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Dedicated in memory of **MACKLUF ben YITZCHAK z"l**

May his soul have a great elevation above and be a faithful advocate for

DR. JEAN JACQUES EDDERAI & family 'י' ש

Claude from Ghana vs. Rabbinical Court!

About four years ago I – Yaakov Cass -- walked into the Tchekenov shul in Ramot [suburb of Jerusalem] after work one evening to study with my *chavrusa* [Torah-study partner]. I found him learning with a young man who I had never met before. I was somewhat taken aback when I first set eyes on Eliezer. Dressed like any other *hareidi* ["Ultra-Orthodox"] young man, he stood out from the crowd for he had just arrived from the West African country of Ghana.

Eliezer was then known as Claude. He was born in Benin and had escaped from that very dangerous country by illegally crossing the border into Burkina Faso and from there he crossed over to Ghana, again illegally. Ghana was much safer and more stable than the previous two countries.

[BENIN is a country in western Africa, bordered to the northwest by **Burkina Faso**, to the east by Nigeria, and to the west by Togo.

BURKINA FASO is a landlocked country in West Africa that is bordered by Mali to the northwest, Nigeria to the northeast, **Benin** to the southeast, Togo and **Ghana** to the south, and the Ivory Coast to the southwest.]

Crossing the border in this way was extremely hazardous and many who did so were killed. However, there was no legal way to gain entrance to Ghana as it did not accept Benin citizens. Claude felt the hand of G-d guiding him safely to his new home in the capital, Accra, where he secured a profitable job as a cook at the French embassy.

One fine day a *hareidi* Jew from Ramot, Jerusalem, by the name of George Brown arrived in Accra. He had come to work in the mining industry and had rented a villa. He told some of his new colleagues that he needed someone to run his home as he was unfamiliar with the local scene. Very soon thereafter Claude knocked at his door.

“My friend just told me that there is a Jew from Israel who is looking for someone to manage his household. I immediately handed in my notice at the embassy and came running to work for you. I have never met a Jew before but I know that they are the Chosen People. It will be an honor for me to assist you throughout the time that you are in Ghana.”

Thus Claude began to help George establish his home. He went with him everywhere. He helped him immerse his dishes in the *mikveh*, kosher the kitchen, purchase a Shabbat kettle and hotplate, install a time switch for the Shabbat lights, and set aside a place where he could pray undisturbed.

One day as George finished his prayers, Claude asked him what were the things he had been wearing. George answered that they were items that G-d had commanded the Jews to wear during the morning prayer. Claude asked if he could do likewise. George explained to him that it wasn't necessary because he was not Jewish.

"Nevertheless I want to keep this commandment," Claude retorted firmly.

George went on to explain that it was forbidden for a non-Jew to perform such *mitzvot* but Claude did not bat an eyelid.

"Then I will become a Jew so that I will be able to keep all the beautiful *mitzvot* that I have observed in your home."

George told him that in order to become Jewish according to the specifications of the Jewish religion he would have to go to an appropriate rabbinical court but there wasn't one in Ghana; nor in hardly any of the African countries. Claude was not the least bit deterred. He spent every spare moment researching Judaism online, delving deeper and deeper, with his burning desire to convert growing stronger with every passing day.

Time moved on and with the help of some roving emissaries, George was able to organize a *minyan* for *Yom Kippur*. Claude turned up in the morning wearing a *tallit* and clutching a *machzor* [Rosh Hashana-Yom Kippur prayerbook] with a French translation. He had been walking for over an hour, fasting, because he knew it was forbidden to ride on Shabbat and Yom Tov. George explained to him that as he was not Jewish he was forbidden to observe Yom Kippur and moreover, to do so would incur punishment.

"I don't care," he answered, "I am prepared to die as a Jew, no matter what price I have to pay."

The following year shortly before *Rosh Hashana*, George told Claude that the time had come for him to leave Ghana. Foreseeing complications and problems that would arise were Claude to accompany him back to Israel, he waited until the last moment to announce his departure, hoping that would dash any irrational attempts on the part of Claude to join him.

Claude of course begged to go so George consulted with his wife. "Of course you must bring him to Israel," she exclaimed.

He turned to Claude and said, "The flight is due to depart in six hours. If you can be ready by then, you are welcome to join me, but be aware that you will have to enter Israel on a tourist visa with all that it entails."

Claude ran home and told his wife that they were going to Israel right away. They packed as fast as they could and then dashed to the airport. Luckily by that time they had already acquired passports.

When he landed in Israel, Claude was in seventh heaven. He found a French speaking *beis hamedrash* [Torah-study hall] and studied Torah there from morning till night. On Yom Kippur he went to shul with George and stood for 25 hours fasting and reciting every word from his French *machzor*. After Sukkot, George took Claude to a *Beit Din* [rabbinical court] authorized to do conversions, where he expressed his wish to convert. It was denied.

“It’s not for you,” the judges told him. “It’s enough for you to be a righteous gentile and keep the **seven Noachide laws**.”

Claude was not discouraged and returned to the *Beit Din* a second time and again his request was refused. Determined as ever, he went back a third time and was refused yet again, this time with a strict warning never to reappear. Claude was not fazed in the slightest.

“Before I leave I would like to ask each one of you three judges to sign on and stamp a document that I, Claude, came to you on such and such a day requesting to convert to Judaism and you refused me.”

“Why on earth would you want such a document,” the judges asked.

Claude answered that *Moshiach*’s arrival was imminent and when they met he would ask him: “Why did you not become Jewish? You knew the truth!”

“So I will tell him that the *Beit Din* turned me away, and I will produce this document to prove I am telling the truth.”

Within a matter of seconds the three judges approved Claude’s request for conversion.

After all the *Halachic* [Jewish law] requirements had been fulfilled (including his wife’s conversion and a 3-month waiting period), Hannah and Eliezer stood under the *chupah* [marriage canopy] and became husband and wife “according to the law of Moshe and Israel.”

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the original article by **Rabbi Yaakov Cass**, as printed in “Living Jewish” #739.

Rabbi Cass is a Lubavitcher chasid living in Jerusalem. Until recently he was a senior official in the Israel Ministry of Health.

Connection: The **Seven Noachide Laws** are mentioned in this week’s Torah reading, *No’ach*.