

Parashat Ekev

How Does the Torah Require Us to Treat Converts?

Holy Conversion Candidates

I have been running a conversion program for more than 15 years as a subdivision of Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. What prompted me to start the conversion program? It was a conversation I had many years ago with one of my students – let's call her Sylvia – who grew up in a typical secular Jewish home, where they kept Chanukah and ate matzah on Pesach. She enrolled in our program to explore her Jewish identity. She had barely arrived, when a comment made in one of the classes caused Sylvia's entire Jewish world to collapse. "All my life, I grew up believing that I'm Jewish, but perhaps, according to strict Jewish law this is not the case," sobbed Sylvia at my kitchen table. "I understand what you are going through is not easy. Tell me what's going on!" I encouraged, as I handed her a tissue and put my comforting arm around her. "My Dad is Jewish and I thought my Mom was as well, since she converted to Judaism before I was born, but her conversion was not orthodox," explained Sylvia. After her initial shock and identity crisis, I helped Sylvia undergo an orthodox conversion. This was the beginning of our conversion program. Sylvia now lives a committed *chareidi* (ultra-orthodox) lifestyle, married to a Rabbi in Jerusalem, and the happy mother of seven children! (Since then, our application form strictly detects the halachic Jewishness of students prior to arrival in our program). Over the years, Hashem has sent us the most amazing holy women seeking to convert in our program. These devoted conversion candidates have added seriousness and commitment to Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, and are a great inspiration for our Jewish students. They are generally more particular about keeping the mitzvot with all their minutiae, including the mitzvah of *tzniut* (modesty) in dress, speech and behavior. The community of Bat Ayin has been very welcoming to these holy converting souls, but I'm appalled to learn that this is not the case in many communities the world over.

The Edict Banning Converts

Over the years, I have heard from several conversion candidates that in their country, they were not welcome in the Jewish community. They were not invited for any Shabbat meals, and in some cases, they were even banned from the synagogue and from classes in Judaism. Some communities don't accept even an orthodox convert as being truly Jewish. The Syrian Jewish community is the most extreme in this regard. In their edict of 1935, it states, "No male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non-Jewish; this law covers conversion, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless." This edict was confirmed in 1946 by Chief Rabbi Jacob Kassin who added: "The rabbi will not perform religious ceremonies for such unkosher couples... The congregation's premises will be banned to them for any religious or social nature... After death of said person he or she is not to be buried on the cemetery of our community..." Community members who violate the edict are shunned – some have not even had any contact with their own parents for decades. The original edict was signed by five dignitaries. Since then, it has been reaffirmed in each generation by more and more rabbis. The version issued in 2006, was signed by 225 rabbis and lay leaders. To this day, 99% of Syrian Jews accept this edict. Jakie Kassin, the grandson of Rabbi Kassin, and the son of the prior chief rabbi of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn is quoted with the following statement: "Never accept a convert or a child born of a convert." Push them away with strong hands from our community. Why? Because we don't want gentile characteristics."

Excommunicating the Mashiach

This hostile attitude towards converts and their spouses stand in stark contrast to the teachings of the Torah:

ספר דברים פרק י' (ז) כִּי הָשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנָי הָאֲדֹנִים הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבֹּר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד: (יח) עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלמָנָה וְאִהַב גֵּר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה: (יט) וְאַהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

“For Hashem your G-d is the G-d of gods and the Lord of lords: the great, mighty, awesome G-d, Who does not show favor and does not take bribes; Who executes judgment for the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger (convert), giving him food and garments. You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Devarim* 10:17-19).

Similar statements, emphasizing the mitzvah to love and treat the גֵּר/*ger* – stranger or convert kindly are emphasized numerous times in the Torah. We are called upon to emulate Hashem, Who loves and shows extra care towards all the weak of our congregation. No motive, even worthy ones such as to protect the community from assimilation can ever justify the pain and agony that the Syrian Jewish edict has caused to numerous converts and their families. What would prevent the Syrian Jewish community from excommunicating the Mashiach, himself, due to his ‘unclean’ gentile blood, stemming from David’s great grandmother Ruth – the righteous convert?

Who is a גֵּר/*ger* – Stranger?

According to the Torah, it is not clear who is a גֵּר/*ger*- whether it refers to a convert or to a non-Jewish resident. In the written Torah, the word גֵּר/*ger* refers to a stranger – a person who comes from a foreign land to live here. We learn this from the above quote: “For you were strangers (גֵּרִים/*gerim*) in the land of Egypt.” Clearly, when the Israelites are referred to as גֵּרִים/*gerim*, it certainly does not imply that they converted to the Egyptian religion. Thus, in our Torah verse, the term גֵּר/*ger* simply denotes someone living among a foreign people. These Torah verses present lofty principles, aspiring to sanctify and elevate the reality of the material world by implementing Divine values and act towards even non-Jewish Israeli residents with the utmost love and treat them as equals. According to this messianic ideal, we are required to show the highest level of care and concern for the weak of our society, even though they are not part of our people, providing they keep the basic Noachide laws, which are prerequisite for living in the land of Israel (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avodat Kochavim* 10:6). Yet, other Torah verses seem to indicate that the גֵּר/*ger* is a convert, who has accept all the mitzvot:

ספר שמות פרק יב (מח) וְכִי יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לְהָשֵׁם הַמּוֹל לּוֹ כָּל זָכָר וְאִזּוֹ יִקְרַב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וְהָיָה כְּאִזְרָח הָאֶרֶץ וְכָל עֶרְלָא לֹא יֵאָכֵל בּוֹ: (מט) תּוֹרָה אַחַת יְהִיָּה לְאִזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

“If a גֵּר/*ger* lives with you he shall perform the paschal-offering to G-d. Let all of his males be circumcised, and then he shall come near to perform it, and he shall be like the native-born. One law shall there be for the native-born and for the גֵּר/*ger* who lives in your midst” (*Shemot* 12:48-49).

“You Shall Love the Conversion Candidate!”

In the written Torah it is not clear whether a גֵּר/*ger* refers to a non-Jewish resident living in Israel or to a full-fledged convert. According to the Oral Torah, the word גֵּר/*ger* refers solely to a ‘*ger tzedek*’ – someone who has accepted all of the Torah’s mitzvot and joined the Jewish people by a kosher conversion. The lofty ideals of the Torah are frequently presented in the form of general, abstract

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

principles. On the other hand, the Oral Law is mainly concerned with the practical details as they apply to concrete reality. I would like to venture an additional way to explain the seemingly inconsistency regarding the definition of the term גֵּר/*ger*. Perhaps the Torah's ambiguous terminology comes to teach us that the גֵּר/*ger* that we must love and treat kindly includes not only the actual convert but also the conversion candidate, who is still in the conversion process. He or she sacrifices so much to become part of our people and suffers greatly during the conversion process by not having any community where they truly belong. The Midrash teaches us the greatness of the conversion candidate, who is considered equal to a righteous Jew:

ילקוט שמעוני רות - פרק א - רמז תרא

אמר ר' אבהו בוא וראה כמה חביבין גרים לפני הקב"ה כיון שנתנה דעתה להתגייר השוה הכתוב אותה לנעמי שנאמר ותלכנה שתיהן עד בואנה בית לחם:

Rabbi Abahu said, Come and see how precious proselytes are to the holy One, blessed be He. Once she [Ruth] had set her heart on converting, Scripture placed her in the same rank as Naomi, as it states, "They both walked till they came to Bethlehem" (*Megillat Ruth* 1:19); (*Yalkut Shimoni Ruth* 1:601).