual Jew but not by a beis din, and her motives were suspect. Her later actions demonstrated the lack of sincerity of her original conversion.)

In contrast, the Rambam says if it is clear that a non-Jew is sincere and is converting for the proper reasons, he is accepted after a rigorous examination. He cites the example of the righteous convert Rus and quotes the verse, "and when she (Naomi) saw that she (Rus) was committed to go with her, she ceased speaking with her (and no longer encouraged her to turn back)."²²⁶

When Naomi realized that Rus was committed to accompanying her to Eretz Yisrael and remain as a dedicated, practicing Jewish woman, she preceded to teach Rus other laws of Judaism. At that point, Naomi concretized her conversion.

226. 1:18

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