

The Blessing of Conversion

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Most of you have probably never heard of one of the greatest heroes in all of Jewish history. Her name was Rahav. A harlot, Rahav saved the Jewish people as they were about to enter the Land of Israel, just before the Battle of Jericho. So, why don't most of us know about Rahav? Is it because she was a woman? Or because she was a prostitute? Maybe the reason we don't hear much about Rahav, is because she wasn't Jewish. Or was she?

Rahav certainly wasn't born an Israelite. She was a subject of the King of Jericho. And yet, when she hears of the wonders that God has done for the Jewish people in Egypt, and for forty years in the wilderness, she professes faith in the Rock of Israel. She puts her very life and the lives of her family in the hands of the Israelites whom she has saved. She links her fate with the welfare of Israel.

Most of us think of Ruth as the first convert. The truth be told, though, the Bible recounts no conversion ceremony whatsoever, not even for Ruth. Some would say that Abraham and Sarah are the first Jews-by-Choice, the first man and woman to begin their lives as idolaters and then come to serve the one God. Whether one technically calls any of these biblical characters "converts," we affirm the powerful importance of those who start in one spiritual place and end up in another, linking their destiny with the faith and people of Israel.

Abraham and Sarah founded our people's covenant with God. Rahav saves the very lives of the Israelites, entering the Promised Land, after the Exodus. Ruth becomes the ancestor of King David, and ultimately, of the messianic redeemer to come. To the extent that they are converts, then clearly their conversion makes a profound and significant difference to the history of the Jewish people.

In tonight's Torah portion, Moses speaks on the edge of the Jordan River, at the people's precipice of entering the Promised Land. He emphasizes that the covenant is made "not only with those who are standing here this day, but also with those who are not here with us today." The rabbis interpret that "those who are standing here this day" include the descendants of those ancient Israelites at the river's edge. The others, equally included in the minds of the ancient rabbis, were converts, those who would later join this ancient people.

History, though, deeply interfered with the way Jews viewed conversion. Throughout most of the centuries that Jews lived under Christian rule in Europe, conversion to Judaism was illegal, often punishable by death, both for the convert and for the Rabbi who solemnized the conversion. We won't have trouble understanding why a later Rabbi would come to assert that "converts are as difficult for the Jewish people as leprosy."

I suspect, though, that the Rabbi in question had more in mind than the threat to his own person, if he accepted a convert. Jews-by-Choice challenge the Jewish community in a variety of ways. Some might argue that converts could dilute our Jewishness. Without personal connection to the lineage and history of the Jewish people, some might think that Jews-by-Choice may not be as vigilant in their attachment to our Covenant. More often, though, Jews-by-Choice challenge those of us who were born Jewish to take our own Judaism more seriously. Frequently, a conversion candidate will ask me how these Jewish folks, who have been offered this incredible gift of having been born Jewish, can take this blessing for granted, rarely attending worship services and tolerating their own cursory knowledge of Torah and Jewish tradition. More than once, I have seen a convert lead a born-Jewish partner into more punctilious observance of our Jewish faith.

Conversion does make a tremendous difference on the immediate Jewish family of the Jews-by-Choice. In today's Reform Jewish world, a fair percentage of Jews-by-Choice are folks who have been living in interfaith relationships for a number of years, sometimes even decades. Many of these folks have already been raising Jewish children, and have been deeply involved in the Jewish life of their families. In a sense, one might expect that these conversions wouldn't change anything. For a long time, these families have observed Judaism, to the exclusion of other religious faiths and practices. And yet, the conversion process infuses these families with new spirit. The children, who might never have thought of their non-Jewish parent as an adherent of any other religion, per se, nevertheless come to see Judaism in a new light. Their parents, for some months, at least, spend more time at the Temple than the children. The children come to see Judaism as a desirable pursuit for adults.

Perhaps the most notable reality about conversion to Judaism in Reform Judaism today is that many Jews-by-Choice are not in a committed relationship with a Jew at all. These are single folks, occasionally couples, and even families, who come to Judaism on their own. They learn about Judaism, and they study and worship with us for many months. They join the covenant of Judaism, often with no Jewish relatives and little Jewish support system in their friendship networks. The synagogue is their Jewish family and community.

I hope that by crediting those individuals who come to Judaism on their own, I am not heard as denigrating those who convert in anticipation of marriage to a Jew. Even folks who come here, exploring conversion in advance of a contemplated Jewish wedding, are choosing Judaism because they believe in our faith and they wish to practice our tradition. They are making a powerful decision, with knowledge and commitment.

Given the rigors of a conversion program, nobody could convert by default. Responsible Rabbis today offer no "quickie" conversion. I have heard Jews-by-birth joke they are sure that they would never qualify for conversion today. Not only does class meet weekly, but weekly worship attendance is also expected. On holidays, our conversion candidates attend services that most Temple members may not even realize exist. They pass a serious exam, and they learn to read Hebrew. I counsel with each one extensively. The folks who will ascend this *bimah* for *kabbalat Torah*, accepting the Torah as Jews, will have earned their place at Sinai. They have joined our Covenant with deep knowledge and firm conviction.

Our own congregation is most welcoming of converts. Jews-by-Choice serve as Officers and Trustees of our congregation. Occasionally, I look around at an adult study class, and I realize the extent to the more newly among us enrich our community.

Rarely, though, I still hear echoes of the old canard that converts are not "real" Jews. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our ancient Rabbis declared that, once a convert emerges from the mikvah, from the ritual bath that solemnizes the conversion, she or he is "Yehudi l'chol davar, Jewish for all purposes." Moreover, I ask all born Jews in this room to examine the color of your skin. Does anybody actually think that this color naturally occurs in the Middle East? The truth is that all of us, children of Abraham and Sarah, are children of converts, somewhere along the path of history.

Let us be grateful that Judaism has always included conversion, preventing ours from being purely a tribal faith. Let us be inspired by the Jews-by-Choice who have found our faith and embraced it with fervor. Let those of us who were born Jewish find the blessing that our newer Jews have revealed to us. Then, let us all embrace Judaism with joy.

Amen.