

Parashat Bamidbar, 5770, 2010:

Shavuot: Converts, Commitment, and Torah

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* (Torah portion) is always read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot, the festival upon which we commemorate *Kabbalat Hatorah* (the Receiving of the Torah). At this time, one of the most important transformations in human history took place – the conversion of our ancestors to Judaism. This is one of the basic reasons we read *Megilat Rut* on Shavuot, since Ruth's story of individual conversion ultimately mirrors our own as a people. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), formulated this idea in the following fashion:

The *Parsha* of *Mattan Torah*, receipt of the Torah at Mount Sinai, was the story of *Gayrus*, conversion of the Jewish people. The children of the patriarchs converted *en masse* at *Maamad Har Sinai* [the Revelation]. Hence the connection to Ruth. The story of *Mattan Torah* and Ruth together comprise the topic of conversion. The Vilna Gaon says this is why we read *Megilas Ruth* on Shavuos, another story of conversion. ...The principle of conversion is a fundamental connection between the events at Mount Sinai and the story of Ruth. As Boaz tells Ruth, she should be blessed for leaving everything behind to join a people that she did not know and for coming under the wings of the *Shechina* [the Divine Presence] of the G-d of Israel, in other words she converted. The same idea is found at *Maamad Har Sinai* where the Torah tells the story of the conversion of *Bnay Yisrael* [the Jewish people] in conjunction with the Revelation of G-d on Mount Sinai. (Direct transcription of Rav Soloveitchik's public lecture on 5/24/68. This is from tape #5285. Source: www.parsha.net/Bamidbar/Shavuos2-60.doc, italics and brackets my own.)

Given that the Jewish people became *gerim* (converts), one would expect that the Torah and its system of Mitzvot would address the unique psychological needs of other converts to Judaism. This, in fact, is clearly the case:

And you shall not oppress a stranger [i.e. a convert], for you know the feelings of the stranger, since you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (*Sefer Shemot* 23:9)

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not taunt him. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the L-rd, your G-d. (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:33-34)

He [i.e. G-d] executes the judgment of the orphan and widow, and He loves the stranger, to give him bread and clothing. You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (*Sefer Devarim* 10:18-19, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In summary, the Torah commands us to show sensitivity to the feelings of the *ger*. This should be natural for us, since their psychosocial experience is one we share, having been “strangers (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt.” On the practical juridical level, this translates into two commandments – the proscription of oppressing and taunting the proselyte regarding his origin, and the positive mitzvah of loving the convert. Thus, in every possible sense, “The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you...”

Maimonides (Hebrew: “Rambam,” 1135-1204) codified the above-referenced obligation to love the convert in his halachic *magnum opus* entitled *Mishneh Torah*:

Loving a convert who has come to nestle under the wings of the *Schechinah* [fulfills] two positive commandments: one for he is [also] included among the “neighbors” [whom we are commanded to love] and one because he is a convert and the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:19) states: “and you shall love the converts.” [Thus, G-d] has commanded us concerning the love of a convert just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself as [Deuteronomy 11:1] states: “and you shall love G-d, your L-rd.” The Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, loves converts as [Deuteronomy 10:18] states: “and He loves converts.” (*Hilchot Deot* 6:4, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

The Rambam clearly notes that two positive commandments are fulfilled when one loves the convert: the obligation to love one’s fellow Jew “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (“*v’ahavta l’reiecha kamocho*,” *Sefer Vayikra* 19:18), and the mitzvah of

loving the proselyte: “and you should love the convert” (“*v’ahavtem et hager*,” *Sefer Devarim* 10:19). We are immediately faced with an obvious question, “If the convert is truly a ‘native among us,’ and therefore covered under the general rubric of loving one’s fellow Jew, why did Hashem deem it necessary to add the specific commandment of loving the *ger*?” Stated somewhat differently, what is the inherent rationale in the mitzvah of loving the convert that is not served by the overarching commandment of loving your fellow Jew?

Maimonides’ *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandment 207, explicitly addresses my above-stated questions in his presentation of the underlying conceptual basis of the mitzvah to love the *ger*:

...and even though the *ger* is included within the general commandment of “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” in the instance of a convert who is truly a righteous proselyte (*ger tzedek*), since he has entered into our Torah [and its multiplicity of obligations], G-d gives him [i.e. the convert] love - and specified an extra commandment on his behalf [that mandates our obligation to love the convert]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In a certain sense, it appears that the *ger tzedek* warrants a unique mitzvah on the basis of a *quid pro quo*: “... since he has entered into our Torah [and its multiplicity of obligations], G-d gives him [i.e. the convert] love - and specified an extra commandment on his behalf.” Indeed, a very careful reading of the earlier passage from *Hilchot Deot* seems to underscore the authenticity of this line of reasoning. Therein the Rambam stated: “Loving a convert who has come to nestle under the wings of the *Schechinah*,” when it would have been sufficient to use the phrase “loving a convert.” True, Maimonides utilized different terminologies in the two works under discussion. Yet, I believe his intent in both instances was the same: The *ger tzedek* is deserving of an extra

commandment that mandates the love of his fellow Jews toward him, precisely because of his exclusive and all-encompassing commitment to Hashem, His Torah, and the Jewish people.

Ultimately, all of the Jewish people are equal before Hashem and deserving of His beneficence and mercy. This is the case whether we are native born, or have chosen to become Jewish and embrace the Master of the Universe and His Torah. Given this fundamental idea, it is little wonder that the members of the *Anshei Knesset Hagadolah* (approximately 500 BCE) formulated this blessing that is part of the *Shemoneh Esrei* (*Amidah* or Silent Prayer):

On the righteous, on the devout, on the elders of Your people the Family of Israel, on the remnant of their scholars, on the righteous converts and on ourselves – may Your compassion be aroused, Hashem, our G-d, and give goodly reward to all who sincerely believe in Your Name. Put our lot with them forever, and we will not feel ashamed, for we trust in You. Blessed are You, Hashem, Mainstay and Assurance of the righteous. (Translation, *Artscroll Siddur*, underlining my own)

May all of the Jewish people be *zocheh* (merit) to receive Hashem's compassion, and be worthy of His goodly reward. Moreover, with G-d's help and mercy, may this be our last Shavuot in *galut* (the Diaspora), and may the next one be celebrated in Jerusalem, in the soon-to-be rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple). *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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