



Why Wouldn't I Marry a Convert?

How Can Emancipated Western Jews Discriminate?

It's unbelievable how in our modern, egalitarian civilization, many Jews still regard converts as second-class citizens. At a wedding many years ago, I struck up a conversation with a matchmaker about some of my students, who were looking for a suitable shidduch. She was very interested, until I pointed out one of the intended students. She stood out in the crowd due to her dark-colored skin. The matchmaker indignantly exclaimed, "Sorry I don't have anyone for *her*! If you had a son in the marriageable age, would you consider marrying him off to someone like *her*? That question has remained with me over the years and I truly don't see any reason why not. Apparently, many Jews-from-birth do not share my sympathies. I even heard a very feminist family member express the opinion that a Jew should not go out on a date with a convert, unless he has a serious problem! As a director of a conversion program, these prejudiced opinions greatly irk me. I'm in daily contact with the most precious souls yearning for closeness with Hashem and passionately seeking to enter the Jewish fold in order to serve Him even more. I would rather see my children married to converts like these, than to Jews with a wishy-washy commitment to Torah. The conversion candidates' enthusiasm for Torah and Mitzvot is a great inspiration for my Jewish students. Over the years, I had several sincere conversion students who became engaged to young men from the Syrian community. Their ban against marrying converts is well known. The parents of one such young man highly opposed the match and even refused to attend the wedding! What a shame! It took some time but finally they were reconciled after getting to know their new daughter-in-law, who is scrupulous about keeping the mitzvot and has the best and kindest character traits. I really don't see any reason why even a rabbinic family wouldn't want their son or daughter to marry a righteous convert. Moshe Rabbeinu, himself, didn't find it beneath him to marry the convert, Tziporah, daughter of Yitro, who had served every kind of idol before he embraced the Jewish faith.

Weren't We All Converts?

In a sense, we were all converts when we received the Torah at Mount Sinai. We then underwent a major transformation by accepting the obligation of the 613 mitzvot, similar to a conversion candidate. The Talmud teaches us, that the souls of the future righteous converts were actually there, with us at Mount Sinai, and received the Torah together with us:

"But not with you alone..." (*Devarim* 29:13). "...but also with those who are not with us today" (*Ibid* 14). I have only those who were currently standing on Mount Sinai. From where do we learn about the future generations and the converts that would convert in the future? Scripture teaches us: "And with those who are not here with us today" (*Ibid.*); (*Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot* 39a).

A close look at the verse quoted above in the original Hebrew, teaches us that it alludes to Yitro, the first convert to Judaism, following the Exodus from Egypt. The last letters of the phrase, "with those who are here" actually spell out the name 'Yitro!'

ספר דברים פרק כט פסוק יד כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַמְּדוּ הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

Just as today, the process of becoming Jewish consists of several steps, already in Egypt we were made to suffer for being different due to our Jewishness. With this archetypal memory, we should

know better than to discriminate against converts. The Torah cautions us numerous times to love the convert:

“When a convert lives with you in your land, you shall not taunt him. The convert who dwells with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Vayikra* 19:33-34).

According to the Talmud, the Torah warns against wronging a convert 36 times:

Our Rabbis taught: He who hurts the feelings of a proselyte transgresses three negative injunctions, and he who oppresses him infringes two... Rabbi Eliezer the Great said: Why did the Torah warn against [the wronging of] a convert in thirty-six, or as others say, in forty-six, places?” (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 59b).

Returning the Jewish Sparks to Their Fold

One of the main reasons for our prolonged exile is in order to gather converts and return the Jewish sparks, scattered in the four corners of the earth, back to Israel, as Rabbi Elazar said, “The Holy One did not exile Israel among the nations except in order to add converts, as it states: ‘I will sow her to me in the earth’” (*Hoshea* 2:25); (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 87b). The fact that conversion candidates already have a Jewish spark in their soul, is alluded to in another Talmudic statement that discusses the laws of conversion. The passage opens with, “A convert who comes to convert...” (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 47a). This begs the question – why does it say, “a convert who comes to convert”? Rather than, “a gentile who comes to convert”? Doesn’t the convert only become a convert after completing the conversion process? Perhaps the reason for this Talmudic expression is that the future convert already has a Jewish spark inside of him or her.

The Sincerity of the Righteous Conversion Candidate

In order to give you a feeling of the Jewish spark inherent in the conversion candidate’s soul, I would like to share with you, some anonymous quotes from past conversion students:

“My spiritual journey has been a very long one and would never fit within a 500-word limit. However, I can sum it up as a constant longing to find truth, clarity, and a connection to something greater than myself. This search is what eventually led me to Torah Judaism and then later to the decision to convert. Somewhere along this Jewish journey I lost part of myself, and I had to rediscover that.”

“I don’t know if there’s necessarily a reason why I want to convert, because it seems all of me wants to convert, it’s like I need to find myself, and be myself and I can only be myself once I’m Jewish. I think it’s my inner self, finally coming through after years and years of repression. I think deep down I always wanted to be Jewish, I just didn’t know the name of what I wanted to be.”

“I see why Hashem lead me through several phases, to reach where I am today. It has been a slow process but for a long time now I have known I cannot live a life not being Jewish. As a Noahide I always felt I was lying to myself, *this is not me*, my soul is yearning for something else. By His mercy I found Him, I found my people and my home. It has been an intense, tough and awesome soul journey reaching into the depths of my being, reshaping the worldview I had from childhood. I am very excited to continue my journey towards my G-d-given purpose in this life. Baruch Hashem!”

The following Midrash recognizes that even before formal conversion, the soul of the conversion candidate is precious and in a way equal to a righteous Jew. We learn this from the comparison of Ruth to Naomi:

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 are proselytes 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 is said, "They both walked until they came to Bethlehem" (*Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth 1:601*).

Thus, Ruth was compared to Naomi in righteousness, even before she could formalize her conversion in front of the Rabbinical Court.

Who was the First Convert to Judaism?

By naming the Torah portion in which the Israelites receive the Torah, *Parashat Yitro*, the Torah attributes great honor to Yitro, a convert whose daughter, Tziporah, became Moshe's wife. Yitro, the past master of every kind of idol-worship, was able to transform the seven powers of negative spirituality into the realm of holiness. Yitro has seven names. Each corresponds to one of the new paths of holiness which now became his essence (*Shem M'Shmuel, Parashat Yitro*, year 5674). There is no clear-cut answer to the question of who the first convert to Judaism was. Although some call Yitro the first Jewish convert, several generations beforehand, Avraham and Sarah were involved in converting the many idol-worshippers they encountered (*Bereishit 12:5* with Rashi). Also their offspring, Yitzchak and Ya'acov, engaged in converting gentiles (*Ibid*, Rabbeinu Bachaya). Some say that Hagar, the daughter of Pharaoh was the first convert to Judaism as her name indicates. Yet, her offspring did not remain on the Jewish path. Yitro is the first convert who converted after the Israelites formally became the Jewish people by accepting the Torah at Sinai. Some call Ruth, the progenitor of the Messianic lineage, the first convert.

Ultimate Return

It is interesting to note that the name יִתְרוֹ/Yitro has the same letters as רות/Ruth, with an added letter י/yud. Although י/yud is the letter of wisdom, with which Yitro was blessed abundantly, Ruth surpassed Yitro in her devotion and desire to live in Israel. Yitro, on the other hand, was unwilling to follow his son-in-law Moshe, but returned back to his fatherland (*Bamidbar 10:29-30*). Through Ruth's yearning to follow her mother-in-law to an unknown future in the Land of Israel, she surpassed the righteous convert Yitro. The great reward that Ruth received was not only the result of her sincere conversion, but also of her deep understanding and conviction to come to the Land of Israel and join the Jewish people. I feel fortunate and blessed to have the merit being a mentor for righteous converts who follow in the footsteps of Ruth. There is not one day I'm not inspired by their commitment and devotion to Torah and mitzvot including the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel.