

Checking Credentials

A concerned Orthodox rabbi has received a certificate of conversion that indicates that the signatories are Conservative rabbis. He requests information on the background and qualifications of the Bet Din.

Often rabbis are presented with Jewish legal documents whose signatories are unknown to them. In order to accept those documents, the careful rabbi will ascertain the facts of the case to which the document attests and will check the qualifications of the signatories, who do not merely certify the facts, but who make operative any change in status indicated by the documents.

This is especially important when it comes to conversion. Rabbi Yossi ben Rav Yehudah (*Bekhorot* 30b) teaches that if a candidate for conversion is informed of the entire Torah yet refuses to accept even one [seemingly trivial Rabbinic] law, he is not a convert. Maimonides (*Laws of Forbidden Intercourse* 14:8) codifies this as law. Moreover, a candidate for conversion who is not informed of all the laws or their respective rewards and punishments is nevertheless, after the fact, considered a convert if the ritual procedures are in order only when, according to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman ben Yitzhaq of Posen (*Responsa Hemdat Shlomo*, Warsaw, 1836, *Yoreh De'ah* no. 29, 30), the candidate unequivocally accepts the binding nature of all the laws. It is therefore the task, indeed the duty, of the rabbis in question to fulfill this dual educational component without equivocation. Thus the commitment, scholarship, observance, and piety of the overseeing rabbis (or laymen) is essential in order for another careful rabbi to accept the conversion. (See Rabbi Moses Isserles' gloss on *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:2 which describes the members of the *Bet Din* as *talmidei hakhamim*.)

These essential qualities stand independent of any movement affiliation. That is to say, affiliation with the Orthodox movement does not necessarily mean that

the *Bet Din* possesses these qualities any more than affiliation with the Conservative movement means that it automatically does not. "Orthodox", "Conservative", "Reform" and "Reconstructionist" are categories that have no halakhic validity and ought not be recognized as such. They are political distinctions. Either a *Bet Din* operates halakhically or it does not. If it does, then its actions are valid. If it does not, then its actions are invalid.

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