

Dear Rabbi,

We are somewhat confused and flustered. We adopted our two beautiful sons from Russia when each one was under a year old, and have raised them as Jews ever since, for over five years. We were under the impression that if a child is adopted and raised by Jews, then the children are considered Jewish. However, during a recent visit to Israel, our cousins told us that the children aren't considered technically Jewish until they convert. This was difficult for us to swallow, and want to find out if it's true. Also, how is it possible to convert small children if they don't have the maturity and understanding to accept upon themselves whatever being Jewish entails?

Kirk and Jessica W.

Dear Kirk and Jessica,

What you heard from your cousins is, in fact, the truth. Whether one chooses to become Jewish as an adult, or is adopted as a child, they don't actually become Jewish until they convert in accordance with Jewish law.

The reason this is so: the Jewish people is not a "race" – there are Jews of every race. We also do not share a common country or location, (most Jews have not lived in Israel for nearly 2000 years). We are not a nation based upon language, as most Jews don't speak Hebrew. Although we have a common religion, a Jew is still fully Jewish even if he is not observant. If so, what makes one Jewish?

The answer is, a "Jewish soul". The entire Jewish people were endowed with a unique soul at Sinai. The Jews needed a soul which would be capable of receiving the powerful spiritual energy transmitted by the Almighty through the Torah. These unique souls are needed throughout the generations, as the Jews continue to be the torch-bearers of the Torah and all the spiritual light contained within it. This is our mission as a "light among the nations". For this reason, the Midrash says, all the future Jewish souls participated in the transmission of Torah at Sinai, so they would be fit to be endowed to a Jew, so he can learn Torah and part of the light among the nations.

This type of unique soul is endowed to a convert to Judaism as well. He or she receives one of those souls from Sinai. In that way they become part of the Jewish people. The conversion process was first carried out at Sinai, when they all received an expanded soul. The convert continues that tradition and, like the Jews of Sinai, joins the mission. For this reason the rabbis when a convert agrees to accept all the mitzvos and live a Jewish life, he or she are having their own private Sinai experience and are endowed with a unique soul.

The same process works for a small child as well. It is true that the child does not have the understanding to make that decision, but the Jewish Court (Beis Din) has a special power vested in them by the Torah to make that decision for the child, as it is considered a merit for the child, and with the power of Beis Din they become Jewish. The children do, however, have the right upon becoming bar or bat mitzvah (at ages 13 or 12 respectively), to reject their Judaism if they so choose. If they do not reject it, then they are fully Jewish forever, like any other Jew.

I wish you the best of success in bringing this process to fruition and entering your children into the eternal covenant of Abraham and the Jewish people, with much nachas!