
The Conversion of “Rabbi Samson”¹

By Joseph H. Prouser

SHE’EILAH: What is the religious status of Samson Mugombe, a “candidate” for conversion?

TESHUVAH:

I. Background: The Abayudaya of Uganda

In 1919, Semei Kakungulu, a Ugandan military hero, political leader, and visionary religious seeker and pioneer, concluded from his study of the Bible² that Judaism represented divine truth, that Jews are God’s Chosen People, and that he was determined to join the Jewish People and faithfully to uphold our religious tradition. At age fifty, he signified his new religious convictions by circumcising himself and immersing in a nearby river, declaring himself “Abayudaya” – “of the Jewish People” – in the Luganda language.

Many of Kakungulu’s community and admirers followed his example, observing the Sabbath, Dietary Laws, Circumcision, Family Purity, and Festivals to the best of their knowledge, ability, and information, and constructing synagogues³ for public worship. At the community’s peak in the mid-twentieth century, the Abayudaya numbered 3,000. The community was depleted through persecution and the criminalizing of Jewish practice under the regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s.⁴ The Abayudaya now number around 600.⁵ *Shabbat* and *Kashrut* observance remain virtually universal, and are articulately and passionately described by community members young and old. The Abayudaya have believed for generations that they are Jews and have distinguished themselves as devout practitioners of Judaism. They have maintained a lofty level of piety despite desperate poverty, persecution and imprisonment, isolation from the Jewish world, and a general lack of religious resources and information. For decades, they have dreamed of being recognized as part of *Klal Yisrael* and of establishing ties of religious principle and peoplehood with world Jewry.

II. The Bet Din

To this end, in February 2002, four Rabbinical Assembly colleagues, Rabbis Scott Glass, Howard Gorin, Joseph Prouser, and Andrew Sacks travelled together⁶ as a *Bet Din* to Mbale, Uganda, at the invitation of the religious leader of the Abayudaya community. The spiritual leader, Gershom Sizomu,⁷ had previously completed conversion to Judaism while in the United States, under the supervision of Rabbi Gorin. Sizomu asked that Rabbi Gorin form a *Bet Din* to oversee the conversion of other

members of the Abayudaya community. While in Uganda, the *Bet Din* individually interviewed over 300 aspiring *gerim*, the vast majority of whom were accepted and, indeed, found already to be leading exemplary lives of Jewish faith and piety, including but not limited to *Shmirat Shabbat* and *Kashrut*. The male candidates, all of whom had already been ritually circumcised, underwent *hatafat dam brit*, conducted by Rabbi Sacks and by Mr. Sizomu, who had also been trained as a *mohel*. All candidates accepted by the *Bet Din* subsequently immersed in a nearby river, or in the community's *mikveh* – built under the guidance of a Jew visiting Uganda from Palestine in the 1920s – and reconfirmed as *kosher* by a visiting Orthodox authority, Rabbi Hershel Worch, in the late 1990s. The *mikveh*, constructed outdoors and surrounded by banana groves and sugar cane fields, is itself testimony to the extraordinary religious achievements of the Abayudaya.

The *Bet Din* prepared appropriate documents attesting to the religious status of all who completed the conversion process. It was generally unnecessary for the *Bet Din* to select Hebrew names for the Abayudaya, as it has long been their practice to bestow names of Biblical origin on their children.⁸ Indeed, while Joseph is, while anglicized, the name of a prominent Biblical personage, the Abayudaya were somewhat scandalized to discover members of the *Bet Din* named Scott, Howard, and Andy!! They asked why we Americans, living in such prosperity and freedom, were "ashamed" of our Jewish identity and resorted to secular nomenclature!!

Two young members of the Abayudaya community represent exceptions to the general pattern of using Biblical names, as well. Tarfon Kamyá's given name indicates the Abayudaya's growing familiarity with Rabbinic literature. Ten-year-old Rabin Omer was born during the administration of the late Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzchak Rabin, during the days of *Sefirah* between *Pesah* and *Shavuot*. His non-Biblical name betokens the Abayudaya's love for the Land and State of Israel, while simultaneously expressing the community's sensitivity to the rhythms of the Jewish religious calendar.

The persistent piety of the Abayudaya, their love of God and their spirit of *Simhah Shel Mitzvah*, present an inspiring tribute to the beauty and wisdom of Judaism...but also to the effective and tenacious religious leadership of a series of indigenous spiritual guides and mentors: the successors of Semei Kakungulu.

III. The Case of Samson Mugombe

Samson Mugombe, now age 93, is the last living original disciple of Semei Kakungulu, who, intending to fulfill Biblical decree, circumcised his then teenage student and immersed him in the *mikveh* constructed for that purpose in the 1920s. Subsequently, for many years, Samson served as spiritual leader of the Abayudaya at the height of its membership. He is revered by the community to this day and known to them as "Rabbi Samson." This title is emblazoned, together with Jewish religious symbols (a *Magen David* and *Menorah*) on Samson's home – a modest hut of mud-brick

walls and corrugated tin roof. Many Abayudaya homes are painted with similar designs, so as clearly and proudly to identify the inhabitants' religious loyalties to their Christian and Muslim neighbors.

ויסר כחו מעליו – Suffering the final disabilities of his Biblical namesake,⁹ “Rabbi” Samson is blind, and his strength depleted. His legs are paralyzed. He remains essentially bed-ridden, though he is carefully and respectfully attended by children, grandchildren, and admirers. Members of the *Bet Din* visited Samson in his home. It was readily apparent that Samson’s physical condition made even his transportation to the *mikveh* or river – much less his actual immersion – an impossibility. Addressing the *Bet Din* from his bed, with an interpreter translating his remarks from Luganda, Samson described his long life of Jewish ritual observance and religious leadership. Members of the *Bet Din*, in turn, described the process of conversion, which Samson’s religious charges had undergone. We assured him that the souls being added to the Jewish People and Covenant were able to effect their new status due in great part to his own efforts and personal example and, indeed, that the community and the *Bet Din* were in his debt: we were merely continuing a process he had helped to set in motion.

וישתחו ישראל על ראש המטה – Growing increasingly animated, Samson sat up in bed¹⁰ and described his ritual immersion some 80 years ago. “Rabbis, do you know why conversion is effected through immersion?” he asked the *Bet Din*.¹¹ He answered his own question: “When Pharaoh attempted to destroy the Jewish People in Egypt, he used water as his weapon. For this he was punished by the drowning of his army at the sea. Similarly, throughout history, when outsiders willingly join the Jewish People through conversion, demonstrating the vitality and inviting beauty of Judaism, they do so by emerging from the water of the *mikveh*, so as to demonstrate Pharaoh’s utter failure.”

The *Bet Din* was inspired by “Rabbi” Samson’s commitment to God, Torah, and *Mitzvot*. Having heard his passionate discourse on the experience of his own community and of the Jewish People, the visiting rabbis – now properly counting themselves among Samson’s “students” – agreed unanimously that he had long since satisfied the requirements of *kabbalat ‘ol malkhut shamayim* and *kabbalat ‘ol ha-mitzvot*.

The question remaining before the *Bet Din* was whether Samson Mugombe, without subsequent *hatafat dam brit* and immersion, could be declared a full and authentic *Ger Tzedek*. Could he be issued a *Teudat Gerut*, or must the *Bet Din*, stopping short of this action, merely express its thanks and admiration to Mr. Mugombe as a non-Jew who has rendered extraordinary service to the Jewish People? Needless to say, “Rabbi” Samson’s advanced age and declining physical condition make resolution of this question a time-critical matter.

IV. Circumcision

Rambam enumerates those who are qualified to perform a ritual circumcision:

הכל כשרין למול. ואפילו ערל ועבד ואשה וקטן מלין
במקום שאין שם איש. אבל עכו"ם לא ימול כלל ואם
מל אינו צריך לחזור ולמול שנייה.

All may legitimately perform ritual circumcision. Even the uncircumcised, a slave, a woman, and a minor may perform circumcision should there be no (Jewish) man available. But a heathen should certainly not perform a circumcision; yet if he does, it is not necessary to undertake any further procedure.¹²

In a 1982 responsum, "*Hattafat Dam Brit*,"¹³ Rabbi Joel Roth summarizes this Maimonidean ruling: "After the fact, though, a circumcision *leshem mitzvah*, performed even by a non-Jew, fulfills the requirement of *brit milah*." Samson Mugombe was circumcised in his youth by Semei Kakungulu. It is not entirely accurate to describe Kakungulu at that point of time either as uncircumcised (ערל) or as a heathen (עכו"ם), although it seems clear that he remained a non-Jew, perhaps most stringently and precisely defined halakhically as a ירא שמים. What is entirely beyond dispute is the fact that Kakungulu circumcised himself and then his student with the unambiguous intent to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*. He did so under circumstances that could not more precisely match those described by Rambam: במקום שאין שם איש – He acted in a place where there was no Jewish man, indeed no Jews at all, available to perform circumcision, oversee ritual observance, or conduct typical conversion proceedings. Given their location and circumstances, Kakungulu and Mugombe fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* in the most authentic manner conceivable: מצוה מן המובחר.

One may object that Maimonides' permissive ruling applies only to the circumcision of Jews in fulfillment of a covenantal duty, not the conversion of non-Jews who have no religious obligation to become Jews. The case before us seems analogous to that of a non-Jewish infant, either adopted by Jews or born to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, and who is circumcised not *l'shem gerut* (as part of a conversion process), but *l'shem mitzvah* (simply in fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of circumcision, as with unambiguously Jewish infants). This occurs not infrequently when the *mohel* is uninformed regarding the lineage of the infant, or the fact of the parents' intermarriage is willfully concealed from him. Of such a case, Rabbi Isaac Klein citing precedents by Rabbis David Tzvi Hoffman¹⁴ and Moshe Feinstein,¹⁵ rules that "no *hatafat dam* is required before *tevilah*, if the child is to be converted."¹⁶ If Samson Mugombe's circumcision by a ירא שמים – performed for the express purpose of fulfilling the *mitzvah* – would have fulfilled Maimonides' standards for *brit milah* – and since circumcision *l'shem mitzvah*

can be recognized as valid *l'shem gerut* – then we may conclude that Samson fulfilled the requisite conversion ritual of circumcision – אינו צריך לחזור ולמול שנייה –.

Such a conclusion must be predicated on the extreme *שעת הדחק* before the *Bet Din* -- the lack of any other halakhic remedy. The possibility of Samson Mugombe undergoing *hatafat dam* is untenable practically and halakhically. *Hatafat dam* must be followed by immersion. If we now require *hatafat dam* of Mugombe, his prior immersion would be tainted as טובל ושרץ בידו.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Abayudaya have a strict regimen of personal and sexual modesty based on age and communal position. Samson Mugombe is properly situated at the pinnacle of that social order. There is no one qualified to see him “uncovered” in order to perform *hatafat dam*! It should be conceded that this objection might be remedied were it not for the independent halakhic quandary.

Halakhic recognition of Samson Mugombe’s prior ritual circumcision presents no compelling concern regarding precedent. Three hundred Abayudaya have completed the conversion process in all its stringency, including *hatafat dam* for previously “ritually” circumcised males – among them 81-year-old Abraham Kakungulu, son of the Abayudaya founder himself!! Three hundred more fully intend to complete the same process. It has been made absolutely clear that under normal circumstances, Abayudaya circumcision (performed prior to the recent conversions) must be completed and validated by *hatafat dam brit*. No Abayudaya would want to cast doubt on his religious status by compromising well-established procedures of conversion. The case of “Rabbi” Samson Mugombe is unique.

In adjudicating the merits of Samson Mugombe’s observance of *brit milah*, let us ascribe to his efforts the spiritual pedigree ascribed to Avraham Avinu, whose behavior Samson and his teacher emulated with conviction:

נטל אברהם סכין ואחז בערלתו ורצה לחתוך
והיה מתיירא שהיה זקן. מה עשה הקב"ה? שלח ידו ואחז עמו.

Abraham took the knife and grasped his foreskin, wishing to excise it, but he was afraid because he was old. What did the Holy One do? He extended His hand and held the knife together with Abraham.¹⁸

V. Immersion

Remarkably, Samson Mugombe immersed in a *kosher mikveh* almost eighty years ago, for the express purpose and with the full intention of effecting his conversion to Judaism. His bedside *Dvar Torah* to the *Bet Din* regarding the meaning of *mikveh*, together with the practice of family purity by his wife and daughters, should be sufficient to establish the quality of his intention in this ritual act.

Obviously, although his intent and the *mikveh* in which he immersed were of unimpeachable quality, Samson Mugombe's immersion did not take place in the presence of unambiguously Jewish witnesses. Nevertheless, it would be unjust and inaccurate to consider him to be the classical case of one who says **נתגיירתי ביני לבין עצמי** – "I converted entirely on my own"¹⁹ – without supervision or witnesses, who by such personal testimony disqualifies himself from Jewish religious status.²⁰ Samson Mugombe underwent every ritual of conversion to Judaism in good faith, and under the supervision of a man perceived to be a Jewish religious leader of unquestioned character and integrity. The religious quality of Samson's long life bears testimony to the sincerity of these acts: **סופו הוכיח על תודלתו**. The conversion of both teacher and disciple are widely attested historic events acknowledged and celebrated by an entire religious community over eight decades – a community which now, in no small part due to Samson's own leadership and example, counts among its membership some three hundred *gerei tzedek*, sincere converts of unambiguous halakhic standing. Their proud history, their collective "memory" of the event, and, indeed, their very existence is testimony to the immersion of their religious leader. His immersion is akin to that of the woman whose child is derisively called **בר ארמייתא** – the son of an Aramean (i.e. non-Jew) because his mother's immersion in the course of her conversion was rumored to have been defective. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi accepts a subsequent ritual immersion as having completed the conversion process. Tosafot explains his position in terms compelling for the case before us:

האי דבעינן שלשה היינו לקבלת המצוות אבל
לא לטבילה. אף על גב דאמרינן לקמן דשני תלמידי
חכמים עומדים מבחוץ היינו לכתחילה דעדיף טפי.
ויש מפרשים: דכיון דידוע לכל שטבלה כאילו עומדים שם דמי.

Inssofar as requiring (a *Bet Din* of) three, that is only for (the aspiring convert's) acceptance of the Commandments, not for immersion. Even though we say below (Yevamot 47B) that two scholars stand outside (to witness a woman's conversion), that is required only before the fact, as this procedure is preferable. There are those who explain it thus: Since it is known to everyone that (the woman in question) immersed, it is as if witnesses were standing there.²¹

It is certainly unconventional for a *Bet Din* to be convened 75 or 80 years following an aspiring convert's ritual circumcision and immersion! It is more common for the *Bet Din* to examine and interview the candidate prior to immersion, as the subsequent immersion is then undertaken with the authorization and blessing of the certifying rabbis. This order of events is not crucial, however. The *locus classicus* for conversion procedures in Yevamot 47B (alluded to by the Tosafot quoted above), has the aspiring

convert – male or female – already immersing before formal *hoda'at mitzvot* begins:

מטבילין אותו מיד ושני תלמידי חכמים עומדים על גביו
ומודיעין אותו... אשה נשים מושיבות אותה במים עד
צוארה ושני תלמידי חכמים עומדים לה מבחוץ ומודיעין אותה.

...He is immersed immediately, and two scholars stand nearby and inform him regarding the *mitzvot*... For a woman, women direct her to stand in the water up to her neck, and two scholars, standing outside (and away from her) inform her regarding the *mitzvot*...²²

As to the order of conversion proceedings, Rabbi Isaac Klein maintains the Talmudic method: "It is the final act, *Qabbalat 'Ol Mitsvot*, that is decisive and requires a *Bet Din*...Since today that is done as a separate ritual after the immersion, a *Bet Din* is required only at the final ceremony."²³ In the case of Samson Mugombe, a duly qualified *Bet Din* met with him, and was fully satisfied at (in fact, humbled by) the quality of his religious life and the depth of his *kabbalat 'ol ha-mitsvot*.

As with the concern for establishing a precedent for recognizing early Abayudaya circumcision as halakhically valid for purposes of conversion, no such danger applies to accepting Samson Mugombe's youthful immersion as valid for his conversion. Immersion is a more accessible and, not insignificantly, less painful rite than *hatafat dam*. No Abayudaya would, on Samson's precedent, wish to omit ritual immersion from the conversion process and thus cast doubt on her or his religious status. The fear that other sincere and pious aspiring converts will on the basis of this precedent, immerse unsupervised in *kosher mikva'ot* – or present *Batei Din* with evidence of such prior immersion from years past – is, to say the least, not a compelling concern.

VI. Conclusion

Rabbinic authorities have rendered lenient decisions in an effort to recognize conversions without benefit of immersion – citing subsequent, incidental immersion devoid of intent.²⁴ Rabbinic authorities have rendered lenient decisions in an effort to recognize conversions without benefit of circumcision – when this surgical procedure is precluded by health concerns.²⁵

Rabbinic authorities have rendered lenient decisions in an effort to recognize conversions by rabbis who do not reflect our religious standards "in order to prevent further fragmentation in the House of Israel."²⁶ The conversion of "Rabbi" Samson Mugombe relies on none of these leniencies; it included ritual circumcision that fulfills the standards of Maimonides. His immersion in a kosher *mikveh* is a matter of widely acknowledged historic record: כיון דידוע לכל כאילו עומדים שם דמי – The famous nature of this historic act itself constitutes testimony establishing its validity. אנן סהדי – We are

all his witnesses. Samson Mugombe is 93, blind, disabled and bed-ridden. He will not, on the basis of his conversion, marry! Thus the principle of *מעלה עשו ביוחסין* – imposing more stringent standards of personal status where marriage and the consequent status of offspring could be affected – in no way applies.²⁷ His children and grandchildren have already converted and will not rely on their parents' Jewish status to establish their own identities. If health and circumstances permitted, Samson Mugombe would eagerly remove any remaining doubt from his religious status by undergoing *hatafat dam brit* and immersion. Given his position in the Abayudaya community, he would have been the first to do so. Alas, the infirmities of age preclude this possibility. He has, however, in the presence of a *Bet Din*, fulfilled the requirements of *kabbalat 'ol ha-mitzvot* and *kabbalat 'ol malkhut shamayim*. His personal piety and religious leadership preserved an extraordinary Jewish community and allowed hundreds of believing, observant, joyful *gerei tzedek* to be added to the Household of Israel.

While the timing and method of his conversion process are highly unusual, no aspiring convert ever presented a greater case of *שעת הדחק* – of compelling circumstances demanding a permissive yet profound – and sound – rabbinic ruling.

Dearer to God is the sincere convert who acted out of personal conviction than all the masses of Israelites who stood before Mount Sinai. For had the Israelites not witnessed the thunder and lightning, the quaking mountains and shofar blasts, they would not have accepted the Torah. yet the sincere convert saw not one of these things, yet came and submitted before the Holy One, and willingly took on the yoke of heaven. Could anyone be dearer to God?"²⁸

Based on all these considerations of halakhic precedent and personal circumstance, the members of the *Bet Din* who personally met and questioned Samson Mugombe are authorized to declare him a full and proper convert and to issue him a document of conversion – *הכל לפי ראות עיני הבית דין*. They are urged, with all possible dispatch, to inform "Rabbi" Samson that in his old age, he has been rightfully acknowledged as a *Ger Tzedek* of heroic and historic stature.

יברכהו ה' אלהי אברהם אבינו ויחזקהו ויאמצהו למען ישאר נאמן לתורתנו
הקדשה ומסור לאמונת ישראל ובן יקר לעם ישראל אשר בו יתפאר.

Postscript:

The members of the Bet Din who travelled together to Uganda and met with Samson Mugombe unanimously accepted this responsum. "Rabbi" Samson was notified that he had been formally recognized as a Ger Tzedek, and gratefully welcomed into Klal Yisrael. He died shortly after receiving this news, on July 16, 2002, survived by over 100 grandchildren and great-grandchildren...and by the vibrant Jewish community he had led for 75 years.

NOTES:

¹This paper was originally written in 2002 as a private responsum, at the request of the members of the *Bet Din* whose activities are herein described. It is published here for the first time and as it was originally written. Updated historic details are provided, where appropriate, in the footnotes.

²Bibles, printed in Luganda, were provided by Christian missionaries, who were dismayed when Kakungulu embraced only the "Old Testament" but rejected Christian Scripture! Sacred volumes are still found in Abayudaya homes and synagogues – torn in half, retaining only a front cover and the Hebrew Bible.

³The central Moses Synagogue stands today at Nabugoye Hill, near Mbale. Smaller, cruder structures are provided as chapels for outlying areas, necessary because night-time travel, especially on *Shabbat*, is impossible.

⁴The fall of Idi Amin is celebrated by the Abayudaya in conjunction with *Pesah*, as an experience of freedom from tyranny. His political demise and the subsequent restoration of Ugandan freedom of religion is cited as the miraculous act of a loving God intervening in human history.

⁵In 2011, the Abayudaya community has been reported as having exceeded 1,000.

⁶The *Bet Din* was sponsored by Kulanu, an organization dedicated to serving the needs of isolated Jewish communities, and communities with Jewish roots or aspirations. The *Bet Din* was accompanied and assisted by Academy for Jewish Religion rabbinical student Moshe Cotel, z"l, who was subsequently ordained. His untimely passing on October 24, 2008 was mourned by his colleagues and by the Abayudaya community.

⁷Gershon Sizomu received rabbinic ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of the University of Judaism (now, the American Jewish University) in Los Angeles in 2008. Rabbi Sizomu returned to Uganda, where he continues to serve as the Abayudaya community's religious leader.

⁸While this responsum was being prepared for publication in *Gvanim*, the newest Abayudaya addition was born, just prior to Purim 2011. She was named Ora, in reference to Esther 8:16, **לִיהוּדִים הִיָּתָה אֹרָה**.

⁹See Judges 16, especially verse 19.

¹⁰See Genesis 47:31.

¹¹This transcription of Samson's remarks is taken from my personal journal, written on the night following our visit to his home. If not verbatim, they represent a faithful representation of the spirit of his words.

¹²Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Milah* 2:1.

¹³Rabbi Joel Roth, "Hattafat Dam Brit," in *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 1980-1985*, (The Rabbinical Assembly, 1988), p. 70.

¹⁴See Hoffman, *Melamed L'Ho'il, Yoreh Deah* #82.

¹⁵See Igrot Moshe, *Yoreh Deah* #48.

¹⁶Rabbi Isaac Klein, "Hattafat Dam," in *Responsa and Halakhic Studies* (Ktav, 1975), p. 103.

¹⁷See Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, Responsa *Seridei Eish*, 2:102, citing Nimukei Yosef and Rashba on Yevamot 47B.

¹⁸Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 47:8; *Tanchumah Yashan* (Buber ed.) Lekh Lekha 24.

¹⁹BT Yevamot 47A.

²⁰Even such testimony is deemed insufficient to undermine the presumptive Jewish status or familial pedigree of the "convert's" children. Ramban suggests that this is so even for children born to a mother and father both of whom underwent "private," unsupervised conversions.

²¹BT Yevamot 45B.

²²BT Yevamot 47B.

²³Rabbi Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, (JTS/New York, 1979), p. 444.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 447: "Inasmuch as immersion requires no declaration of intention...we accept as valid any act of bathing in a natural body of water (ocean, lake, or river), and count it as valid for conversion."

²⁵In his "Guide" (p. 448) and responsa (p. 99), Klein cites exceptional rulings to this effect by Rabbis Tsevi Kahn and Pinchas Hirschprung, both of Montreal.

²⁶Klein, "Guide," p. 447, citing Blumenthal and Fink, *Converts of Questionable Status*, p. 109.

²⁷For a discussion of this principle as it relates to conversion, see Rabbi Joel Roth, "Should the *Kashrut* of Conversions be Investigated?" in *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 1980-1985* (Rabbinical Assembly, 1988), p. 90.

²⁸Midrash *Tanchumah* (Buber ed.) *Lekh Lekha* 6.