

PROPER TREATMENT OF THE CONVERT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah describes for us in detail the visit of Yitro to the encampment of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. It also details for us the advice given to Moshe by Yitro as how to organize the justice system of the Jewish people.

Though there is a divergence of view among the rabbinic scholars as to whether Yitro came before or after the revelation and the granting of the Torah at Mount Sinai, there is general agreement that Yitro remains the template and role model for converts to Judaism.

Part of the reason is not only Yitro's sincerity in joining the Jewish people and his abandonment of the pagan gods that he had worshipped earlier in his life but in his willingness to give advice and counsel for the benefit of the administration of justice in his newly adopted society.

Many times a new convert is most hesitant to give advice or counsel to the Jewish society. After all, the word "ger"- convert - in Hebrew, has the connotation of being a stranger, an outsider, someone who is only a sojourner and not yet necessarily a full fledged citizen. Therefore it is most understandable that such a person may feel somewhat reticent at giving suggestions and advice to those who have been Jews for generations and since their birth.

Yitro's boldness in asserting himself immediately into advising and improving Jewish society is a testimony to his comfort level, sincerity and commitment regarding the Jewish people and its Torah values and strictures. That is why he is given so much respect and prominence in the Torah of the Jewish people.

Converts bring with them a different range of experience and mindset to Jewish life than do generational and born Jews raised exclusively in a Jewish society. In Yiddish there is a famous phrase that "a guest for a while sees for a mile." Jewish society always needs constant revitalization and freshness. Our Torah is eternal and ageless but the tactics for promoting and teaching it vary from time to time and from locality to locality.

Many times it is the newcomer, the former stranger that has newly entered the fold of Judaism and Jewish society that provides that new spark of energy and innovativeness that powers Torah Judaism forward even more. It is no coincidence that the Gaon of Vilna is buried next to the grave of

the Ger Tzedek - the righteous convert to Judaism in eighteenth century Vilna.

The Gaon was an innovator, a departure from the other scholars of his time and even from many of those who preceded him. Converts on the whole - those who are sincerely attracted to Judaism and not influenced by other factors or are converted by ersatz methods and insincere and non-observant courts - are an inspiration to Jewish society and a prod for further progress and accomplishments.

This is also an important lesson that we can glean from the events described in this week's parsha. Proper treatment of the convert is mentioned thirty six times in the Torah - more than any other commandment or value. We should take heed of this and assess the new convert correctly and not condescendingly.

Shabat shalom, Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com