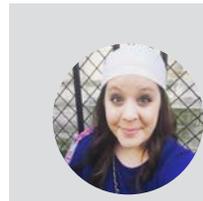


I Just Want to Drink My Tea

Sipping a nice hot cup of ginger tea is my favorite way to end a Shabbat meal, regardless of the time of year. I was once a guest at someone's Shabbat table sipping my tea, when the conversation turned to non-kosher food trends. The topic seems a bit random but I promise there was a context to it. Anyway, I was just sitting in my seat and enjoying the spicy aroma of my brew when, yet again, someone asked my opinion on a popular non-kosher restaurant. Before I could open my mouth, someone else piped up and asked how it is that I could have an opinion to begin with. Not missing a beat, I followed with my typical response, "Because I'm a *baalat teshuva*," a line I've been using for years at this point.

Then came the typical questions: Why did you become *frum*? Was it hard to keep Shabbat? What do you miss from before? I've learned how to give canned answers to these questions that at this point require little to no thought and satisfy the inquiries fairly quickly. Inevitably there was one person who was more curious than everyone else and just couldn't let the topic go. It tends to be the case that someone will then proceed to poke at my defenses and ask more personal questions about my family. Sometimes someone else will get involved and change the subject, but more often than not there will instead



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be a pregnant pause until I give some rushed answer.

Before I describe where the conversation tends to go from there I would like to bring in the Shelah, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz. In *Shnei Luchot HaBrit* he spends some time discussing the phrase "When a stranger (convert) lives among you" from Vayikra 19:33, and how it is meant to serve as a literary allusion to Avraham. He explains that the reason Hashem put this allusion in the Torah is to remind us not to remind others of their potentially sordid pasts when we have our own to deal with. He goes on to remind us that B'nei Yisrael committed acts of *avodah zarah* and other *aveirot* while in Egypt and that because of this, we have no right to remind a convert of his or her prior acts.

The Talmud Bavli in *Masechet Bava Metzia* page 58b discusses a Mishna detailing the prohibition of *ona'at devarim* — causing someone emotional suffering — and how that can be done through various statements. One of the examples the Mishna gives refers to *baalei teshuva*:

אם היה בעל תשובה לא יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים אם הוא בן גרים לא יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך שנאמר (שמות כב, כ) וגר לא תונה ולא תלחצנו.

If one is a baal teshuva, someone cannot say to him, "Remember your earlier actions," and if one is a child of converts, you cannot say to him, "Remember the actions of your ancestors," because the verse says, "And you shall not mistreat nor oppress" (Shemot 22:20).

These statements from the Mishna are already fairly clear: don't remind *baalei teshuva* or converts about their past. But the Gemara goes a step further in its discussion of the Mishna. On the same page, the Gemara discusses an actual convert, explaining:

אם היה גר ובא ללמוד תורה אל יאמר לו פה שאכל נבילות וטריופות שקצים ורמשים בא ללמוד תורה שנאמר מפי הגבורה.

If someone is a convert and he came to study Torah, someone cannot say to him, "Does the mouth that consumed non-kosher carcasses, wounded animals, disgusting creatures, and creeping animals come to study the Torah that was given over by the mouth of Hashem?"

Now most people, being decent and



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kind, would never think of saying something like what the Gemara is describing to anyone. I think that the rabbis of the Gemara also believed that most people were decent and kind and didn't need to give *mussar* telling people not to make such statements. The rabbis were possibly using such an extreme example to illustrate a different point about how it feels for the convert in this situation. If you were in this convert's shoes, how would you feel? Attacked? Embarrassed? Isolated? Inferior? I believe the rabbis would also apply this thinking to other questions posed to converts that seem to be more *pareve*. Questions like, Why did you convert? Was it hard to keep Shabbat? What do you miss from before?

If you have been following me so far, then you can already see where that conversation I was describing usually goes. It comes out that I'm a convert (surprise!) and then the questions become increasingly more invasive. At this point I tend to do one of two things, feign fatigue or steel myself with another cup of ginger tea. After about 10 minutes of being peppered

with questions I hear the most common comment of all, "You're so inspirational! Can you share your story?"

Now, to people who aren't converts or *baalei teshuva* that last comment may seem harmless, but I would like to argue otherwise. When someone becomes a *baal teshuva* or a convert he or she spends a certain amount of time learning how to fit in to the *frum* community. What to say when, how to dress, what *hechsherim* to look for, these are all things we have to navigate as we find our place in the religious world.¹ After this transitional period we just want to be accepted like any other *frum from birth* person (FFB). In other words, we want to "pass." Once we have integrated into Modern Orthodox society, we don't want others to remind us of our past. Can you imagine someone reminding you of a car accident you had at 16 after you were well into your 20's? Now imagine that happening when you're surrounded by strangers who want to ask all sorts of probing questions about the incident, over 10 years later.

I would like to suggest that as we

celebrate Shavuot, we take time to think about how we could be more sensitive towards converts and *baalei teshuva*. Not just because Megillat Rut discusses the famous convert of the same name but because when the story was over, Rut went on to just be Rut, a regular *shomeret mitzvah* member of the tribe. Stories such as Rut's can definitely be a source of inspiration, but as we seek out inspiration, we also need to be sensitive to the impact it has on others. I, and many, many others, don't want to be treated as a separate group that the rest of the community finds "inspiration" from. We just want to bake challah, daven in a minyan, learn Torah, and enjoy a night out like anyone else. So please, don't make us pay for our supper by harassing us with questions. We just want to drink our tea.

Endnotes

1 I encourage you to read *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* by Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor for more information on this transition.

The Choice of the Convert as a Source of Inspiration

Even without knowing a person's particular story, we can be inspired by the very choice to become Jewish. The *Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* no. 6 states:

א"ל ר"ש בן לקיש חביב הגר לפני הקב"ה מן אותן אוכלוסין שעמדו על הר סיני, למה שכל אותן אוכלוסין אלולי שראו הקולות והלפידים וברקים וההרים רועשים וקול שופרות לא קבלו עליהם מלכות שמים, וזה לא ראה אחד מכולם ובא ומשלים עצמו להקב"ה וקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים יש חביב מזה.

Reish Lakish responded: the convert is more precious before the Holy One, Blessed Be He than the population that stood at Mount Sinai. Why? Because if that population didn't see the sounds, the flames, the thunder, the trembling of the mountains and the sound of the shofars, they wouldn't have accepted upon themselves the Heavenly Kingdom. This

individual didn't see any of that and came to refine himself/herself to the Holy One Blessed Be He and accepted upon himself/herself, the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom. Is there anything more precious than this?

R. Yehonatan Eibeschutz, *Yearot Devash* no. 1, writes that when we recite the beracha of *Al HaTzaddikim* (for the righteous), we should specifically have in mind to fulfill the mitzvah to love the convert. In today's day and age when the spirit of the times is to live a life free of any ethical systems, and this individual decides to accept the yoke of mitzvot, this individual is comparable to Avraham Avinu who discovered God on his own.

Torah To Go Editors