

ONCE A JEW, ALWAYS A JEW

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"As for me, behold, my Covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations." [17:4]

The Medrash (in Parshas Vayeira) tells us that Avraham said that after he had circumcised himself, many converts came to join the covenant. The Bais HaLevi, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l of Brisk, points out that this seems illogical. We would expect just the contrary -- people should have stayed away because of the pain of circumcision!

In order to understand this Medrash, says the Bais HaLevi, we need to better understand the verse above.

Every person on the face of the earth has free will, and can choose good over evil. Everyone has the opportunity to be a good person, and the righteous of all nations are guaranteed a place in the World to Come. And yet, this recurs in each generation -- as we know, the fact that a person is righteous does not guarantee that his or her children will choose the same path.

The Covenant of Avraham is different. A person who is born into the Jewish people, even a sincere convert who later turns away from Judaism, remains a Jew. Even if he sins, he remains one of the Children of Israel. This stems from the Covenant of circumcision. Even though not all of Avraham's children, and not all of Yitzchak's children, followed that path and joined the same covenant (thus leaving Avraham the founder of nations, plural), the Jewish people was established with the Covenant. Today, it is no longer optional; one cannot refuse the birthright of this nation. And the idea that one could join a people, and steer his or her children into that same people for generations to come -- that was very attractive. That remains attractive today.

For all of the politics today about conversion, and the arguments about patrilineal descent, we must remember -- these arguments which threaten to divide us only bear upon a very small number of people (though it is growing). We all agree (or should) that those born into the Jewish people cannot be disqualified, dispatched, "delegitimized," as Jews. Were someone to attempt to do otherwise, it would cast aspersions upon our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and the Covenant which G-d made with them. We are fortunate to walk with eternity -- let us recognize it, every day, and learn to value every fellow member of the Covenant.