

Matan Torah as a Form of Conversion

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One of the themes of Shavuot is *geirut*, conversion. This theme is apparent in the fact that the laws of conversion are derived from the *Matan Torah* (receiving of the Torah) experience. Additionally, R. David Avudraham, in *Tefillot HaPesach*, writes that one of the reasons we read *Megillat Rut* on Shavuot is that it serves as the source for the requirement to inform the prospective convert about some of the mitzvot (see *Yevamot* 47b), which relates to the mass conversion of the Jewish people at *Matan Torah*. In this article, we will explore the differences between the mass conversion of all of the Jewish people at *Matan Torah* and the conversion of an individual such as Rut.

Matan Torah and the Laws of Conversion

The Torah, Bamidbar 15:14-16, in presenting the idea that converts observe the laws in the exact same way as other Jews states "ככם כגר", like you (observe them) so too a convert." The Gemara, *Keritut* 9a, deduces from this phrase that the laws of conversion are derived from the process that the Jewish people underwent prior to receiving the Torah. Rambam (1138-1204) elaborates on this idea:

The Jewish people entered the covenant with three things: circumcision, immersion and a sacrificial offering. Circumcision was performed in Egypt as it states "Anyone who is uncircumcised may not eat [the paschal lamb.] Immersion was performed in the desert before the giving of the Torah as it states "and you shall purify yourselves today and tomorrow and wash your clothing." A sacrificial offering as it states "And he sent the youth of the people of Israel and they brought offerings," these offerings were brought on behalf of the entire Jewish people. The same applies in all generations, when a non-Jew wants to enter the covenant and to settle under the wings of the Shechinah and accept upon himself the yoke of the Torah, he requires circumcision, immersion and offering a sacrifice and if she is a female, immersion and sacrifice, as it states "like you, so too a convert." Just look like you [converted] with circumcision, immersion and offering a sacrifice,

בשלשה דברים נכנסו ישראל לברית במילה וטבילה וקרבן. מילה היתה במצרים שנאמר וכל ערל לא יאכל בו ... וטבילה היתה במדבר קודם מתן תורה שנאמר וקדשתם היום ומחר וכבסו שמלותם, וקרבן שנאמר וישלח את נערי בני ישראל ויעלו עולות ע"י כל ישראל הקריבום. וכן לדורות כשירצה העכו"ם להכנס לברית ולהסתופף תחת כנפי השכינה ויקבל עליו עול תורה צריך מילה וטבילה והרצאת קרבן, ואם נקבה היא טבילה וקרבן שנאמר ככם כגר, מה אתם במילה וטבילה והרצאת קרבן אף הגר לדורות במילה וטבילה והרצאת

so too, all generations of converts do so with circumcision, immersion and offering a sacrifice.

Rambam, Hilchot Isurei Biah 13:1-4

קרובן.
רמב"ם, הל' איסורי ביאה יג:א-ד

Was the conversion process of the entire Jewish people exactly the same as the conversion process for an individual? There is a passage in the Gemara that indicates at least one major difference:

The verse states "And they stood under the mountain," R. Avdimi b. Chama b. Chasa said: This teaches that God hung the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them "If you accept the Torah, good, but if not, this will be your burial ground."

Shabbos 88a

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.
שבת פח.

While there are many interpretations of this passage, assuming that the Jewish people did not have a choice whether to accept the Torah, how can we derive from the *Matan Torah* experience the laws of conversion? Doesn't Judaism reject the concept of forced conversions? Furthermore, when Rambam writes that we don't force non-Jews to convert, he presents it together with the idea that conversion is derived from *Matan Torah*:

Moshe Rabbeinu only bestowed the Torah and its commandments to the Jewish people- as it states "A heritage for the congregation of Ya'akov"- and to anyone from the other nations who wants to convert- as it states "like you, so too a convert." However, if one doesn't want to [convert] we cannot force him to accept the Torah and its commandments.

Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 8:10

משה רבינו לא הנחיל התורה והמצוות אלא לישראל. שנאמר מורשה קהלת יעקב. ולכל הרוצה להתגייר משאר האומות. שנאמר ככם כגר. אבל מי שלא רצה אין כופין אותו לקבל תורה ומצוות.
רמב"ם הלכות מלכים ח:י

Why did Rambam associate "like you, so too a convert" with the idea that we don't force conversion?

Another discrepancy between the laws of conversion and the *Matan Torah* experience is with regards to the relationship between a convert and his biological relatives. The Gemara, *Yevamot* 97b, employs the term *ger shenitgayer k'katan shenolad*, a convert is like a newborn child, to explain why a convert is allowed to marry certain biological relatives. R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843-1926), *Meshech Chochmah*, Devarim 5:26, writes that after *Matan Torah*, the entire Jewish people were permitted to marry biological relatives and that *Matan Torah* actually serves as the source for the *ger shenitgayer* concept. However, a number of later commentators (see for example, *Chavetzelet HaSharon*, Bamidbar 11:10) note that the Gemara, *Shabbat* 130a, indicates that the concept of *ger shenitgayer* did not apply to the conversion of *Matan Torah*. According to the Gemara (as per the interpretation of the *Ba'alei HaTosafot* in *Da'at Zekeinim*, Bamidbar 11:27) the Jewish people complained about the fact that after *Matan Torah*, certain marriages that took place before *Matan Torah* were

invalidated because they were considered a form of incest. Why didn't *ger shenitgayer* apply to the conversion of *Matan Torah* and why does it apply to an individual who converts?

The Insight of Maharal of Prague

Maharal of Prague (1520-1609) has a suggestion that sheds light on these questions:

One should not ask: being that the Jews who left Egypt accepted the Torah and were not born with an obligation to observe the Torah, they should have been permitted to marry their relatives. This is not a question because they were forced to accept [the Torah] because God hung the mountain over them like a barrel ... and therefore we don't assume that they are like newborn children. While someone who voluntary converts, such as the ordinary case of a non-Jew who willingly converts is considered a new individual, the Jewish people that left Egypt- since they were obligated to accept the Torah and were forced to do so- were not considered like newborn children.

Gur Aryeh, Bereishit 46:10

ואין להקשות דאם כן יהיו יוצאי מצרים מותרים בקרוביהם דהא קבלו עליהם את התורה, לא נולדו בחיוב, ויהיו מותרים בקרוביהם. אין זה קשיא דהם הוכרחו לקבל דהא כפה עליהם הר כגיגית ... ולא אמרינן בזה דהוי כקטן שנולד דודאי מי שנתגייר מעצמו כגון גוי כיון דלא היה צריך לגייר והוא מגייר עצמו הוי בריה אחרת לגמרי אבל ישראל שיצאו ממצרים כיון שהיו מחויבים לקבל את התורה, והיו מוכרחים לזה אין זה כקטן שנולד.
גור אריה בראשית מו:

According to Maharal, *ger shenitgayer* is a function of voluntary acceptance of the Torah. Since that didn't happen at *Matan Torah*, *ger shenitgayer* didn't apply. Maharal's comments require further explanation. Why should the *ger shenitgayer* principle be strictly limited to voluntary acceptance of the Torah? What element of the forced conversion of *Matan Torah* prevented the *ger shenitgayer* principle from taking effect? If the conversion of *Matan Torah* was fundamentally different to the extent that there were different laws, how can *Matan Torah* serve as the model for conversion?

R. Meir D. Plotzki (1867-1928), *Kli Chemdah, Parashat Vayigash* explains Maharal's comments by stating that when an individual converts, he is separating himself from his previous attachment to another nation and therefore, *ger shenitgayer* applies. When the Jewish people accepted the Torah, they were building on their connection to Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, not trying to sever it. This is why *ger shenitgayer* did not apply.

R. Eliyahu Bakshi Doron, *Teshuvot* 1:22, develops this idea further. He notes Rambam's language (in *Hilchot Issurei Biah* 13:4) that there are two components to the conversion process. First, one must enter the covenant (*l'hikanes lab'rit*). R. Bakshi Doron explains that this refers to the covenant of Sinai which is as a covenant to observe the mitzvot as members of the Jewish community. While the Jewish people were observing some mitzvot prior to Sinai, they were observing them as individuals with no connection to others observing the same mitzvot. At Sinai, observance of mitzvot became a direct function of being a member of the Jewish nation, each person responsible for another. Second, "[one must] settle under the wings of the *Shechinah* and accept upon himself the yoke of the Torah." Before entering into the covenant, the convert must first choose to become a member of the Jewish people and accept the mitzvot.

Why does Rambam list entering the covenant first? Doesn't that take place after one decides to become a part of the Jewish people and accept the mitzvot? R. Bakshi Doron suggests that Rambam listed it first because the acceptance of mitzvot must be an acceptance that incorporates entry into the covenant of Sinai. After *Matan Torah*, one cannot become part of the Jewish people without also entering the covenant of Sinai. In practical terms, the potential convert chooses to become part of the Jewish people, accepts the mitzvot and then enters the covenant and becomes a member of the Jewish people.

Rambam describes that the Jewish people entered the covenant through circumcision, immersion and the offering of a sacrifice. R. Bakshi Doron notes that this is how entry into the covenant is performed for all future converts. However, there is a part of the conversion process that the Jewish people who left Egypt did not perform. As descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, they did not need to become part of the Jewish people nor did they have a choice in accepting the mitzvot. It is this part of the process that gives the convert a new identity and therefore, *ger shenitgayer* did not apply to the Jewish people. "Like you, so too a convert" teaches us the specific steps that are necessary to enter the covenant. Aspects related to the broader conversion process are not derived from the *Matan Torah* experience.

R. Bakshi Doron's comments can explain Rambam's discussion of forced conversion (*Hilchot Melachim* 8:10). Rambam writes that there are two ways to become Jewish. First, one is born Jewish and there is no choice whether to accept it or not. It is a heritage for the congregation of Ya'akov. Second, one chooses to convert. Rambam does not provide the details of the process because he already mentioned them in *Hilchot Issurei Biah*. However, he does introduce the idea that "like you, so too a convert" can only be applied to someone who willingly wants to convert. This is because "like you, so too a convert" only teaches how to enter the covenant and not the broader conversion process, which includes a voluntary acceptance of observance of the mitzvot.

The Benefits of the Voluntary Conversion

Another difference between the conversion of the Jewish people at *Matan Torah* and the conversion of an individual is highlighted by the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797). In *Megillat Rut*, when Rut first meets Boaz, he says:

May the Lord reward your deeds, and may your reward be full from the Lord God of Israel, under Whose wings you have come to take shelter.

Ruth 2:12 (Judaica Press Translation)

ישלם ה' פעלך ותהי מכשרתך שלמה
מעם ה' אלקי ישראל אשר באת
לחסות תחת כנפיו.
רות ב:יב

On a simple level, Boaz is praising Rut for taking the bold step of converting to Judaism and offering her a blessing that she should be rewarded for her actions. The Vilna Gaon felt that Boaz's comment seems to contradict the statement in Avot 1:3, that we should not fulfill mitzvot in order to receive reward, and therefore offers the following insight:

The idea is that our service of God must not be for reward because how can we be brazen to ask for reward for our service to Him? Does it make sense for a permanent slave to ask for

הענין כי עבודתינו אליו ית"ש שלא
על מנת לקבל פרס כי איך נעיז פנינו
לבקש שכר על עבודתינו לו היתכן
שבקש עבד עולם פרס מרבו הלא כל

reward from his master? So too, God took us out of Egypt to be His servants. However, someone who was not redeemed from Egypt can ask for reward for his service because he chose [service of] God on his own. This is what [Boaz] states "May the Lord reward your deeds, and may your reward be full etc," you can certainly ask for reward because you came to take shelter under His wings now and you weren't part of the redemption from Egypt.

Commentary of the Vilna Gaon to Ruth 2:12

גופו קנוי וכן הוא יתברך הוציאנו
ממצרים מבית עבדים ולקח אותנו
להיות לו לעבדים. אבל מי שלא
נגאל ממצרים זה יכול לבקש שכר על
עבודתו כי מעצמו בחר בה' וז"ש
ישלם ה' פעלך ומשכרתך שלמה כו'
ובודאי תוכל אתה לבקש שכר מפני
אשר באתה לחסות עתה בצל כנפיו
ולא היית בגאולת מצרים.
פירוש הגר"א לרות ב:יב

The Vilna Gaon's comments provide an important insight into the difference between the conversion at *Matan Torah* and the conversion of an individual. The conversion of *Matan Torah* was not optional because the Jewish people were considered servants of God from the moment He redeemed them from slavery. This idea is expressed by the Midrash:

R. Tuvia b. Yitzchak said: [the verse states] "I am the Lord your God," it is on this condition that I took you out of Egypt, so that you accept My Divine authority upon yourselves.

Shemot Rabbah 29:3

א"ר טוביה ב"ר יצחק אנכי ה' אלקיך
שעל מנת כן הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים
שתקבל אלקותי עליך.
שמות רבה כט:ג

The individual potential convert who wasn't freed from the slavery of Egypt has the option to choose to be part of the Jewish people. Although the convert cannot opt out once the conversion is complete, the convert retains certain benefits based on his voluntary acceptance of the Torah including the right to perform mitzvot for the purpose of receiving reward.

Your Nation is My Nation

The holiday of Shavuot celebrates our entry into the covenant of Sinai. This covenant requires all members of the Jewish people to take responsibility for each other. We do not see ourselves simply as a group of individuals who all observe the same laws. We are a nation bound together by the covenant of Sinai. The mitzvot we received at Sinai, even those that appear as mitzvot incumbent on the individual, all have a national element to them. The individual convert can't become part of the Jewish people without accepting this national element of mitzvot. R. Bakshi Doron notes that this is why Rut tells Na'ami (1:16) "your nation is my nation and your God is my God (עמך עמי ואלקיך אלקי)." Rut accepted the national element as part of her acceptance of Judaism. As we celebrate Shavuot and experience our own personal acceptance of the Torah, we should keep in mind our national mandate and responsibility towards others.