

Lech Lecha 5781

Abraham the first Jewish Proselytizer.

*In ancient times, conversion was a simple procedure,
it could be legitimately completed in an afternoon.*

At the start of this week's parsha, God tells Abraham, "*Lech lecha*, go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

We can read *lech lecha* on two levels. On one level, God is telling Abraham to go on a physical journey to leave Haran and continue his journey to Canaan, the land that in the future would be known as Eretz Yisrael.

The Hebrew phrase is unusual: *lech lecha* literally would mean "go to you," or "go to yourself."

The Sfat Emet, a 19th c. Hasidic commentator, says the message of *lech lecha* is go on a spiritual journey and find yourself, and find God. And he says this is a message that God transmits to everyone, each one of us, every single day. What made Abraham special is that he was the first to pay attention. He was the first to answer that call, to hear God calling, and to head out on that journey.

But when Abraham left, he didn't leave alone: not only did he bring his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, the Torah tells us that they brought with them, *hanefesh asher asu b'charan*, the souls that they had made in Haran. Which is a phrase that sounds as strange in Hebrew as it does in English. The midrash Bereshit Rabbah says this is referring to "The souls which he had brought beneath the sheltering wings of the Shechinah. Abraham converted the men

and Sarah converted the women and Scripture accounts it unto them as if they had made them.”

The very first thing that Abraham does after hearing the call of God – the very first mitzvah he engages in – is to convert people, to bring them to Judaism, to invite others to join him on his Jewish journey to the holy land. Later on, when Moses led our people out of Egypt, the Torah tells they were accompanied by an “*erev rav*,” a mixed multitude. Many of the 600,000 Jews at Mount Sinai were converts who chose to join the Jewish people, presumably after seeing the miracles in Egypt.

In ancient times, conversion was a simple procedure. It didn’t involve studying for a year, appearing before a *beit din*, a circumcision for males, and immersion in a *mikvah*. You converted by choosing to throw your lot in with the Jewish people. When Isaac and Jacob sought wives from the “old country,” the women became Jewish by choosing to join their husbands. Our most famous convert, Ruth, the ancestor of King David, didn’t have a long course of study or appear in front of a *beit din*. She became Jewish by telling Naomi, “For wherever you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people are my people, and your God, is my God.”

Once upon a time, Judaism was a proselytizing religion. We eagerly, actively sought new converts. There was even a brief period when the Hasmonean kings converted people at swordpoint. Scholars estimate that from the 5th to 2nd centuries BCE, the Jewish population of the world was about 1 million. By the 1st century BCE this grew to somewhere between 4.5 to 8 million! Even with the lower estimate, Jews made up an astonishing 10% of the population of the Roman Empire in the late Second Temple period!

What changed wasn't a remarkable increase in fertility or decrease in mortality in ancient Judea. There is a large body of evidence attesting to the dispersion of Jews throughout the Hellenistic world followed by a great wave of conversion among the pagan population. The Jewish God was a popular God.

What changed? How did Judaism go from being a religion clearly focused on outreach and winning new converts to one where some rabbis will still reject prospective converts three times before accepting them to study?

The changes started with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. The Jewish world was, of course, in great turmoil. Millions of Jews were killed or fled for their lives. The rabbis had to "reinvent" how Judaism was practiced. Ironically, their reaction to destruction and difficulties wasn't to seek "reinforcements" and bring in more converts. It was to make conversion more difficult, a sort of "circle the wagons" mentality when under siege from an outside threat. Strengthen the commitment of those who are left.

The anti-conversion bias became greater in the 4th century, after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire, and conversion to Judaism could be a dangerous act. In the 7th century, with the Islamic conquests, Jews were in a situation where seeking converts from Christianity in Christian lands or from Muslims in the Islamic areas was a crime punishable by death. No wonder rabbis started rejecting people who wanted to convert – they needed to make sure that the prospective convert wasn't trying to infiltrate the Jewish community in a sting operation.

There have always been some people with a “Jewish neshamah” who would not be deterred from joining us – in the Middle Ages they estimate 10-15,000 Catholics left Christian lands for Islamic territory so that they could safely convert to Judaism. There’s even the story of the Khazars, a remarkable story of an entire nation that converted to Judaism in the 8th century – a story that is undisputed.

In the Orthodox world, conversion has continued to become progressively more difficult over the centuries. In the Mishneh Torah Rambam describes the process, and far from requiring a year of study and acceptance of following all the commandments to the very last rabbinic detail, he ruled as halacha that if someone wanted to convert you taught them some of the major and minor mitzvot and the accompanying rewards / punishments, brought them before a beit din which was only concerned with the prospective proselyte’s sincerity, and if found sincere, circumcised him if a man, and then took them to a mikvah. The whole process could be done in an afternoon. And Rambam said even if the conversion was done for ulterior motives, or the witnesses weren’t kosher, or the convert did not obey all the mitzvot, the conversion is still valid.

The idea, now common in the Orthodox world, that a convert must accept upon themselves following all of the commandments in an exceedingly meticulous manner is a modern concept – the first place we see this requirement is Rabbi Yitzchak Schmelkes in 1876. Disagreeing with Rambam, he said if a convert undergoes conversion, but then is shown to be a violator of the Sabbath, it is not considered that he had a valid conversion. In Israel today there are hundreds of thousands of Russians of Jewish ancestry who are not halachically Jewish. Instead of making it easy for these

people to convert and be fully recognized as Jewish, the haredi controlling the religious ministry have made it exceedingly difficult. If one of these people marries someone who was born a Jew (with a marriage outside Israel, since there is no way to conduct such a wedding in Israel) they insist that the Jewish partner must also follow halacha in the most minute detail. As a result, many of these people never go through with a conversion, or they seek a Conservative or Reform conversion, which isn't recognized by the Orthodox establishment for such purposes as marriage.

The Reform go to the opposite extreme: while many Reform rabbis follow traditional procedure and have their converts appear before a beit din and immerse in the mikvah, it is not a requirement of the Reform movement. Since the late 1800s the official policy of Reform Judaism has been to admit converts, and I quote, "without any initiatory rite, ceremony, or observance whatsoever." All the Reform movement requires is that a person commits to religious standards set by the local Reform community.

In the Conservative movement, we follow the traditional rules: we require appearance before a beit din, circumcision for men, and immersion in a mikvah. Individual rabbis have leeway on how much study they require, and how much observance of the mitzvot they expect.

In these difficult times for the Jewish people – in the wake of the Holocaust which wiped out one third of the world's Jews, and in the wake of intermarriage rates around 50% - is it time to update our attitudes toward conversion?

To start with, despite the fact that there are some laypeople who may question whether a convert is “really Jewish,” there is no question that as a matter of halacha and tradition a convert is considered 100% completely Jewish, and is to be welcomed and commended for making that choice.

The first example we see is in the book of Ruth. When Ruth asks Boaz, “why have you taken notice of me, a foreigner?” he replies:

It has been fully reported to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband’s death, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and went to a people you had never known before. May God reward your deed, may you be given full recompense from the Lord, God of Israel, for you have come to seek refuge under His wings.

The Talmud tells us that if someone is interested in converting, we explain to them, “don’t you know the Jews are a persecuted people?” If the aspiring Jew answers, “yes, I know, and I am unworthy,” they are to be accepted as a Jew at once. The Talmud also clarifies, “at once, because it is a mitzvah to convert, and a mitzvah must be done as soon as possible.” The Talmud tells us not to overwhelm him with threats (for example, that violating Shabbat is theoretically a capital crime) and we are not to be exacting with him about the details of the mitzvot. In other words, don’t try and scare prospective converts away.

Once they convert, the Talmud charges us not to oppress the convert or remind them of their former status.

The Jewish world would be well-served to adopt a more welcoming attitude toward conversion. We don’t need to have missionaries knocking on people’s doors seeking to save people, but we should not turn people away

either. Judaism has a very good “product,” one that can compete well in the marketplace of world religions. In a time when we have experienced so much demographic decline because of the Holocaust and assimilation, we can use, and should welcome, the reinforcements and fresh energy that “new members of the tribe” can bring us.

May we be like our father Abraham in this week’s Torah reading, welcoming others to join us our spiritual journey.

Shabbat Shalom