

THE BAD DAYS

גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה אומרים לו מה ראית שבאת להתגייר אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דויים דחופים סחופים ומטורפין ויסורין באין עליהם.

When someone comes to convert nowadays, we say to him, "Why do you want to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people nowadays are depressed, persecuted, subjugated, harried, and subject to suffering?" (Yevamos 47a)

When I began my tenure as Administrator of the Manhattan Beth Din for Conversions in 2010, we always made a point of asking the would-be convert whether he or she was prepared to be subject to antisemitism. The question and answer (it was always "yes") seemed *pro forma*. Antisemitism in 2010 seemed like a distant memory in most of the West. Sure, occasionally one dealt with a bigot, but that was the exception to the rule, and even the bigots tended to be verbally abusive at most.

Over the past fourteen years, I have often observed to conversion candidates that the question has become progressively less *pro forma* and more of an actual question. That slow progression became an avalanche after Oct. 7, when antisemitism erupted worldwide. Suddenly, the question was real: Do you really want to join us? As you can see, there are many people out there in the world today who hate us and are actively working to kill us

So ... what's the answer when the question is "real"? How has the explosion of antisemitism impacted potential converts?

While I'm not sure that there are hard statistics, anecdotally, antisemitism does not seem to have diminished the number of prospective converts. There are some indications that interest in conversion has even increased. But why? Why would someone want to join a people who are "depressed, persecuted, subjugated, harried, and subject to suffering"?



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The beginnings of an answer may lie in a text forwarded to me by a friend and rabbinic colleague. It was sent to him by a convert (one of our "graduates") in his community, shortly after the events of Oct. 7:

I'm not sure if you remember, but in the mikveh they asked me a TON of questions that I had to answer yes and no to, and one I remembered the most often since has been, "do you understand that you are joining a persecuted people who are discriminated against, etc etc?" And I thought, "what a question to ask during this beautiful moment?!" Lol

Dedicated in loving memory of my father, Rabbi Judah Leonard Romm, Rav Yehuda Leib ben Avraham Dov ה"מ

Then, I didn't get it. Now, I completely get why Rabbi Romm asked it. It's part of the essence of our being, along with all the good, even if it's hard to face and stomach. It's who we are and what we continue to face and push through the next wave of darkness.

This convert felt that antisemitism was not simply an unfortunate byproduct of being Jewish. Somehow, being subject to antisemitism expressed the very essence of Jewishness. There is almost a sense of pride in being the target of antisemites.

The notion that experiencing antisemitism is an essential aspect of a full Jewish identity seems to find halachic expression in the Talmud's insistence that the prospective convert not only be aware and accepting of antisemitism, but likely to actually experience it:

ת"ר אין מקבלין גרים לימות המשיח כיוצא בו לא קבלו גרים לא בימי דוד ולא בימי שלמה.

The Rabbis taught: We will not accept converts when Mashiach comes. Similarly, converts were not accepted during the days of David and Shlomo.

Yevamos 24b

The Talmud goes on to explain that this refusal to accept converts during messianic times stems from an interpretation of a verse in Yeshaya (54:15): "He who comes to convert can only do so when I—Hashem—am 'absent' (i.e. at a time where the Jewish people are persecuted and G-d seems to be 'absent')."

We might be tempted to explain that the refusal to accept converts in messianic times stems from the suspicion that they are converting for ulterior motives. Indeed, the same passage in the Talmud teaches that we should not accept converts who convert for the sake of marriage or political prominence (literally "the table of kings"). This suspicion of motives does seem to be the reason behind converts not being accepted during the reigns of David and Shlomo, as implied by the Talmud's statement (*Yevamos* 76b) that Pharaoh's daughter was able to convert during Shlomo's reign because she already had a position of political prominence and thus had no political motivation to convert. In a similar vein, Rambam (*Issurei Bi'ah* 13:15) writes explicitly that converts were rejected during David and Shlomo's reigns because of concerns about their motivations, while Ritva (*Yevamos* 79a) suggests that sincere converts were accepted even during those periods.

However, the fact that the Talmud utilizes a verse to teach that converts are rejected during messianic times seems to convey that the issue is not merely one of motivation. Even if we are convinced that the would-be convert is motivated by altruistic motives—indeed, those living during messianic times will realize the truth of G-d and His Torah—he cannot convert during messianic times because he will not experience one of the core aspects of Jewish identity: antisemitism. His motivation is pure, but his Jewish

identity is, by definition, incomplete.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Chaim Packer shared an original insight that reinforces the centrality of accepting antisemitism to a complete Jewish identity. Rashi (*Shemos* 18:1) writes that Yisro was prompted to come to the Jewish people to convert after hearing of the splitting of the Red Sea and the war with Amalek. What prompted Rashi to single out these two events specifically?

Rabbi Packer suggested that the news of the splitting of the Red Sea demonstrated to Yisro that the Jewish people had a unique role to play in the world and solidified his decision to cast his lot with theirs. However, after the splitting of the Red Sea, the Jewish people were in a highly protected position. As the Torah itself describes (*Shemos* 15:15), "Then the chieftains of Edom were startled, the mighty ones of Moav were seized by trembling, the inhabitants of Canaan all melted away." In light of the ascendant position of the Jewish people, Yisro was prohibited from joining them, even with the purest of motives.

It was only after the Jewish people experienced the bite of antisemitism with the war against Amalek that Yisro felt that he could attempt to join the Jewish people. His motives had not changed, but he was now able to join a people who were subject to antisemitic attacks and thus experience the Jewish identity in its fullness. It was not the miraculous victory against Amalek that prompted Yisro's readiness to join the Jewish people; it was the attack itself, reminding the world that being Jewish still meant being vulnerable, even after the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea.

Why is the potential of experiencing antisemitism so central to a Jewish



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identity? Why can't we be Jewish without feeling hated?

I believe the answer may lie in an issue dealt with by commentators throughout the ages: Why was it necessary for the Jews to be enslaved in Egypt? While many commentators—indeed, the Talmud itself (Nedarim 32a)—point to sins that brought about the Egyptian slavery, others see that experience in a different light. They argue that the Egyptian slavery was not punitive; it was a necessary prerequisite for the Jewish people to become worthy of receiving the Torah. The suffering the Jews experienced shaped them in the following ways:

First, being the object of persecution made it easier for the Jews to accept a system of rules that governed their lives from morning until night. Someone who has only experienced a pampered existence is less likely to embrace any restrictions which limit their lifestyle choices. (*HaKesav veHaKabbala* Devarim 16:10, *Rav Kook Haggadah* “Maggid”)

Second, the suffering of persecution impressed upon the Jewish people that they needed G-d's assistance constantly to achieve whatever they would achieve. Just as it was clear that they were only able to exit Egypt through divine intervention, so too the Jewish people needed to absorb the idea that any success in life, whether spiritual or physical, only comes about through divine intervention (*Sefas Emes*, VaEira 5631 “viYedatem”).

We might add that the experience in Egypt sensitized the Jews to the suffering of others, as stated in Shemos

22:20 and elaborated upon by Ramban there.

All of these reasons can explain why experiencing antisemitism is a critical part of a religious Jewish identity. Antisemitism reminds us, in a decidedly negative fashion, that life is difficult. It reinforces the truth that we do not have the luxury to simply seek pleasure and self-indulgence in life. Our enemies will constantly remind us of our status, but that reminder, in turn, forces us to focus on eternal values and commitments which are only upheld through hard work and difficulty.

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Similarly, antisemitism is a constant reminder of how we are ultimately dependent on G-d. We do not embrace a philosophy of quietism; we seek to proactively combat antisemitism. But the fact that the dragon seems impossible to vanquish should remind us of our fragility and dependency on G-d for assistance and protection. Whenever Jews have thought that they have defeated the problem of antisemitism, they are sadly proven to

be incorrect. As frustrating as this is, it serves as a blessing in many ways, emphasizing for us that any success we make in combating antisemitism is only with divine assistance.

Finally, antisemitism, like the Egyptian slavery, serves to sensitize us to the suffering of others, both within the Jewish community and without. We know what it feels like to be hated.

Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael* chapter 46) expresses succinctly how the essential quality of antisemitism and Jewish suffering is a necessary prerequisite for conversion:

הרי לך שאין מקבלים גרים כאשר יהיו ימי הטוב, לפי שאין לעשות התחלה מימים טובים, כי בודאי אדם בזה הוא עובד השם יתברך כאשר יראה הטוב. ולפיכך צריך שיהיה תחלתו קודם, ואז יקנה עולם הבא אף בימים טובים.

We see (from the Talmud) that converts are not accepted when only good days will lie ahead of them, since the “good days” can never be the beginning (of one’s service of G-d) ... One must begin (serving G-d) beforehand, and then one acquires the World to Come when the days are good.

Indeed, our convert is correct: *It’s part of the essence of our being, along with all the good, even if it’s hard to face and stomach.* As all of us struggle with the explosion of antisemitism, let us take comfort in the knowledge that we grow as a people from all the horrific phenomena around us. At the same time, let us daven that we speedily enter into the “good days” when we acquire the World to Come.