

Proselytism as Epistemic Violence

A Jewish approach to the ethics of religious persuasion

Samuel Lebens

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to provide a philosophical justification for the counterintuitive attitude that Judaism seems to have towards proselytism; and (2) to extend the case so as to create a general argument, applicable to all religions, against many forms of proselytism.

Part I

To proselytise is to try to persuade a person, outside of your faith community, to commit to your religion. Jewish law includes no obligation to seek out converts. On three occasions, Naomi told her non-Jewish daughter-in-law, Ruth, to turn back rather than accompany her (Ruth 1:8; 1:11; 1:12). Accordingly, the Rabbis suggest: potential converts should be discouraged three times before they're accepted (Ruth Rabba 2:16).¹ The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to make sense of this Jewish attitude towards proselytism and (2) to advance a general argument that can apply to any religion, against proselytism.

Willard Van Orman Quine said: "If someone firmly believes that eternal salvation and damnation hinge on embracing his particular religion, he would be callous indeed to sit tolerantly back and watch others go to hell" (Quine, 1987, p. 208). Fortunately, Jews believe that righteous Gentiles have a place in heaven (Sanhedrin, 105a). Nevertheless, the committed Jew will contend that Judaism has got important things right, which others have got wrong. So why *not* proselytise? In fact, for any person x , and for any truth p , such that p would be important for x to know, it seems plausible that, upon coming to believe that p , you'd have an *obligation* to try to persuade x that p is true.

How can Judaism justify its opposition to proselytization, let alone its reticence to accept volunteers for conversion?² Before developing my answer to this question, I discount six alternatives.

Answer 1: According to Josephus, certain Hasmonean Kings would force conquered Gentiles to choose between conversion to Judaism or exile.³ When the Rabbis were codifying their traditions, by contrast, the Jewish people no longer had sovereignty over their land. A policy of aggressive proselytism, in

¹ See also: Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 42a – all other Talmudic citations in this paper are from the Babylonian Talmud.

² For some exceptions see Sagi & Zohar (2007, pp. 37-104).

³ See *Antiquities* 13.9.1

such conditions, would have made them greater targets for oppression. Even in Talmudic times, when Yusuf Dhū Nuwās – himself (probably) a convert to Judaism – became king of Himyar in Yemen, he supposedly offered conquered Christians the choice between conversion or death.⁴ Jewish attitudes towards proselytism are, therefore, a function of Jewish power or lack thereof; a matter of expedience rather than principle.

Rejecting answer 1: Nuwās was an outlier in Jewish history, acting without recorded sanction from the Rabbinic movement, from whose orbit he was likely detached.⁵ His example isn't normative. Moreover, in modern times, Jews *have* come into military and political power, through the creation of the State of Israel, *without* an attendant rise in proselytism.

Crucially, answer 1 (even were it true) is the wrong sort of answer. When philosophers ask why Descartes (for example) thought what he did, we don't tend to be interested in his personal psychology. We're interested in the *philosophical* reasons that justify his saying what he said, rather than any other causal story explaining why he said what he said. Along with David Shatz, I'm not looking for "an explanation that is historically accurate" as to why the Rabbi's arrived at their policies vis-à-vis proselytism. Rather, I'm in search of a philosophical *justification* of their policy. We require a "compelling reason not to proselytize" (Shatz, 2017, p. 292).

The Rabbis don't present their position as the result of socio-political factors, much as Descartes doesn't present his positions as the result of his own social and psychological condition. According to the Rabbis, Judaism was *always* opposed to proselytism. The Hasmonean kings were *wrong* to do what they did, as was Nuwās. Philosophical engagement with Rabbinic texts challenges us to seek *philosophical* justification rather than historical explanation.

Answer 2: Perhaps there are no theological facts. Perhaps religions are nothing more than valuable forms of life, without any deep anchor in the way the world objectively *is*. Religious postmodernists might feel less inclined to proselytise. Proselytism dilutes human diversity for no reason other than cultural imperialism.

Rejecting Answer 2: Like its predecessor, answer 2 is the wrong sort of answer. We're not merely looking for *any* philosophical justification that works. We're also looking for one that could plausibly be attributed to the Rabbis themselves. Anachronism might be acceptable, in our final answer, but only to the extent that it makes precise what was likely to have been inchoately in the minds of the Rabbis. So too for philosophical questions about Descartes. We prefer justifications that would likely

⁴ For other examples see (Goldenberg, 1997).

⁵ Some speculate that he was in touch with Mar Zutra III (a Rabbinic figure), but Nuwās is not referred to in any Rabbinic text (Hirschberg, 1946).

have been endorsed by Descartes had they been put to him, over justifications that he would have rejected.

The Rabbis were open to legal and ritual pluralism, but the evidence suggests that they took an absolutist stance regarding their most heartfelt theological convictions; for which many were willing to die. Moreover, the endorsement of postmodernism *needn't* undermine proselytism. There might be non-metaphysical reasons, perhaps pragmatic ones, that anyway render your religion the best option for outsiders, and thereby justify attempts to proselytise.

Answer 3: Daniel Statman (MS) cites psychological studies (most centrally, Alicke 2000 and Alicke et al. 2018) showing that biases and self-aggrandizing agendas are central to the psychology of *blame*. Moreover, negative motivation undermines the reliability of an assertion.

Proselytism always contains a critique of the target's lifestyle (even if only tacitly). The endeavour will therefore tend overwhelming towards inflating the ego of the proselytiser. Perhaps we should conclude:

1. You shouldn't try to proselytise, since you can't do so without manifesting negative motivation.
2. A person is justified in discounting the claims of proselytisers since negative motivation renders them unreliable.

In other work, Statman (Forthcoming) traces the conceptual evolution of the Jewish concept of *tokhacha* (rebuke). The Bible commands Jews to rebuke the sinful conduct of other Jews (Leviticus 19:17). Qualified by the Rabbis, however, the law morphed into something akin to a *pro tanto* obligation *not* to rebuke; in part, because it was deemed improper to rebuke with impure motives. Perhaps the Rabbis foreswore proselytism for the same reason. These things can't generally be done with pure motivation. Consequently, targets of proselytism would generally be advised to disregard proselytisers.

Rejecting answer 3: David Shatz distinguishes between *general* and *direct* proselytization. When Dawkins writes a book proposing atheism, there's a sense in which he's proselytising.⁶ He broadcasts his arguments, for anyone interested. Shatz calls this *general* proselytization (Shatz, 2013, p. 143). If

⁶ Strictly speaking, 'proselytization' refers to *religious* persuasion, rather than anti-religious persuasion.

Dawkins wrote a book specifically dedicated to persuading *me* of his atheism, and camped outside my house, reading it through a megaphone day and night – that would be extremely *direct*.

Judaism doesn't have a problem with proselytism when sufficiently general. There's nothing impious about writing a book, arguing that Judaism is true. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi did so with *The Kuzari*⁷ and Rabbi Saadya Gaon with his *Emunot Ve'Deot*.⁸ But Judaism *would* frown upon Rabbis actively seeking out specific Gentiles to convert.⁹ Answer 3 can well accommodate this distinction. Broadcasting one's views (without targeting a specific audience) needn't be sunken in the same negative motivations plaguing *direct* proselytism.

Having said that, answer 3 can't easily explain our policy of discouraging *self-motivated* candidates. Perhaps we discourage them merely to test their sincerity. But if we cared for their *souls*, shouldn't we accept them even if sincerity is lacking? The Talmud says: it's better to do the right thing for the wrong reason than not to do it at all.¹⁰ Doing the right thing, the Rabbis contend, is liable, in the long run, to reform one's character. Eventually one will come to choose the right thing for the *right* reason. If answer 3 were correct, we should *encourage* candidates for conversion, if they volunteered of their own accord. But we don't.

Moreover, it's unreasonable to place a fear of (the mere possibility) of ill-will over the callousness of refusing to proselytise. Rabbinic fear of impure motives would end up keeping multitudes of people away from infinitely valuable truths. Answer 3 implies that the Rabbis got their priorities wrong.

Answer 4: If conversion to religion R was the only way to avoid hellfire, then proselytism should be an obligation on believers of R. But if conversion isn't merely *unnecessary* but could even make a person's posthumous situation *worse* – if there are, say, punishments reserved only for sinful members of R – then you can begin to see why conversion to R might be discouraged.

Witness the Rabbinic warning to prospective converts:

Be aware that before you came to this status [and converted], had you eaten forbidden fat, you would not be punished by *karet* [a severe Divine punishment]; had you profaned the Sabbath, you would not be punished by stoning [since these laws don't apply to Gentiles]. But now, [once you convert, if] you have eaten forbidden fat you [will be]

⁷ Even though it's about a fictional attempt at *direct* proselytism, the book counts as *general* proselytism.

⁸ The book *could* convince its readers of the truth of Judaism.

⁹ Even the fictional Rabbi in *The Kuzari* only engaged the king when *invited* to do so.

¹⁰ See Pesachim, 50b.

punished by *karet*, [and if] you have profaned the Sabbath, you [will be liable to be] punished by stoning.

(Yevamot 47a)

Gentiles might be better off as Gentiles.

Rejecting Answer 4: Judaism doesn't teach that Gentiles are automatically *better-off* than Jews in the afterlife. It teaches that Jews face certain risks not faced by Gentiles. But according to Judaism, being Jewish is a tremendous privilege, despite the risks. The Rabbis describe conversion as coming "to take shelter beneath the wings of the Divine presence" (Yevamot 48b). It would be extremely paternalistic for us to decide unilaterally, on behalf of Gentiles, that they'd be better off without this great privilege. Instead, we should let people decide for themselves, once they've been convinced of its truth, whether they want to convert or remain as Gentiles. Either way, they'd be better off knowing these immeasurably valuable truths.

Answer 5: Perhaps Rabbinic attitudes to proselytism are motivated not by concern for Gentiles, but concern for Jews. The Rabbis might contend that there are too many non-observant Jews. To bring new members in, from the outside, is thus to take a risk that could backfire on the community, creating even more widespread non-observance. The Talmud quotes Rabbi Chelbo (Yevamot 47b), who said, "Converts are as harmful to the Jewish people as a leprous scab." Rabbi Shimon Yitzchaki (*loc. cit.*)¹¹ explains this statement in terms of the fear that (1) converts may revert to their pre-conversion ways; (2) their post-back-sliding behaviour might rub off upon the Jewish people at large; and (3) even without back-sliding, native Jews may come to rely upon the misunderstandings that poorly educated converts are liable to have, and spread, regarding Jewish law.

Rejecting Answer 5: Granted: Rabbi Chelbo had a negative attitude towards converts. But that attitude was not as wide a Rabbinic consensus as the aversion to proselytism was. Indeed, some Rabbis thought that the absorption of righteous converts was so crucial that it serves as the reason for the dispersion of the Jews (Pesachim 87b). Moreover, the central weekday prayer of Jewish liturgy places righteous converts on a pedestal, pleading with God to include the rest of us in their lot.¹²

It's not even a consensus among Talmudic commentaries that Rabbi Chelbo's words were supposed to reflect badly upon *converts*. The Tosafists cite the opinion of Rabbi Abraham, himself a convert, who explained Rabbi Chelbo's words as follows: "Since converts are well versed in the commandments [having voluntarily assumed their authority], and since they are very meticulous in their observance,

¹¹ Rabbi Yitzchaki is more widely known as Rashi.

¹² See the thirteenth benediction of the *Amida* prayer.

they are harmful to native Jews, like a scab. For in the midst [of the scrupulous observance of converts], the Holy One, blessed be He, recalls the sins of native Jews [made more salient by the scrupulous observance of converts] when [native Jews] are not doing His will.”¹³ Ironically, they even offer, in explanation of Rabbi Chelbo’s statement, the view that accepting converts into our midst might cause us to stumble in the sin of not loving the convert, and that’s why we’re better off without them in our midst!¹⁴

Accordingly, answer 5 fails for two reasons. First: it explains a widespread policy in terms of a less widespread attitude. Second: although concern for the welfare of the Jewish people is legitimate, it hardly seems fair for that concern to hold us back from sharing infinitely valuable information with the world.

If the concern is that converts might backslide into their pre-conversion ways, then the right thing to do would be to spread the word widely, but then to exercise caution, once the truth has been spread, regarding who should be allowed to *convert*. Elite universities adopt discerning admissions policies. That needn’t entail that they keep their existence and achievements a secret from the masses, thereby preventing social mobility.

If the concern is that converts, insufficiently educated in Jewish law, are liable to spread their misconceptions among native Jews, the right response isn’t to punish prospective converts by refraining from proselytism. The right response is to improve the education of converts and native Jews alike.

If the concern is that converts are going to be so excellent in their Judaism that they will make the rest of us look bad, or bring out our nascent xenophobia, it seems particularly egregious to let such concerns damage the prospects of potential converts, rather than using the concern to inspire the rest of the Jewish people to improve themselves.

Answer 6: Perhaps the proselytiser fails to “do unto others as she would have done unto her.” Mormon missionaries, for example, probably don’t relish the prospect of opening their doors to Jehovah’s Witnesses. Perhaps this constitutes an ethical double standard. Why should they expect people to listen to *them* when they don’t listen to others?

Rejecting Answer 6: Who’s to say that a missionary *won’t* be willing to open their door to proselytisers from other faiths? They may see it as an opportunity to hone their skills in apologetics. Moreover, even if the missionary *isn’t* open to the arguments of others, the problem isn’t with proselytism *per*

¹³ See Tosafot, 70b, s.v. קשים גרים

¹⁴ Ibid.

se (Shatz 2013, p. 168-169). As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points out, “To be defeated by the truth is to experience the one defeat that is also a victory” (1991, p. xx). Missionaries should be more open minded, but that’s not an argument against proselytism.

I suggest that we will only arrive at a working philosophical justification of Rabbinic attitudes towards proselytism in the context of a more general question. Namely: Rabbinic attitudes to conversion in general.

Part II

The Hebrew Bible doesn’t contain any obvious descriptions of religious conversion. There is the case of Naaman, in II Kings (Chapter 5); a non-Jew, miraculously cured of leprosy by Elisha. When cured, he proclaims, “There is no god in the whole world except in Israel.” But Naaman returns to his homeland. He doesn’t join the Jewish people. He isn’t a convert. To situate the laws of conversion in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbis turn instead to the book of Ruth.

The key verses, for our purposes, in the book of Ruth, read as follows:

But Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her.

(Ruth 1:16-18)

Compare this to the conversion of Paul to Christianity. Paul sees a heavenly light flashing around him. He hears the voice of Jesus. He’s stricken blind. After three days of fasting, a disciple of Jesus had a vision instructing him to heal Paul, at which point “something like scales fell from Paul’s eyes, and he could see again” (Acts 9:18).

Scales don’t fall from Ruth’s eyes. She has no epiphany. Her speech to Naomi *does* talk about God, but only at the end. Her primary interest was staying with Naomi, no matter what God may do to her. If Ruth is the Biblical archetype of conversion, then it seems that the Hebrew Bible has a very different conception of conversion than the Christian Bible. This suspicion is reinforced when we look at the discussion between Moses and his non-Jewish father-in-law, Hobab:

Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the LORD has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the LORD has promised to be generous to Israel."

"I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."

He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide. So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the LORD grants us."

(Numbers 10:29-32)

In the Rabbinic imagination, Hobab is often regarded as a convert to Judaism. Moses is trying to convince him to convert. He might have said, "God recently freed us from bondage. He split the sea and revealed His law to us at Mount Sinai. Haven't you noticed that food drops down from heaven to sustain us in the wilderness? Our religion is true. Join us." But in the *actual* speech, God is only mentioned to assure Hobab that the Jews will have bounty to share. Why not focus on theology when proselytising?

Ruth says: 'Do not urge me to leave you...'. Moses beseeches Hobab: 'Please do not leave us.' Both narratives turn around the word 'to leave' (in Hebrew, *בָּרַח*). Moreover, Isaiah foresaw a day in which many Gentiles would convert. They would, he said (Isaiah 14:1), "cleave to the House of Jacob." The central question for Jewish conversion isn't to believe or not to believe; but whether to *leave* or to *cleave* to the House of Jacob.

God isn't *entirely* absent from Ruth's speech. Since the Rabbis chose to make it a key source for the laws of Jewish conversion, you might expect them to focus on that, and to read *more* theological commitment *into* her speech. But they don't. They imagine Ruth's monologue as a dialogue. Naomi says:

"My daughter, Jewish women don't go to the theatres and circuses of the Gentiles."

Ruth said, "Where you go, I will go."

Naomi said, "My daughter, Jewish women don't live in a house without a *mezuzah*."

Ruth said, "Where you lodge, I will lodge."

(Ruth Rabba 2:22)

If Naomi will be scrupulous, then Ruth will be too. But what if Naomi *isn't* scrupulous? The Midrash doesn't say. It continues:

[Ruth's words:] "Your people shall be my people," refers to [Ruth accepting the] warning[s] and punishment[s that come along with being Jewish], and [her words,] "Your God shall be my God," refers to [Ruth's commitment to] the rest of the commandments.

In the Talmudic account of the same dialogue (Yevamot, 47b), Naomi warns Ruth that "Idolatrous worship is forbidden to us." Ruth responds, "Your God is my God." Accordingly: all that she *really* meant when she accepted God was that she rejected *other* gods.

The Rabbis base the laws of conversion (in part) upon the case of Ruth, and yet they squeeze every hint of religiosity *out* of her words. Moreover, they teach that once a person demonstrates deep commitment to the Jewish people, they only need a very cursory introduction to Jewish law and thought before we convert them (Ibid.).

How should we justify the bizarrely anti-theological flavour of conversion to Judaism? Perhaps it stems from an underlying conception that the Jewish identity is not a *religious* but a national one, or from a conception of religion that places little importance on *belief*. I find these justifications implausible. We may *be* a nation, but conversion is governed by *religious* law. The Rabbis may have spoken more about practice than belief, but this doesn't mean that belief wasn't important to them.

Even if inchoately, I contend that the Rabbis were committed to the following principle: to incubate and sustain the right theological beliefs, you must be epistemically rooted in the right *community*. Part III develops the notion of epistemic roots and completes our explanation of the Rabbinic conception of conversion.

Part III¹⁵

We tend to develop biases in favour of friends and loved ones.¹⁶ Some argue that this is what it means *to be* a friend.¹⁷ Even if friendship makes no such demand in *theory*, it certainly tends to have this effect in *practice*. You may argue that friends are *not* biased. You don't think better of your friends than I *would*, if only I knew them as you *do*. But if you judge your friends more favourably than a stranger and you *would* have judged that stranger differently had he been your friend, and since you can't befriend everybody in the world, it's difficult to escape the implication that friendships *are* skewing your reasoning, imposing unwarranted differentiation upon the general population. It's unrealistic to hope that we'll overcome this bias. Should we, then, give up on having friends?

¹⁵ This section draws heavily from my (Lebens, 2020a).

¹⁶ See, e.g., (Brown, 1986) and (Murray & Holmes, 1993; 1997)

¹⁷ See, e.g., (Keller, 2004) and (Stroud, 2006).

Some argue that epistemic notions, such as warrant and justification, are sensitive to pragmatic concerns. The higher the stakes, the more evidence required.¹⁸ Your biases in favour of your friends are thereby *justified* by the high stakes you have in sustaining your friendships. But I'd rather not accept that pragmatic concerns encroach into epistemology. I prefer to distinguish between two forms of rationality. '*Epistemic* rationality' is about forming beliefs in ways that respect the evidence. '*Practical* rationality' is about acting in ways that are, so far as you can tell, most likely to secure your personal goals and desires.

If you present me with compelling evidence that my wife is plotting to kill me, but not enough to justify certainty, it might be practically rational for me to *refuse* to believe it. I grant that I can't *literally* refuse. I can't directly control what I believe. But because of my love for my wife, an attachment that was practically rational for me to foster, I'm going to find it *difficult* to believe hideous claims about her. You'll need to give me *more* evidence; perhaps more than epistemic rationality demands, but only because of the consequences of my attachment to my wife; an attachment sanctioned by *practical* rationality.

I call a thought 'unthinkable' for you if you cannot bring yourself to factor it into your practical reasoning. You might be waiting for a heart transplant for your loved one. You *know* that one way to save them would be to find a healthy match and drug them to cause a brain-stem death, giving the doctors time to salvage the heart for your beloved. This strategy might work, but it's *unthinkable*, and rightly so!¹⁹

To be an ethical person makes some things unthinkable. To love somebody makes some things unthinkable. To be a committed member of a community will likewise make some things unthinkable. We could call your inability to think certain things, in these contexts, a function of your "epistemic rootedness".²⁰

¹⁸ See (Fantl & McGrath, 2002) and (Stanley & Hawthorne, 2008) for slightly different accounts of an epistemology that bends to pragmatic concerns. I'm more sympathetic to those who allow pragmatic effects to influence what I *can* believe, rather than in terms of what I'm *justified* in believing. Accordingly, pragmatics impacts the philosophy of mind, rather than epistemology (Weatherston, 2005).

¹⁹ For important discussions about unthinkable and moral incapacity see (Frankfurt, 1988; 1998; Williams, 1973, pp. 92-93; 1995)

²⁰ See (Hazlett, 2016) for a similar notion: "intellectual loyalty." Perhaps "epistemic rootedness" is a bad name for this phenomenon given the extent to which it is grounded in considerations of practical rationality. But Andrew Moon put it to me that sometimes the phenomenon I call rootedness *can* offer epistemic reasons for a certain sort of conservatism. Membership in a community can inoculate a person against evidence that seems counter to the values or beliefs of that community. Sometimes such inoculation is warranted (Begbe, Forthcoming). Rootedness also gives rise to an epistemic bubble – to use the terminology of C. Thi Nguyen (2020). As Nguyen makes clear, membership in an epistemic bubble – as opposed to an echo-chamber – needn't constitute an epistemic vice. In such cases, your stream of evidence will be filtered by your bubble, but you will

Being epistemically rooted needn't make a person *culpably* closed-minded. If you provide me with an overwhelming amount of evidence that my wife is plotting to kill me, that *will* impact my affinity for her. It will uproot me. Once the relationship is undermined, what was once unthinkable (that she's homicidal) might become eminently thinkable. But, short of *overwhelming* evidence, the fact that her plotting to kill me is unthinkable to me is no indictment on my rationality. I was acting rationally when I put down these roots.²¹

Danny Statman (in correspondence) objects:

Climbing out of the epistemic cave in which we find ourselves is always very hard. Nonetheless... most philosophers assume that it is possible; that we can step back from our dearest beliefs ... and appreciate the force of arguments... So, although in some sense it is "unthinkable" for those down in the cave that what they see and hear is not the real world, with a lot of effort and with appropriate guidance they can come to see the truth.

Surely the point of philosophy is to free the masses from the cave. Epistemic rootedness cannot function as a free pass to *remain* there.

I respond: we must distinguish between the philosophy seminar room and the outside world. In the seminar room, all intellectual options should be on the table. Solipsism is a good example. In the philosophy seminar room, solipsism should be seriously entertained. In fact, it's not easy to construct decisive arguments *against* solipsism. But *outside* the seminar room, I don't so much as *consider* the possibility that I'm the only real person affected by my actions.

If, in the seminar room, I come across *overwhelming* reason to adopt a theory that I wouldn't have considered outside, then I *must* take that theory back with me into the world at large. If I didn't, then my close-mindedness would become culpable. But, so long as: (1) we're all encouraged to spend some time (so to speak) in the philosophy seminar room; (2) we're willing to listen to other opinions and to gather contrary evidence while there; and (3) our rootedness has a threshold beyond which the evidence *would* make inroads and *compel* us to bring new beliefs from the seminar room into our outside lives – we can't say that fidelity to epistemic roots is straightforwardly (or irredeemably, or culpably) closed-minded.

Imagine an agnostic Jew, deeply integrated into the Jewish community. She sometimes attends synagogue, for cultural reasons. She had a Jewish wedding to a spouse with a similar identity to her.

not be epistemically compromised by that fact. Also relevant to the epistemic effects of membership in a community of believers is (Moon, 2021).

²¹ So long as we concentrate on practical rationality rather than epistemic rationality. In these circumstances, practical rationality anyway seems to trump epistemic rationality.

They have children to whom they pass on their identity. If what we've said so far is true, then: despite her lack of belief in Judaism, belief in *other* religions will be unthinkable to her. In the terminology of William James (1979, p. 14), those other religions are not, for her, *live options*. To adopt another religion would sever her connection to her community, history, and family. It's not that she's culpably closed-minded. She spends time, so to speak, in the philosophy seminar room. She'd just need an awful lot of evidence to make the unthinkable thinkable.

If you gather a sense of belonging from your membership of the Ku Klux Klan, then you're open to criticism. The organising principles of your community are immoral. Membership might give you things that you value. Your membership might be practically rational for you – given your preferences. But *we're* still right to criticise you. Your lifestyle might maximise your expected utility, given your preferences. Having immoral preferences doesn't render you *irrational*. Rather, I would call you 'unreasonable.' The reasons that motivate your decisions *shouldn't* function as reasons.

Is our agnostic Jew, like the member of an immoral organisation, being *unreasonable* for having a commitment to her community? You might argue that *all* communal identities are bad. The proud Jew might not neglect her duties to non-Jews, but to the extent that her identity causes her to go the extra mile for other *Jews*, then isn't it unethical? All people deserve equal consideration. If communal identities lead us to treat *members* differently from *outsiders*, shouldn't we write off *all* forms of communal identity? Ethics demands impartiality.

But there's a problem with wholly impartial systems of ethics. As soon as you have a single deep attachment to a single friend, you run the risk of finding yourself in conflict with the demands of an impartial ethical system. And yet, imagine a world with no deep attachments. Bernard Williams writes:

There will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself. Life has to have substance if anything is to have sense, including adherence to the impartial system...

(Williams, 1976, p. 215)

When conflicts emerge between the demands of an impartial ethical system and a person's "*ground projects*" (as Williams calls them), the impartial system cannot always win. If communal belonging helps to form a person's *identity* – an identity that gives her life meaning and allows her to function as a citizen of the world, and to strive towards ethical conduct – then to criticise her for wanting to belong to some community or other is, ultimately, to threaten her ability to act in the world at all.

We *could* criticise our agnostic Jew if her belonging to her community came at the expense of respecting her general obligations to humanity (that would render her unreasonable). But a Jewish

identity doesn't have to come at that cost. We could criticise her if her communal identity caused her to ignore *overwhelming* evidence for other religions (for then she would be culpably closed-minded). But she doesn't.

Nobody can criticise her for wanting to belong to a community, and to forge the sorts of connections of mutual partiality that communal membership fosters. This is an inherently reasonable human desire. She's not to be blamed for having roots.

A rational person outside of any religious community should treat the evidence for all religions equally. A rational person rooted *within* a religious community, by contrast, need *not* treat the evidence for every religion equally. We cannot straightforwardly criticise her for this. For her, every religion other than the religion (or religions) embraced by her community will be *unthinkable*. For *her* religion, she needs evidence. For *other* religions, she requires *overwhelming* evidence.

Had Ruth experienced an epiphany, Naomi might have been sceptical. One day she has a mystical vision driving her towards Judaism; perhaps the next day she'll have a different vision pushing her in a different direction. Instead, Ruth's primary commitment was to *Naomi* and to her *people*.²² In the long term, this made it more likely that if and when Ruth *did* embrace the theology of Judaism, she'd do so with a steadfast resilience. If a person is epistemically rooted in their religious community, then their commitment to that religion is likely to be more *stable*. Other religions will become unthinkable.

Some imagine that Hobab eventually converts. Some imagine that he doesn't. The Torah leaves it ambiguous. In one Midrash, he responds to Moses:

There are some who have a land, but no possessions; others who have possessions, but no family. But I have a land, possessions, and family, and I was a judge in my land. If I will not return because of my land, I will go because of my possessions; and if I will not go because of my possessions, I will go because of my family.

(Sifrei Barmidbar §79)

Ruth's connection to Naomi eclipsed everything else in her life. She was therefore able to convert. Hobab, according to this Midrash, was too firmly rooted in foreign soil. This isn't a criticism of Hobab. He could certainly continue blamelessly to be a righteous monotheist with roots in another

²² Eleonore Stump suggested the following to me. It wasn't that God was of secondary interest to Ruth, but that Naomi was Ruth's gateway, so to speak, to God. Ruth recognised that she had come to know God through Naomi. Though I accept that a person can come to have a relationship with God in this way, I doubt the Rabbis would have sympathised with this reading of the story. Naomi, her husband, and her two sons, are harshly criticised for having left Israel in a time of famine. They were a wealthy elite. Their exodus left the masses abandoned and disheartened (Baba Batra 91a). Accordingly, Naomi isn't the optime of a righteous servant of God in Rabbinic eyes. Rather, Ruth redeems Naomi as much as Naomi redeems Ruth.

community, but so long as he was rooted elsewhere, he couldn't become a *Jew*. By contrast, so long as Ruth was rooted in the community, her religious commitment needn't concern us too much since it is likely to flourish given her new roots. This, I think, goes a long way towards a philosophical justification of Rabbinic attitudes towards conversion.²³ How does this impact upon Rabbinic policies towards proselytism?

Part IV

Your affiliation to a religion might be based (at least in part) upon evidence, but it will almost certainly be based upon lots more than that; on all sorts of personal details: family history, communal belonging, your sense of identity, etc. Epistemic roots tend to be deeply implicated in religious commitment. Shatz notes that this seems to be “different in the sciences and politics, even though it may [sometimes] be granted in those domains, too” (Shatz, 2013, pp. 172-173). Change a person's favoured interpretation of quantum mechanics, and you're unlikely to devastate their social standing, communal belonging, and sense of self. Changing a person's *religion* can often be a much more dangerous endeavour.

Joining a faith group is sometimes bound to strain pre-existing bonds of family, friendship, and community. There is a sense in which something stands to be *broken*. Some sort of social fabric stands to be ripped asunder. This is the sense in which proselytism can be characterised as *violent*. Martin Marty writes:

The fabric of social relations is gossamer, easily pulled at and torn. Bombarded from all sides by advertisers, public relations experts, strangers, and seducers, people have few psychic defenses that will help them keep to boundaries and uphold traditions. The proselytiser violates boundaries and disrupts traditions... Be caught off guard, and, whether or not one succumbs, there is a challenge to personal and social identity.

(Marty, 1999, p. 2)

Just as physical violence is sometimes *appropriate*, so too, the proselytiser might argue, is epistemic violence. If the stakes are high enough – if eternal salvation is the reward for being right, and eternal damnation the punishment for being wrong – we can recognise that proselytism damages something

²³ In the book of Ezra, foreign wives of Israelites are sent away (10:3). Rather than coming to be rooted in the culture of their husbands, these wives, it would seem, at this point in history, were an obstacle to the reestablishment of the sort of Jewish community that best incubates stable Jewish belief.

valuable when it tears at the fabric of social relations but insist that the damage would be worth it. Having said that, perhaps we've done enough to justify *Rabbinic* eschewal of proselytism.

The Hebrew Bible's presentation of conversion, read through the prism of Rabbinic interpretation, encodes an insight about the relationship between stable religious belief and epistemic roots. That insight can justify Rabbinic policies regarding proselytism better than the six attempted explanations discounted in part I. Proselytism often severs a person's epistemic roots. That constitutes a sort of violence. According to Judaism, salvation and damnation are not necessarily at stake. Accordingly, the epistemic violence of proselytism may be enough to render it immoral. The theological ignorance and errors of the Gentile are (often) the lesser evil when compared to the social and psychological dislocation that their conversion would engender for them.

Consider how well this explanation accounts for the Rabbinic data:

- We have no obligation to convince non-Jewish ethical monotheists of the truth of Judaism because the harm done in uprooting such a person isn't worth the expected gain.²⁴
- We will accept people who *volunteer* to convert to Judaism so long as we are convinced that they're really committed to membership in the Jewish community.²⁵ In such a case, the person is likely uprooted already. Why else would they volunteer to convert?
- We are less concerned about the religious beliefs of a prospective convert than their sense of communal commitment, not because we don't care about religious belief but because we take religious belief to be nourished and rendered stable by rootedness in a community.

You might think that our explanation fails to do justice to Rabbinic attitudes to non-observant *Jews*. We might not send missionaries out to the Gentiles, but Rabbinic law *does* contain a *pro tanto* obligation to convince native Jews to commit to their Jewish religion. But note: Jewish outreach to non-observant *Jews*, in contrast to proselytism, doesn't generally require much uprooting (especially if done with sensitivity); and thus, the expected net-gain is significant. Note also that any such obligation admits of exceptions, where the cost of the attempt *is* liable to be higher than the expected gain.

One exception is when the attempt at outreach towards non-observant Jews will likely cause resentment and therefore backfire. In such circumstances, it is best to refrain. In the words of the

²⁴ At this point, some of the six answers dismissed in Part I can be rehabilitated, not as the central philosophical justification for Rabbinic attitudes to proselytism, but as additional considerations.

²⁵ See Yevamot 47a

Talmud (Beitza 30a): “Leave the Jews alone. Better that they be unintentional sinners and not [be transformed, through our ill-fated attempts at outreach, into] intentional sinners!”

The exceptions likely go further. Consider the case of Simon. He believes in Judaism but is convinced (on good grounds) that he was born a Gentile. He decides to remain a Gentile with his belief that Judaism is true, in the knowledge that Judaism doesn’t require Gentiles to convert. He marries a devout Christian woman. They love one another deeply. She wishes he would believe in Jesus, but they agree to disagree. Together, they raise a family of seven children who also become devout Christians. If I were to discover that Simon was actually a native Jew, would I have an obligation to tell him?

In this instance, I wouldn’t be transforming an unintentional sinner into an intentional one. On the contrary, I can be quite confident that he would strive to observe Jewish law as soon as he becomes aware that he’s a Jew. And yet, he would have to separate from his wife, since a Jew is not allowed to be married to a non-Jew, according to Jewish law. Untold harm would accrue to his children and their family life. He *would* become an observant Jew, but at what cost? He would likely be torn, bitter, and profoundly psychologically damaged. Interestingly, it seems to me that there’s *room* to say that Jewish law would forbid (or at least discourage) me from telling Simon about his identity.²⁶ This ruling is, once again, consistent with the underlying Rabbinic recognition of the harm of epistemic violence.

There is a *pro tanto* obligation to inform people of important truths, but only when the damage of so doing doesn’t outweigh the good. Moreover, we generally have an obligation to convince people to live *ethical* lives. But to achieve that end, we needn’t convert them to Judaism. Indeed, the Rabbis do

²⁶ As a matter of *Ashkenazi* law, Rabbi Moshe Isserlis rules that one shouldn’t intercede to prevent unintentional sins if doing so would conflict with ethical concern for the people involved (*Yoreh Deah* §303). This is particularly pertinent in the case of Simon, since many of his transgressions might be considered “*mitasek*” – which is one level *less* severe than an unintentional sin. An action is considered *mitasek* when (for one reason or another) Jewish law won’t attribute the action to the agent at all.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger (Responsum §8) wouldn’t categorise Simon’s unintentional transgressions as *mitasek*, but he concedes that Rabbi Yaakov Loberbaum would, as would Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik and his grandson, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (see Krumbein, 1985-1986).

An unintentional sinner holds some degree of culpability for his or her ignorance. Somebody who is *mitasek*, like Simon (epistemically uprooted from his Jewish identity), by contrast, isn’t culpable for his ignorance. This total lack of culpability is what severs the agent from his actions (see *Ohr Sameach*, on the Mishne Torah, Laws of Shabbat 1:8).

Even if some of Simon’s transgressions cannot be considered *mitasek* (for technical reasons, such as the pleasure he receives from unkosher food restoring the link between agent and action), they can certainly be considered *unintentional* (in that he had no intention to sin). Accordingly, *Ashkenazi* law seems to accept that ethical considerations make it *improper* to correct Simon’s behaviour (his sins aren’t intentional, many are even *mitasek*, so ethical concerns should take precedence). For an explanation of these sources see (Krumbein, 1985-1986). Thanks to Aaron Segal for leading me to Rabbi Krumbein’s article. In correspondence, Rabbi Chanoch Waxman rightly points out how controversial it would be to apply Rabbi Isserlis’s ruling, not to isolated transgressions, but to a person’s entire lifestyle. I concede that it would be controversial. I merely contend that there is room for a such a ruling, and that the ruling coheres well with the general picture of this paper.

seem to recognise an obligation to persuade Gentiles of *monotheism*, but that might be justified by the (admittedly controversial) claim that there's an *overwhelming* degree of evidence for the truth of a generic *monotheism* – or by the (equally controversial) claim that ethical monotheism constitutes some sort of ethical advance beyond ethical atheism. Moreover, convincing people to commit to ethical monotheism without adopting any particular *religion* often won't come at the cost of their being *uprooted* (in which case, overwhelming evidence won't be called for).

In the final section, I argue that non-Jewish religions, even by their own lights, should also eschew proselytism (in many cases).

Part V

If a person's epistemic rootedness is a function of *unobjectionable* and even *praiseworthy* attitudes, then it seems that she is within her rights to demand overwhelming evidence before she converts. Now, consider the following assumption, which seems to be an *a priori* truth:

- (A) No good and reasonable God could possibly condition salvation upon a person doing or believing that which is practically irrational for them to do or believe, so long as they're not to blame for being in a state that renders that action or belief irrational.

If you recognise that the communal and family connections rooting a person against conversion are blameless (and even *valuable*), then you *shouldn't* think that that person's salvation requires their conversion.

Moreover, if a person won't be damned to hell, and if you recognise that proselytization will come at the cost of some sort of epistemic violence, or perhaps, worse, if you fail to persuade them, you may have harmed their situation in the afterlife – transforming unwitting transgression into informed sin – you shouldn't even *try* to persuade such people to convert. Given (A), there's no reason to think that the gain will be worth the cost.

A proselytiser might cite scriptural reasons to disregard (A), but to the extent that (A) is an *a priori* truth, and to the extent that scripture is to be interpreted in the light of *reason*, I would suggest that scriptural challenges should be overcome. If someone says that a good and reasonable God *demand*s conversion from all people, even when it's neither rational nor reasonable for that person to do so, you should tell them that that makes no sense. If their religion tells them otherwise, you should tell them to go back and reinterpret their sources.

Is (A) really an *a priori* truth? To many, it seems to be. Moses Mendelssohn called the thought “ridiculous” that those who have guided “people to virtue in this life” should be “damned in the next one” for having had the wrong religion (Mendelssohn, 2017, p. 288). Likewise, Rabbi Israel Lipshitz (1782-1860) argued that, even had there not been sources to back it up, it stands to reason that certain Gentiles would go to heaven. He mentions Edward Jenner, who created the smallpox vaccine; Francis Drake, who brought the potato to Europe, helping to avert famine; and Johannes Guttenberg, who invented the printing press. He continues:

Many did not receive reward in this world, such as the pious one [Johann] Reuchlin, who endangered his own life to prevent the burning of the Talmud. And could one possibly think that these great benefactors will not be recompensed in the next world after death – is it not the case that God does not withhold the reward from any creature?²⁷

(A) hasn’t always seemed as obvious to members of other religions, as it did to certain Jewish thinkers. But once you realise, as the Rabbis did, that people have good reason to be connected to communities, cultures, and histories, and that these connections can render foreign religions unthinkable, one can more easily see one’s way to the truth of (A).

There may *sometimes* be an obligation to proselytise, but only in situations in which doing so will not interfere with a person’s blameless rootedness, or in cases where the proselytiser has access to overwhelming evidence.²⁸ But there will often be situations in which to proselytise with anything less than overwhelming evidence would be immoral.²⁹

The only way out would be to argue that the cultural and familial ties of people beyond *your* religious community are always *worthless* or *unreasonable* such that God could condemn them for having such roots. That, I think, would be a tall order.³⁰

²⁷ *Tiferet Yisrael* on Avot 3:14 (Boaz §1).

²⁸ Some people claim to have evidence that *is* objectively overwhelming for the truth of their religion (see e.g., Swinburne, 2003). I doubt that they’re right (for my own rebuttal of Swinburne’s argument, see Lebens 2020b, pp. 199-204).

²⁹ Any argument against proselytization in this paper should be taken as directed only to direct cases and not to general cases.

³⁰ Too many have helped me to shape this paper to name individually, including (Zoom) audiences at the University of Leeds, the University of Haifa, a virtual workshop organised by Eleonore Stump, and the inaugural conference of the Princeton Project in Philosophy and Religion. Each event helped me greatly. Thanks to their organisers and participants. Thanks to those who wrote detailed comments on earlier drafts: Cole Aaronson, Lior Levy, Ariel Meirav, David Shatz, Saul Smilansky, Danny Statman, and Dean Zimmerman. Thanks also to Naftali Goldberg, Aaron Segal, Chanoch Waxman, and Fraser MacBride.

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