

Parshat Toldot

Is Antoninus a True Convert?



Dear Rebbetzin Siegelbaum,

My wife found your book (Women at the Crossroads) and we have been enjoying reading from it at our Shabbos Table. We have a question. In *Parshas Toldos*, p.23, you say that Antoninus converted to Judaism. I had been aware of his friendship with Rebbi (Yehuda Hanasi) yet, I never before heard that Antoninus had converted. I asked a knowledgeable rabbi friend about this and he, too, had not heard about it beforehand. Can you please provide a source, so that we may use this knowledge in the future? Thank you.

Anthony Romano (name changed)

Dear Anthony,

I'm happy you and your wife have been enjoying reading my book at your Shabbos table. As I mentioned in [Women at the Crossroads – A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion](#), (insert link) the *Meshech Chochmah* explains that even the evil Esav whom Rivkah carried within her womb, contained a tremendous spark of good, which made it worthwhile for her to be his mother. This spark was the soul of Antoninus, the Roman Caesar, who converted to Judaism (*Meshech Chochmah, Bereishit 25:23*). Regarding your request for additional sources for Antoninus converting, I'm surprised that your rabbi friend had never heard about this. Even the name Antoninus – from the Latin meaning 'worthy of praise' alludes to this. Below are just a few of the many sources from Talmud, Midrash and commentaries about Antoninus the convert.

Conversion Imbibed Through Mother's Milk

The Midrash tells the story of how Antoninus converted due to the holy milk that he suckled as a baby. "What comes from the heart enters the heart." When a baby suckles from a holy woman, the essence of her holiness enters deeply into his soul. Therefore, Hashem performed the miracle of filling our Mother, Sarah's breasts with milk. This was not only in order to prove that Sarah was Yitzchak's true mother, but also for the spiritual elevation of the entire world. When Sarah's milk overflowed and she suckled the sons of the princesses at her weaning party (Rashi, *Bereishit 21:7*), the children of the nations who merited to receive Sarah's influence through her milk and later converted (*Yalkut Shimoni, Mishlei* allusion 947).

Head of Sincere Converts

Our sages teach, "Milk can make impure, milk can make pure." When Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi (also known as just Rebbi) was born, the evil Caesar Hadrian made a decree to prohibit circumcision. Nevertheless, Rebbi's holy parents circumcised him. Soon after his birth, the suspicious Caesar summoned Rebbi and his parents to check whether their baby was circumcised. Rebbi's mother, who was friendly with the Caesar's wife, exchanged her baby with the prince – Antoninus – and nursed him on the way to the Caesar. Thus, the Caesar found the baby un-circumcised and let them go in peace. In this way, Rebbi and his parents managed to escape the persecution of Hadrian's officers. Consequently, Antoninus who had absorbed with the milk of Rebbi's mother a love for Jews and Judaism, learned Torah, circumcised himself and converted (*Tosfot, Avodah Zarah 10b*). Rebbi, the son of this Antoninus' vicarious mother, served as the guide and friend of Antoninus, and was influential in Antoninus' conversion process. The two remained close for life. The following discussion with Rebbe was instrumental in Antoninus' conversion: Antoninus asked Rebbi whether he was entitled to partake of the feast of the Leviathan in the days of Mashiach. Rebbi answered that he was. Antoninus challenged Rebbe, quoting the Torah verse, "No uncircumcised shall partake of the

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Pesach lamb" (*Shemot* 12:48). "If I can't eat from the Pesach sacrifice, why would I be allowed to eat from the Leviathan?" He asked. Rabbi shook his head saying, "I can permit you to eat from the Leviathan since that depends on a person's righteousness. However, what can I do about the Pesach lamb when it explicitly states that to partake of that you need to be circumcised? Understanding the importance of circumcision, Antoninus subsequently circumcised himself, entered the covenant of Avraham and became a full-fledged Jew. Our sages say about him, "If sincere converts to Judaism enter the world-to-come, Antoninus will be at the head of them" (*Yeushalmi Megillah* 15a, *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 3:2).

Antoninus and Rabbi: Engaged in Philosophical Discussions

Antoninus challenged Rabbi regarding many fundamental principles of the Torah. For example, he questioned the Torah concept of punishment after death by asserting that both body and soul have a good excuse to escape punishment. The body could claim, "It is the soul that transgresses, for just as soon as it leaves me, I am as lifeless as a stone." The soul could reply, "Sin is the body's fault. Since I have separated from it, I hover like a bird in the air" (*Sanhedrin* 91a). Through a parable regarding a blind and a lame man, Rabbi explained that it is the relationship between body and soul that may become liable for punishment. When the lame man rides on the blind man, together they have the ability to sin. Likewise is the symbiotic relationship between body and soul. The Talmud and Midrash are replete with examples of philosophical discussions between the two, for example, regarding the resurrection of the dead; and whether a baby receives its soul at conception or at birth. Rabbi initially held that the *yetzer hara* is given to the fetus while still in gestation. Antoninus countered that in that case, the baby would rip up its mother's womb. Subsequently, Rabbi had to concede (*Sanhedrin* 91a; *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 34:10).

Rebbi – The First Court Jew

Antoninus would take counsel from Rabbi in both political and personal matters. Since the encounters between a Jew and the Roman Emperor involved danger, they were compelled to use special sign language. Thus, Antoninus' emissary brought Rabbi the question of how to better the financial condition of the state. In reply, Rabbi led the messenger into his garden, and without saying a word pulled up some of the large radishes and replaced them with young ones. Antoninus understood the suggestion. He removed the heads of his financial administration and put younger men into their position, thereby effecting positive change (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 67:6). Antoninus expressed his appreciation of Rabbi through exclusive presents such as tracts of land and sacks of gold, covered with grain, in order not to provoke the jealousy of the Romans. Rabbi refused to accept these presents until Antoninus convinced him that the time would come when Rabbi's descendants would need the gold in order to appease the greed of Antoninus' successors (*Avodah Zarah* 10a).

Antoninus's Mother Encore

Breastfeeding is indeed a two-way relationship. Not only is the baby influenced through suckling from a holy woman. The nursing mother in return is influenced by breastfeeding a holy suckling. Thus, the Arizal explained that not only did Rabbi's mother nurse Antoninus, but also the queen, Antoninus' mother, nursed Rabbi. This had future significance for the eternity of her soul. The Talmud tells a story where a woman died and left a suckling baby. Since the father was very poor and couldn't afford to pay a nursemaid, a miracle was done for him, and his two breasts were opened to become like a woman's breasts and he nursed his son (*Shabbat* 53b). Behold, in the merit of nursing Rabbi, the Caesar's wife was reincarnated into this Jewish man, to give her merit for the world-to-come (The Rama of Pa'ano, *Soul Reincarnations* 200).