

Lessons from Mount Sinai: The Interplay between Halacha and Humanity in the Gerus Process

A major motif of the Shavuot holiday is the idea that *kabbalas HaTorah* represents the collective conversion of B'nai Yisroel to the Jewish faith. Indeed, the Talmud (*Kerisus* 9a) derives from the *matan Torah* experience at Har Sinai each of the requisite components of conversion, including the requirements for immersion in a mikvah and, in the case of male converts, bris milah. The statement of “*na’aseh ve’nishma*” (Shemos 24:7) — that we agreed to accept the covenant of all the laws of the Torah, including those not yet known by us — parallels the requirement of *kabbalas ol mitzvos*, the acceptance by each convert throughout the generations of the yoke of commandments (see, e.g., *Teshuvos VeHanhagos* 2:515). Similarly, the requirement that a conversion take place before a rabbinical court is based on the concept of the rabbinical court serving in the place of the Divine Presence that was present at Har Sinai, as expressed in the verse (Tehillim 82:1) *Elokim nitzav ba’adas Kel be’kerev Elokim yishpot* — that the Divine Presence resides within a rabbinical court (see Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Al HaTeshuva*, p. 137).

During the reading of the *Aseres*



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Hadibros on Shavuot morning, the entire congregation rises to stage a reenactment of the entering of the community of Israel into the Divine covenant (see *Mesorah*, volume 1, pp. 17-18). Along the same lines, the reading of the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuot (in the Diaspora on the second day) evokes the conversion experience of each individual convert. Ruth, in her exclamation (1:16) of “*amech ami v’elokoich elokai*” (your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d), represents the paradigmatic convert who is prepared to associate herself wholly and unconditionally to the Jewish people and the Jewish faith.

The Talmud (*Yevamos* 48b) derives from the verse in Ruth (2:12) in which Boaz tells her “*u’sehi maskurtech shelemah*” — that your reward shall be complete, “*asher bas lachasos tachas kenafav*” — because you have chosen to enter under the protections of the wings of the Divine Presence, that Ruth received a particularly

grandiose reward for her conversion to Judaism. According to one opinion in the Talmud (that of “*acherim omrim*”), most converts endure a certain amount of suffering as a result of having delayed their entry into the covenant of the Jewish people. However, in the case of Ruth, she was not able to convert until the Sages had decreed that the Biblical ban against marrying Moabite converts applied only to Moabite men and not Moabite women. As soon as this ruling was issued, she converted immediately without delay, and was therefore not subject to punishment (commentary of *Etz Yosef*, *ibid*).

However, the aforementioned opinion in the Talmud about how converts are penalized for not having converted at an earlier point in time is puzzling because Judaism does not seek to proselytize non-Jews to convert to Judaism, and believes that it is perfectly legitimate for non-Jews to remain non-Jewish. Why, then, should



PERSPECTIVES ON CONVERSION

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a convert be punished for taking so long to convert?

The commentary *Ahavas Eisan* (on the *Eyn Yaakov*) answers this question based on a different Talmudic passage. The Gemara in *Shabbos* (146a) states that all Jews were present at Har Sinai and have therefore been cleansed of the contamination brought upon humankind by the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. The Talmud then asks that while this makes sense with respect to descendants of those who were present at Mount Sinai, this does not account for converts whose ancestors were not present at the time. Accordingly, the Talmud answers that while the converts were not present, their “*mazal*,” or spiritual shadow, was indeed present at Har Sinai when the Torah was given. Therefore, all converts were predestined from the time of their birth to become converts to Judaism, in which case, explains the *Ahavas Eisan*, they can be held responsible for not converting quickly enough.

The *Chida* (*Midbar Kedemos*) notes that this is a reason why a convert is not called a “*goy she’nisgayer*” (a non-Jew who converted), but rather a “*ger she’nisgayer*” (a convert who converted), since he or she was always destined to become a convert. This insight is also consistent with the comment attributed to the Ger Tzedek of Vilna that throughout the generations, those Jews who became apostates were descendants of the small minority of Jews who did not want to accept the Torah at the time of *matan Torah*, and those non-Jews who converted to Judaism were descendants from the small minority of the other nations who would have been prepared to accept the Torah when it was offered to them.

Based on this insight, we can

understand why, notwithstanding Na’ami’s three utterances of *shovna* and *shovna b’nosai* (“return, my daughters, go back”), from which we derive that a convert should be discouraged three times, the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Yisro, Remez 268*) teaches:

כשיבוא אדם אצלך להתגייר ואינו בא אלא
לשם שמים אף אתה קרבהו ואל תרחקהו
מכאן אתה למד שיהא אדם דוחה בשמאל
ומקרב בימין.

When a person comes to you to convert and is sincerely motivated to do so, you should welcome him and not distance him. From here we learn that a person should distance with left (weaker hand) and welcome with the right (stronger) hand.

Since each sincere convert starts off as a destined member of the Jewish people, special care must be taken not to cast the convert away, even in the process of our appropriate efforts to gauge his or her commitment and sincerity to adopt the Jewish faith. The Radal (commentary to *Midrash Rabbah, Megillas Ruth*) writes:

והיינו שפותחין לו דלת ואין דוחין לגמרי לנעול
דלת בפניו.

The door to conversion should never be shut entirely but must always maintain a sliver of an aperture.

In fact, the *Ba’alei Tosafot* (*Yevamos 109b, s.v. Ra’ah*) note that while it is improper to solicit converts or to convert an individual precipitously, the patriarchs were criticized for rejecting the overtures of Timna (see *Sanhedrin 99b*), a daughter of a chieftain of Seir, when she genuinely desired to become a member of the Jewish people. A consequence of her rejection from conversion to Judaism was that she ended up in a union with Elifaz, the son of Esav, from whom she bore Amalek, the arch enemy of the Jewish people.

It is interesting in this vein to note that while Judaism recognizes the validity of *she’ain da’atam domeh zeh lazeh* (*Berachos 58a*) — of there being a variety of different personality types — nonetheless when it comes to interactions with conversion candidates the Talmud (*Shabbos 30b*) states explicitly:

לעולם יהא אדם ענוותן כהלל ולא קפדן
כשמאי.

A person should always have the patience and forbearance of Hillel and not the strictness and severity of Shamai.

Most people are familiar with the famous story of the individual who thought he could cause Hillel to lose his temper by continuously interrupting him with silly questions while Hillel was trying to bathe for Shabbos. What is not as well known is that this story appears in the context of the Talmudic passage praising Hillel’s personality specifically when dealing with candidates for Jewish conversion. The Talmud immediately thereafter recounts how after Shamai forcefully turned away three conversion candidates who came with unreasonable attitudes (one wanting to accept only the Written Law, one wanting to learn the entire Torah on one foot, and the other wanting to become the High Priest), Hillel worked with them with patience and understanding until they were fully ready for conversion (see *Maharsha ad locum, s.v. amar leih*). At the end of the account, the Talmud (*Shabbos 31a*) tells about how the three individuals met up in one place and declared:

קפדנותו של שמאי בקשה לטורדנו מן העולם
ענוותנותו של הלל קרבנו תחת כנפי השכינה.
The severity of Shamai sought to banish us from the world, and the humility of Hillel drew us under the wings of the Divine Presence.

The clear message from this Talmudic passage is that the rabbis who deal with conversion candidates are enjoined to assume the personality profile of Hillel.

The *Gemara* in *Yevamos* (47b) indicates that it is a mitzvah to convert a sincere conversion candidate without delay as soon as the convert demonstrates his or her readiness to accept the yoke of commandments and the Jewish faith. The commentators debate the nature of this mitzvah, but one explanation is that this is a fulfillment of the commandment *v'ahavtem es hager* — to love the convert (see Rav Yerucham Perlow's discussion in his commentary to the *Sefer Hamitzvot* of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon, *Mitzvah* 19, in the name of the Ri Arbagaloni). While others are of the opinion that the mitzvah of loving a convert only kicks in at the time that the convert has joined the Jewish people, the *Tosafos HaRosh* (*Shabbos* 137b) states that the mitzvah of loving the convert is in existence even at the time that a *bris milah* is performed on a male conversion candidate who still needs to undergo conversion in order to become a member of the Jewish faith, and that this is the reason why the blessing recited at such time includes the phrase *אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לומר למול את הגרים* — Who has commanded us to circumcise the converts. We can understand this approach very well based upon the explanation that every convert was destined from birth to convert to Judaism, and therefore is already viewed as a convert on some

level prior to the completion of the conversion process.

Along these lines, Rav Asher Weiss (*Shu"t Minchas Asher* 1:49) rules that it is not the province of the Beth Din to reject a candidate based on the fact that they are uncomfortable with the convert's social skills (unless of course there is a deficiency in terms of *midos* — the essential character traits that are part of a Torah Jew's personality) if the convert has the requisite commitment and wherewithal to fulfill the mitzvos of the Torah. While part of the conversion process is an assessment by the Beth Din that a candidate belongs in the community of Israel, the Beth Din also has a solemn responsibility to facilitate the conversion of any sincere individual who is genuinely prepared to assume the commitments and responsibilities that define membership in the Jewish community.

Our rabbis teach that *ger she'nisgayer k'katan shenolad dami* — a convert who converts is like a newborn child (*Yevamos* 22a). Conversion is not only a halachic process, but is a birth, a moment of celebration. It is our custom at the Chicago Rabbinical Council, and the practice of many other rabbinical courts, to have the convert recite the blessing of *Shehechyanu* on a conversion. It is a happy occasion, a momentous event. There is even a custom (see *Mishnas HaGer* 8:4, *Teshuvos VeHanhagos* 3:307) to have a *seudas mitzvah* — a festive meal — following the completion of a conversion. It is vital to remember that conversion

to Judaism is a significant human milestone that requires humanity, sensitivity and appreciation. Accordingly, in addition to sending out a certificate of conversion to the conversion candidate, we have adopted the practice of sending out “Mazal Tov on Your Conversion” cards, much in the same fashion that people send such cards on a birthday, anniversary, or birth of a new baby.

The Talmud in *Pesachim* (87b) teaches:

לא הגלה הקב"ה את ישראל לבין האומות
אלא כדי שיתוספו עליהם גרים

Hashem did not exile the Jewish people amongst the nations of the world except for the purpose of adding converts to our people.

Hashem put us in exile to attract the sincere converts who are scattered throughout the earth. We can suggest that this task carries a twofold purpose. On one level, we have a responsibility to bring into the fold the sincere converts, such as Ruth, the great grandmother of King David, who have so much to contribute to the continuity of the Jewish people. But on another level, the very process of working together with conversion candidates serves as a growth opportunity for the character traits of Jews from birth, to learn how to inspire, to instruct and to embrace those, like Ruth and even like Timna, who want so much to join the Jewish people and adopt the Jewish faith. This can happen if we are prepared to open our hearts and minds, like Hillel, to work with them earnestly and compassionately.



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