

# CONVERSION & THE CONVERT

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

Yisro answered Moshe, "*I will not go [with you], but will instead return to my own land and relatives.*" (Bamidbar 4:22)

In this week's *parshah* Moshe's father-in-law Yisro returns to Midian. He had come out to meet Moshe and the Jewish people in advance of the giving of Torah and converted to Judaism. Now he was returning home to his native Midian according to some, to convert the rest of this family.

He himself had converted after he heard all that God had done for the Jewish people up until the giving of Torah. The miraculous exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the sea, and the defeat of Amalek impressed him tremendously and he realized that the God of the Jewish people was the one true God.

When we think of converts, we primarily recall the quintessential convert, Rus, the ancestress of Dovid HaMelech. The truth is that Yisro beat her to the punch, so-to-speak. He was one of the first converts to Judaism, and he went back to Midian to make more, something for the most part Judaism does not encourage.

We certainly do not like it when someone converts to Judaism for non-altruistic reasons, as the Talmud states:

Both a man who became a convert for the sake of a woman (i.e., for the sake of marriage), and a woman who became a convert for the sake of a man, and similarly . . . or for the sake of joining Shlomo [HaMelech's] servants, are not proper converts. (*Yevamos* 24b)

There are 613 *mitzvos* in the Torah, and though not all of them apply to everyone or can be done at all times, there are always plenty that are currently applicable. It is difficult enough for people who are born Jewish to not only remain committed to them, but to do them as prescribed by the Torah. The last thing the Jewish people need are additional people who will be lax in Torah observance, which more often than not happens when people convert for non-Torah reasons:

Onkelos son of Kolonikos was the son of Titus's sister, and wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and raised Titus from the dead by magical arts, and asked him, "Who is most in repute in the [other] world?"

He replied, "The Jewish people."

"What about joining them?" he asked.

He answered, "Their observances are burdensome and you will not be able to carry them out."  
(*Gittin* 56b)

Obviously Onkeles converted anyhow and did a good job of it, because his translation of the Torah appears in every *Chumash* and is quite authoritative. He's not the only famous convert since Roman times. There is also the well-known story of Avraham ben Avraham who died *al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the Name of God. He lived in the time of the Vilna Gaon and the Church tried to force him to return to their fold and burned him to death for not doing so. Who knows how many others there have been that we just don't know about?

As my Rosh Yeshivah used to tell us, it is one thing to die for God but something altogether different to live for Him. Dying is a one time event (usually). Living is a moment-by-moment daily thing, and sanctifying the Name of God should be ongoing. This is not easy to recall when someone is born Jew, how much more so might this be the case when someone converts.

In fact, not only is conversion not encouraged, it is even discouraged:

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a person desires to become a convert, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a covert? Do you not know that the Jewish people at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" (*Yevamos* 47a)

It is an interesting question. If someone already knows about the Jewish people well enough to join them, more than likely they also already know about their status among the nations of the world. Perhaps it is the answer that interests us:

If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," he is accepted. (*Yevamos* 47a)

What a bizarre answer. I would have thought that the ideal answer was, "Yes, I know, but I want to convert anyhow." What this convert is essentially saying is, "Yes, I know, and even though I am unworthy of such disgrace and suffering, I want to convert anyhow." Hmm. What is the message here?

Let me explain using an analogy. If an American decides to visit Canada there is very little he must do to prepare for the experience. There will be some cultural differences but not enough to make him stand out and cause a serious mistake that can land him in jail.

If the same American goes to Russia it will be a different story. The cultural change can be so dramatic, that without adequate preparation he will more than likely seriously offend someone, and perhaps even get in trouble with the law. The Cold War did not occur because the US and Russia are so much alike, but because they are so different from one another. So much so, in fact, that each side has to hire special staff just to interpret one side for the other.

The Jewish people are a fish out of water. They may "swim" in this world, but it is not their home "tank." We may adapt, but we cannot adopt, and every time we have tried to, it has backfired on us. We belong to a different world, as the following indicates:

Rav Yosef, the son of Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi, became ill and fell into a trance. When he recovered his father asked him, "What did you see?"

"I saw an upside-down world," he replied, "those who are above [in this world were] below [over there], and those who are below [in this world were] above [over there]."

"My son," he said, "you saw a clear world." (*Pesachim* 50a)

There are not a lot of stories like this in the Talmud, but it is a very instructive one. It speaks of two worlds that are opposites of each other, what Torah tradition refers to as, "This World" and "The World-to-Come." Regarding both, the rabbis taught:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the "corridor" in order to be able to enter the "Banquet Hall." (*Pirkei Avos* 4:16)

Though this world is necessary passage to reach the next one, it is very different from it. This world is physical, and the next one is completely spiritual. This world tends to be about fleeting pleasures, the next one about eternal pleasure. In this world, the good can suffer while the evil prosper. In the World-to-Come, only the good enjoy themselves while the evil spend their time in *Gihenom*. In this world what ought to be up can be down, but in the one that follows up is up and down is down.

Someone once visited the Chofetz Chaim in his home in the 1920s and was shocked at how bare it was. It was missing some the most basic creature comforts of the time, and the guest asked the venerable sage about his situation. The Chofetz Chaim answered him something to this effect:

"When a person travels he takes with him only his most basic necessities for the trip. It would be silly and wasteful to take more since he is only passing through. Likewise, I am only passing through this world, so why should I take with me more than I really need?"

I do not know the impact the Chofetz Chaim's words on the person who asked him the question. I know that I would have been impressed to hear them, but I don't think I would have altered my lifestyle all that much after returning home. Our minds know that the words are true, but the rest of us enjoys this world too much to give up what we can afford to own or experience.

It gets us in trouble. As the Talmud states, it is rare to be able to simultaneously eat at two tables (*Brochos* 5b). Material wealth often comes at the cost of spiritual "wealth." The more one has the more one bonds with the material world, the more addicted he can become to it, and the more willing he becomes to sacrifice the next world for this one.

When Ya'akov Avinu, on his way back into *Eretz Yisroel*, confronted Eisav, the Midrash says they made a deal. It was agreed that this world would belong to Eisav and that the World-to-Come would

belong solely to Ya'akov Avinu, and anyone else righteous enough to join him there. Even Caesar Antoninus, a distant descendant of Eisav, worried about the deal:

Once [Antoninus] asked [Rebi Yehudah HaNasi], "Will I go the World-to-Come?"

"Yes!" Rebi answered him.

"But," Antoninus said, "is it not written, '*There will be no remnant to the house of Eisav*' " (Ovadiiah 1:18)?

"That," he replied, "applies only to those whose evil deeds are like those of Eisav." (*Avodah Zarah* 10b)

This is why the Jewish people have been so loathed throughout the ages. We are foreigners in this world, and we stand out as being different. We can shop in their stores, wear the same clothes as the "locals," but at the end of the day, we belong to another world, another dimension altogether.

When we fail to learn this lesson from the Torah then we are taught it by our enemies:

"If only one country, for whatever reason, tolerates a Jewish family in it, that family will become the germ center for fresh sedition. If one little Jewish boy survives without any Jewish education, with no synagogue and no Hebrew school, it [Judaism] is in his soul. Even if there had never been a synagogue or a Jewish school or an Old Testament, the Jewish spirit would still exist and exert its influence. It has been there from the beginning and there is no Jew, not a single one, who does not personify it." (Robert Wistrich, *Hitler's Apocalypse*, p. 122)

In every generation there have been Jews so assimilated into their gentile cultures that they were shocked when the enemies of their "brothers" came for them as well. It was as if the enemy knew something about them that they did not, and they often left this world pained and confused. They thought they were at home in this world and others told them that they were not.

It is about this that we ask the potential convert to Judaism. We are not merely asking him if he wants to change religions. We are asking him if he wants to change worlds, and if he is aware of the "cost" for doing so.

When the convert claims to be unworthy of the suffering inflicted upon the Jewish people, it is not because he is a masochist. It is because he has learned to see past this world into the next one, and understands the "fee" for right of passage. Willing to pay it, he is welcomed aboard and prepared for the journey ahead.

Text

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