Darshan Yeshiva

Conversion To Judaism

Two models for conversion to Judaism:

- **Commonalities between Yitro and Ruth**
  - Both Non-Jews
  - Both have portions of the Bible named after them (Book of Ruth, Parsha Yitro)
  - Both are instrumental in the future of the Jewish people. Yitro convinced Moses to create the first Jewish court; Ruth/Boaz begat Obed, father of Jesse, father of King David (seat of the Messiah)

- **Yitro → Father-in-law to Moses, Midianite Priest**

Moses told his father in law [about] *all that the Lord had done* to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians on account of Israel, [and about] all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and [that*] the Lord had saved them*.

Jethro was happy about all the good that the Lord had done for Israel, that He had rescued them from the hands of the Egyptians.

Jethro said, "*Blessed is the Lord*, Who has rescued you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued the people from beneath the hand of the Egyptians. *Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the deities*, for with the thing that they plotted, [He came] upon them."

Then Moses' father in law, *Jethro, sacrificed burnt offering[s] and [peace] offerings to God*, and *Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to dine with [Jethro] before God* (Exodus 18:8-12)

- **Ruth → Wife of Mahlon, Daughter-in-law to Naomi**

And Ruth said [to Naomi], "Do not entreat me to leave you, to return from following you, for *wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So may the Lord do to me and so may He continue*, if anything but death separates me and you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Your History: Conversion From the Bible to Today

- Biblical times (2500 – 300BCE)→ joining the Jewish community through marriage or clinging to the destiny of the Jewish people
  - Marriage: Joseph's wife Asenath, Judah's daughter-in-law and wife Tamar, Zipporah, Moses' wife (daughter of Yitro)
  - The family of Abraham: Sarah, Lot, Terah

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    - Abraham's converts "all the souls that they had gotten in in Haran" (Genesis 12:5)
    - "Mixed multitude" of the Exodus (erav rav)
    - Ezra/Nehemiah rally against pagan practices of foreign born wives (see Conversion to Judaism by Joseph R. Rosenbloom, pg. 15)

- Rabbinic Period (300BC – 500CE) → golden age of converts. Population boom results in codification of Oral Law
    - Hillel vs. Shammai on circumcision (Hillel won)
    - "God dealt kindly with Israel in scattering them among the nations…[so converts] were added to Israel" (Pesachim 87b)
    - Sincerity as the key issue: the only times when the Talmud talks badly about converts is the people who converted in order to gain from Jews
    - Christianity changed everything

- Middle Ages (500-1800CE) → turning away converts
    - Death to anyone who converted to Judaism under Christian and sometimes Muslim rule
    - The more "ghettoized" the Diaspora made us, the less interested we were in converts. Also, less people knew about Judaism and therefore were not attracted to it

- Today → intermarriage, secularization and post-traumatic stress
    - Jewish history of being afraid of converts is longer than the history of accepting converts or frankly encouraging them
    - "Destruction" mentality
    - Assimilation leads to more open discussion
    - Reform movement starts active pursuit of converts; Conservative movement follows

The bottom line: there is no such thing as an authentic Jewish family, an authentic convert or anything else. Jewish identity has changed over time and laws have been written to reflect those changes.

Fears every convert has (for good reason):

- My family will cut me off
- Anxiety about losing Christmas/Easter
- My bet din will not count/will be invalidated
- Not accepted as a liberal convert by Orthodox Jews

Fears every convert has (for NO good reason):

- People will "out" me as a convert and I will not be accepted by the community or have to prove myself
- My conversion is "inauthentic"
- Feeling resented by secular Jews (e.g. "You can't just wake up and decide you are Jewish. That's like deciding you're Asian.")

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Don't blame the rabbis:

- Rabbis are trained to know Jewish law, history and lifecycle. Conversion is not part of their curricula in a meaningful way and so rabbis are unprepared, really, to handle conversion in a meaningful way
- Halachka: "religion always looks over its right shoulder"
- Most conversions (over 50%) are for marriages of non-Jews to Jews. This is what rabbis are working with

"Getting Real" about conversion and fear:

- The "What-If" Game
- There is no such thing as "all Jews" or "THE" Jewish community
- "But my situation is different". Nope!
- There is no such thing as a Reform/Orthodox/Conservative Jew
- God is always on the side of the sincere and the faithful (see Noah, Abraham, Yitro, Ruth, Balaam, Korach)
- No one can make you feel inferior without your consent (Eleanor Roosevelt)

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