

The Things Which Should Define Us

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While the Torah is perfectly clear that we are expected to treat the *ger*, the convert, with the utmost level of love and respect, no explicit directives exist in the Written Law regarding the process of conversion. As usual, the relative dearth of information in the Written Law is supplemented by extensive analysis of *gerut* in the Talmud. However, there too, the quantity of sources does not necessarily generate an overall clarity of vision.

Our basic posture towards the desirability of conversion is complicated by what appears, at least superficially, to be conflicting evidence in a host of different sections of Talmud. This is no accident; the Talmudic 'ambivalence' is but a reflection of the extremely subtle and nuanced philosophical balance Halakhah is attempting to strike. On the one hand, a basic affirmation of the inestimable worth of each and every human being per se, merely on account of being created in the very image of God, as well as concern that proper motivations are driving the conversion process, serves to mitigate any headlong rush towards proselytizing. On the other hand, our instinctive admiration of the aspiring convert's laudatory impulse to draw closer to the Almighty, with the increased demands and opportunities that are part and parcel of entering 'beneath the Divine wings', may militate in precisely the opposite direction.

The striking omission of conversion protocol in Chumash notwithstanding, we gain invaluable insight into the Halakhic philosophy of conversion in this week's parashah. Rather than being told who may join *Kelal Yisrael*, the Torah tells us of certain groups who are not permitted, even following conversion, to marry into the main body of the Jewish people. We are instructed (Devarim 23:4-9) that males from the people of Ammon and Moab, descendants of Lot, may never marry into the Jewish people, while both male and female Egyptians and Edomites, descendants of Esav, may marry in after three generations. The Torah gives us two explicit reasons for the exclusion of the descendants of Lot. First, they demonstrated extremely cruelty in denying the Jewish people basic sustenance as they traveled in the desert. Second, they deputized Bilaam to curse the Jewish people.

Chazal and all of the *Parshanim* are perplexed by these pesukim. Is it conceivable that the Torah could possibly argue that two acts of historical cruelty on the part of the descendants of Lot are more egregious than centuries of slavery inflicted upon us by the Egyptians, or the aggressive and violent response we received from Edom in response to our entreaty to cross their land? While our Sages pose numerous resolutions to this basic problem, the Ramban has perhaps the most elegant and satisfying approach.

Ramban teaches us that the Torah is excluding the descendants of Lot, and overlooking what, when approached from a narrow perspective, appear to be the incomparably graver sins of Egypt and Edom, is a lesson in historical loyalty. Avraham risked his own life and even challenged Hashem at Sodom on behalf of Lot, and yet, when Lot's descendants had the opportunity to reciprocate, to reach out to the children of Avraham in a moment of vulnerability, as they travel, weak and weary, Lot's progeny just couldn't find the simple decency of *Hakarat HaTov* within themselves. When it comes to accepting those who wish to cast their lot with us, certain qualities are indispensable. Regarding people who don't know what it means to say thank you, who spit on the very concept of loyalty, the Torah insists that we have no truck with them whatsoever.

A fascinating passage in the Talmud in Tractate *Yevamot* (78b-79a) underscores this message. Following a horrifying act of violence on the part of the Givonim (the same group who used deception to obtain a peace treaty in Sefer Yehoshua) perpetrated against the descendants of the House of Saul, David issues an edict forbidding accepting Givonite converts. Once again, we find that a proper sense of gratitude, which the Givonim ought to have had to the Jewish people for sparing them in Sefer Yehoshua, is *sine qua non* for conversion. Moreover, in an exquisite formulation, David HaMelech states that it would be inconceivable for people who could perpetrate such atrocities to mix with Am Yisrael, whose hallmarks are 'rachmanut, bayshanut, and gemilut chasadim,' compassion, modesty, and acts of loving kindness.

While these elements- loyalty, gratitude, compassion, modesty, and kindness- are so fundamental that they are prerequisites for conversion, the import of this Halakha transcends the single institution of *gerut*. For, if we are willing to stigmatize the ancient nations of Ammon, Moab, and Gibeon on the basis of the absence of these fine middos, then surely, we must also look inward, and ask ourselves whether David's observation concerning the Jewish people is only an ideal, or, hopefully, if we have made it into a reality.

If not, the sheer hypocrisy of exclusion of others based on standards we do not ourselves maintain should make us more than a bit uncomfortable, especially during this season of repentance. May we merit personal and communal lives entirely deserving of that timeless description- 'There are three hallmarks of this nation, they are merciful, modest, and perform acts of loving kindness.' These are the qualities which should define us.