

HONORABLE MENTSHEN

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week the Torah tells us about loving every Jew. It adds a special verse exhorting us to be especially sensitive to a special type of Jew the convert. "When a proselyte dwells among you in your land, do not taunt him. The proselyte who dwells with you shall be like a native among you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt -- I am Hashem, your G-d" (Leviticus 19:33-34)

A person who converts has the status of a Jew. He is a full-fledged member of the community and every social, moral and ethical tenet applies to him. Though he may be exempt from particular laws concerning "kahal" (which would have implications in marital law), he is otherwise as equal as any Jew. And that's why this verse troubles me. After all, if the convert is a Jew, why do we need a special command telling us not to inflict any discomfort upon him? Hadn't the Torah told us in verse 18, "Love your neighbor as yourself?" Why implore born-Jews to be nice to the newcomers through a series of commands that seem to use a moral approach: "You were once a stranger, so you know how it feels?" A convert is a Jew. And a Jew is a Jew is a Jew! All rules apply!

When my grandfather Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, was dean of Mesivta Torah Voda'ath back in the 1950s, he developed a professional relationship with a psychotherapist who worked with some of the students. The doctor would often call Rabbi Kamenetzky to discuss his treatment of some of the students under his care. They also would have discussions on psychology and education. The doctor was a student of the famed psychotherapist, Dr. Sigmund Freud, and despite Freud's attitude toward religion, this particular doctor was always respectful and never attributed any of the students' problems to observance or religious commitment.

Years later, when Rav Yaakov was informed that the doctor had passed away, he felt it incumbent to attend his funeral. He assumed it would not be the type of service he was used to, and even understood that he, a frocked and bearded sage, would appear out of place among a medical community of his distinguished colleagues, assimilated German and Austrian psychotherapists and mental health professionals. However, Rav Yaakov's gratitude overruled his hesitation.

When entering the Riverside Chapel, Rav Yaakov was shocked to see that a distinguished Rav, a friend of his, was performing the funeral and that scores of Torah observant Jews were participating. After the service which was done in total compliance with halacha, Rav Yaakov approached his friend who had officiated.

How do you know the doctor? What connection do you have with him? "What do you mean," answered the Rav. "Of course I knew him. The doctor davened in my shul three times a day!"

My grandfather had never discussed religion with the man, he just respected him for his professionalism and abilities.

The Torah tells us that even though there is a universal command to love every Jew as yourself, an additional concept applies specifically to a convert. We must be kind to him as part of the overall moral obligation of a nation that also endured the trauma of being strangers. In addition to loving Jews as their inherent birthright, it is also imperative to display love to them when our moral obligation demands it. The Torah is teaching us not only to act with affection as born Jews but as honorable *mentshen*.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in honor of Thomas & Judith Raskin

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