

Conversion to Judaism – Shavuot 5762

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Why would anyone want to convert to Judaism? Especially these days, when so much of the world seems so hostile toward our national homeland – Israel; and anti-Semitism seems to be on the rise in parts of Europe and across much of the Arab and Muslim world. For those of us born Jewish, well, we really didn't have much choice in the matter. Although there **are** plenty of Jews who seem ready to hide from their Judaism, and from the Jewish community. Jews who are ready to fade into the rest of society never to be heard from again. Isn't it crazy to **want** to be Jewish?

Yet, here at Beth Yeshurun alone we perform at least 20 conversions a year. Some are babies who are adopted, or who are born to a Jewish father but a non-Jewish mother. But most are adults. I know what some of you may be thinking: adults who convert to Judaism are probably converting simply because they have met someone Jewish and wish to marry him or her. But that is just not the case.

One person who converted recently was already married to a Jew. He has attended services here regularly – even on weekdays. He simply wanted to be Jewish. He felt Jewish already, both spiritually and by observance of Jewish rituals.

We had a **couple** convert to Judaism recently. Neither one of them was Jewish, but both came to the conclusion that Christianity did not make sense to them, and the more they learned about Judaism, the more they felt at home in our faith. All of the students planning to convert who are in the current conversion program at Beth Yeshurun are genuinely motivated to be Jews.

I wish that all Jews could hear the commitment of these men and women. They are thrilled to learn about our rituals and traditions. They marvel at the depth and intelligence of our faith and the wisdom of our Sages. Our program naturally emphasizes the differences between Christianity and Judaism in terms of understanding who Jesus was, what the word “Messiah” means, how we understand concepts like life after death, resurrection and Divine reward and punishment. We also discuss anti-Semitism. We teach about the importance of Israel in Jewish history and in Jewish life today. Yet we still have more than 20 conversion students committed to becoming Jewish each year – not in **spite** of these issues, but **because** of them. Judaism is attractive because it makes **sense** as a religion. Judaism is attractive because it creates so many opportunities to enrich our lives with meaning. Judaism is attractive because it has a sublime mission to transform the world into paradise, and because its Sages have endowed us with a library permeated with wisdom.

If only those Jews who wish to disappear from Judaism could hear from our converts.

On Shavuot we read the story of the consummate convert: Ruth. Ruth married a Jewish man without converting. It is only after her husband died that she chose to convert to Judaism, following her mother-in-law – Naomi – back to the Land of Israel. Ruth then went on to marry yet another Jew, Boaz. The story of Ruth reminds us how important converts are to our people. As the end of the story emphasizes, the offspring of Ruth and Boaz eventually gave birth to King David.

In Rabbi Strauss' recent sermon on intermarriage, he rightly suggested that intermarriage may not be the “greatest threat to the future existence of the Jewish people.” Rather “It's what

the people in the marriage, whether it's an intermarriage or an inmarriage, decide to pass on to their children. Both types of couples have the opportunity and the challenge of imparting a love of Judaism to their offspring.”

We have at Beth Yeshurun therefore embarked on a program to reach out to intermarried couples who wish to raise a Jewish family “within a Conservative context.” At the same time, we continue to strongly encourage inmarriage – a marriage between two Jews. One way to encourage inmarriage is to suggest the possibility of conversion to a non-Jewish partner. Now, before I go any further, I want to make one thing very clear: conversion solely for the purpose of marrying a Jew is not appropriate. We do not perform conversions where it is apparent that the person is not really interested in being Jewish, or has no idea what it **means** to be Jewish.

On the other hand, you may never know if a potential mate would be interested in converting if you don't ask. Dr. Lawrence Epstein has written several books and pamphlets about conversion to Judaism and maintains a website on the subject as well. In his pamphlet “How to Discuss Conversion to Judaism” he writes: “The most important part of discussing conversion is not to be afraid or reluctant to discuss the subject. Most non-Jews are never even asked if they would consider learning about Judaism. Many would do so if they were simply asked to explore the subject.”

He adds:

“Because a welcoming attitude is the most important contribution you can make, remember not to use any emotional pressure. Conversion is a personal decision. Each person thinking about it must carefully consider conversion. Instead of pressure, focus on showing love and humor, two vital Jewish qualities of special importance when dealing with conversion.”

I am still surprised – and I must admit dismayed – by the reluctance **some** Jews have to fully accept converts as Jews. I wonder if they are aware how dedicated our converts are not just to the Jewish people, but to Beth Yeshurun. A disproportionate number of our most active members here are converts. They come regularly to services – not just on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, but on festivals, on Saturday afternoons, and even on weekdays. They lead services, they attend adult education classes, they teach, they work hard on various committees, and they perform countless acts of *gemilut hassadim* – acts of social charity.

Moreover, it is a **sin** to mistreat or speak ill of converts and it is a **mitzvah** – a commandment – to welcome them and to be kind, thoughtful and appreciative toward them.

Maimonides was once asked a question by a convert. This convert had written to Maimonides for advice. The convert had apparently disagreed with his teacher about whether Muslims were idolaters. The convert's opinion was that they were not idolaters while his teacher thought they were, and told his student he was a fool for thinking otherwise. Maimonides agreed that Muslims are not idolaters but more importantly for our subject he excoriated the teacher for his treatment of this convert. This is what he wrote:

“When your teacher called you a fool ... he sinned grievously, and it is fitting that he ask your pardon, though he be your master. Then let him fast and weep and pray; **perhaps** he will find forgiveness. Was he intoxicated that he forgot the thirty-three passages in which the Law admonishes concerning “strangers” (the Hebrew is *gerim*, which Maimonides here suggests means “converts”)? For even

if he had been in the right and you in error, it was his duty to be gentle, how much more, when the truth is with you and he was in error! ... [Maimonides continues:] And how great is the duty which the Law imposes on us with regard to converts. We are commanded to honor and fear our parents; we are ordered to hearken to the prophets. A man may honor and fear and obey without loving. But in the case of ‘strangers’ we are bidden to love with the whole force of our heart’s affection. And he called you fool! Astounding! A man who left father and mother, forsook his birthplace, his country and its power, and attached himself to this lowly, despised, and enslaved race; who recognized the truth and righteousness of this people’s Law, and cast the things of this world from his heart – shall such a one be called fool? God forbid! Not witless but wise has God called your name, you disciple of our father Abraham, who also left his father and his kindred and inclined Godward. And He who blessed Abraham will bless you, and will make you worthy to behold all the consolations destined for Israel; and in all the good that God shall do to us He will (also) do good to you...”

Why would anyone want to convert to Judaism? Ask our converts. You will be amazed, uplifted and inspired. Sometimes a person does not realize all the wonderful things there are right in his or her own back yard. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we often don’t understand how precious our family and our own heritage are until we feel we are about to lose them. Then we suddenly wake up and realize ‘there’s no place like home.’

At the end of every conversion ceremony I repeat the passionate words of that famous convert Ruth upon her conversion to Judaism. They are words that should inspire those of us who were born Jewish because they demonstrate such earnest commitment, such devotion and enthusiasm for a faith we all too often take for granted. This is what Ruth said:

“Do not urge me to leave you, to turn away from joining you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God, my god. Where you die will I die and there will I be buried. I vow before God that nothing but death could part me from you.”

On Shavuot we commemorate the giving of the Ten Commandments, as our ancestors stood at Mount Sinai and said “na’aseh v’nishma” – “we will do whatever God commands us to do.” Let us commit ourselves to our covenant with God with the same devotion our ancestors had at Mount Sinai. Let us commit ourselves to our covenant with God with the same devotion that Ruth the convert had. And let us commit ourselves to welcoming in our midst all the Ruths, all the converts, who wish to join us in our faith.