

"ARE CONVERSIONS SUCCESSFUL?"

Are conversions successful? Do proselytes who come into the fold, with sincere promises to observe the tenets of Judaism, really keep the Halakhah, the Jewish "way?"

The question is one that many Orthodox rabbis are now asking themselves. I do not refer to those of my colleagues who on principle will never perform a conversion, and instead consistently refer them to their colleagues; I have no respect for such cowardly souls. Nor, certainly, do I refer to those few rabbis who treat conversion lightly, as if it were merely another ceremony; for such people I have nothing but undisguised contempt. But what of those of us who are cautious and careful -- do we succeed?

The criteria of "success" are clear enough: the observance of the commandments, genuine piety, and a sense of identification with the people of Israel.

In looking back on my experience of 23 years in the rabbinate, I find that I have refused most candidates who came to me for conversion. Either I talked them out of taking the step, or I rejected them as spiritually weak or ethically insincere. But what of those whose conversions I did preside at -- how have they fared?

Before answering, I should like to point out that Jewish history offers no clear answers. We can point to illustrious successes -- and to dismal failures. For every Shemaya and Abtalion, for every Onkelos, for every progenitor of Rabbi Meir, for every Graf Pototfky, there were probably a hundred who fell by the way side. For every statement in our sacred literature that is positive, such as *וְאַהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר*, "and ye shall love the stranger," which (as Maimonides pointed out in his famous letter to a proselyte) the Torah repeats some five times, emphasizing it much more than love of one's (Jewish) neighbor, there is another statement such as *קָשִׁים גֵּרִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּסַפְחָת*, that proselytes are as difficult for Israel as a scab on the skin.

Perhaps this ambivalence can be found concentrated in the conflicting attitudes of the tradition towards an incident mentioned in today's Sidra, focusing on the personality of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses.

Moses invited Jethro to accompany him and the people of Israel in their trek through the desert:

לְכָה אִיתָנוּ וְהִיטַבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי ה' דִּבֶּר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל

"come with us, and we shall do good to thee, for the Lord hath promised to do well with Israel." Jethro's answer to his son-in-law was:

"I shall not go; I shall return only to my land and to my birthplace." Moses retorted:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְנָא תַעֲזֹב אוֹתָנוּ... וְהֵייתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם, וְהָיָה כִּי־תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ, וְהִיטַבְנוּ לָךְ אֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב לָּךְ

"And Moses said: do not, I pray thee, forsake us... for you shall be for us like eyes, and it shall be that if you will go with us, that all the good which the Lord will do for us, we shall do unto thee."

What an intriguing dialogue! Exactly what did the participants mean in this exchange? Furthermore, there is a tantalizing question: what happened in the end -- did Jethro join Moses, or did he go home to Midian in the desert?

Most commentators see the dialogue as one involving gerut (conversion). What was at stake was the conversion of Jethro to the belief in the God of Israel. So, was this conversion successful? What did Jethro do? Did he come or did he go?

The Tannaim offered two extreme opinions, both of which relate to the incident mentioned in Exodus (18:27)

וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה אֶת חוֹתָנוֹ, "Moses sent his father-in-law away." They see the present Biblical passage as a continuation of that one. Thus, Rabbi Joshua says: וַיִּשְׁלַחוּ מִכְבִּידוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, that Moses sent Jethro "away from the Glory of the World." Moses sensed that Jethro was not sufficiently convinced, his moral fiber and spiritual strength were not adequate to qualify as a genuine proselytization, and therefore Moses rejected him as a member of the community of Israel. R. Eliezer, however, maintains that not only did Moses accept Jethro as a גֵּר צַדִּיק, (righteous proselyte); not only was the conversion successful; but Moses sent Jethro to his "land and his birth place," in order to convert the rest of his family! He told him:

כִּלּוֹם הֵנָּה מֵהֵנָּה אֵינָא בְּמִקְוִים חוֹשֶׁךְ

"is the candle of any use or benefit except in a place of darkness?" In other words, Moses told Jethro to go to those places where spiritual darkness prevails, and there to illuminate it with the light of God.

In between these opinions, we find several intermediate commentaries. Ramban explains that Jethro was a proselyte, but not a very good one. His interpretation of this dialogue was that Moses offered שָׁבוּ, the spoils of war, to Jethro but not נַחֲלָה, no inheritance of the land. Hence Jethro refused to join Israel as a proselyte, and preferred to return to Midian.

that

It was only when Moses mentioned what the Lord would give us we would give Jethro, implying a portion of inheritance of the land, that Jethro accepted. This places a different light on Jethro's conversion -- it was one which was not necessarily motivated by the highest ideals.

Rashi follows a similar but not identical pattern of interpretation. He sees Moses beseeching Jethro to join the people of Israel, but he interprets Moses' remarks אל יא תעזב אותנו, "do not, I pray thee, forsake us," as meaning: let it not be said that Jethro became a Jew only because of extraneous reasons. Instead, join us because you believe in your new faith. The verse is thus a biblical forerunner of the American colloquialism, "Say it ain't so..."

A completely different intermediate opinion is that of Sforno, who maintains that Jethro indeed was a righteous proselyte, but he felt that he was too old and sick to go to a new land, and preferred therefore to return to his home in the desert. However, when he returned to his home, he proselytized his children and his household, and sent them to join Israel and Moses as Jews.

So, my answer to the question I posed is equally ambiguous and uncertain: did Jethro convert? What kind of conversion was it?

Were my own conversions, at which I presided, successful?

I don't know. Yes and no. Some were marvelous, and gave me great satisfaction and joy. Such people, whether or not I presided at their conversions, are to my mind unquestionably superior to the majority of native Jews. Yet I must confess: the majority of those whose conversions I presided -- failed. My requirements were understandably high. I did not preside at a conversion unless, in my own heart and mind, I was convinced of the integrity of the candidate. And yet most have experienced backsliding to greater or lesser degree.

If I had to make a general statement I would say that conversions, as a rule, are not successful. But there are exceptions.

If my experience is adequate to formulate an exegetical answer to the question that bothered our commentators, I would say that Jethro probably did not accompany Israel on their journey to the Holy Land. Jethro was a failure.

I am therefore extremely reluctant to undertake any דבר

(proselytization), even if the candidate promises to observe the commandments and even if my impression is that the candidate is sincere.

Hence, I offer the following advice, besides my "pastoral" opinion about the chances for marital success when the cultural and religious backgrounds differ enormously.

To a young Jew, man or woman, I say: don't count on conversion. Do not put yourself into a position where you are romantically involved with a non-Jew, and then have to guide such a person through proselytization. It can be done successfully, but it is rare. As a rule, I am deeply pessimistic about the results. Save yourself a great deal of trouble, and much heartache for yourself and your family, and avoid such difficulties by not getting involved in the first place.

To a non-Jew who is thinking of conversion because he or she wants to marry a member of the Jewish family, I say: Don't! Proselytization into Judaism is not an empty ceremony, no matter what some Jews may tell you. Immersion in the mikvah is not some magical hocus-pocus. It is a commitment to a new destiny, to rebirth, to taking on a completely new identity. It is unworthy of you, of Judaism, and of your previous religion, to convert merely for convenience. Never mind that most Jews are non-observant. If you desire to come in, it must be at the highest, not the lowest, level. We have enough mediocre Jews... I recommend to you the cigarette that advertises, "I'd rather fight than switch." Don't fight, but don't "switch" merely for convenience. Faith is an ultimate commitment; and marriage, in our society, is not...

To a candidate for conversion who comes out of honorable reasons of conscience, to one who comes out of a metaphysical longing, out of spiritual restlessness, as a result of a life-long search, with inchoate and unarticulated attraction to things Jewish, out of a fascination with Jewish history -- I say: Stop, think... and re-think.

It is hard to be a Jew. It is difficult not only because the observances are a burden, not only because politically it means identifying with a persecuted minority, but it is also socially difficult -- both with non-Jews and even more with Jews. One must enter into the Jewish community with clear awareness of the risks. Marriage, especially, can be difficult. If you enter honorably, you must become an observant Jew. But remember that observant Jews are not prone to marry proselytes because of our long experience of failure. You can be of more service to the Jewish people by being a good goy than a mediocre and non-observant Jew. Judaism has no theological doctrine

of exclusive salvation. In our faith, Olam Haba, the world-to-come or spiritual bliss, is granted to any human being who lives up to his requirements, and therefore the non-Jew who is decent, righteous, and moral is as deserving of spiritual reward as is a Jew who observes the Torah.

But, to the non-Jew who comes in forewarned, ready to withstand all trials and bear all difficulties, prepared for a life-long, irrevocable commitment to love God, to love Torah, to love Israel; who accepts the burden of mitzvot; who wants, out of love, to share our destiny and our way, who will never compromise his or her integrity before God or man, will not be deterred by gentile or Jew --

In other words, to one who comes in with open eyes and stout heart; we say, as did Moses to Jethro: וְהָיִינוּ לְךָ כְּאֶפְרוֹחַיִם which Rashi interprets to mean: "you shall be to us as the apple of our eyes," and we shall take you to our hearts.