

## Rabbi Cooper's Shavuot Sermon

### Shavuot 5774

#### Ruth Would Be Proud

Among my teachers at the Jewish Theological Seminary was Professor Max Kedushin. At a seminary heavily invested in Talmud, Professor Kiddushin was never fully respected for his contributions by the rest of the faculty as a great asset. I, and many of my fellow students, however, took from him lessons which were invaluable to our studies and relevant, to this day, as we study and teach about Judaism. Among those lessons was Professor Kiddushin's notion of the value-concept. A value concept is a Jewish value which can be identified by the Hebrew noun which describes it. Stated differently, unless a value can be expressed in a single noun, it is probably not a true, Jewish value. Identifying the Jewish value embedded in a text or practice is, according to Professor Kiddushin, the first step toward understanding.

In order to understand the Book of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot, I begin with the value-concept which I believe best describes that Book and the theme of Shavuot: sincerity. The value-concept of sincerity is not stated explicitly in the liturgy of Shavuot. Nevertheless, it permeates the Book of Ruth and is found most exquisitely, in that beautiful and oft quoted passage:

- Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not to follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and Your God shall be my God. (Ruth 1:16)

With these words, Ruth became the quintessential convert to Judaism, the embodiment of the righteous proselyte. Hers was a conversion in which she adopted both Judaism and membership in the Jewish People, embracing both the faith and the People of Naomi. With these words, Ruth became the model against which all subsequent proselytes would be judged. It is the sincerity of her conversion and the purity of her intentions which has set the example for those who convert to Judaism. More generally, however, that notion of sincerity should be part of every religious act, not just the primary value which must accompany every conversion candidate into the Mikveh.

In order to qualify as a Jewish value-concept, we must find its translation in Hebrew. In Hebrew we might be drawn to "*kavanna*" which literally means "intent" or single-minded directedness, a term often applied to mindfulness in prayer. But I prefer here to use the term "*shlemut*" /whole-heartedness/unencumbered completeness, without distraction or hesitation. That was the conversion of Ruth. She became the model of one who chose Judaism without any ulterior motive and with a full and unfettered heart. It is heartening to note, therefore, that today those who convert to Judaism are distinguished by their sincerity and by the purity of their motivation. As such, today's converts can be likened to Ruth.

Today, the streams of world Jewry cannot agree on the specific requirements which today's converts should be expected to accept and observe. Conversion in America's Orthodox world has been, and continues to be a rarity, since Orthodoxy insists on complete and unwavering commitment to the observance of Jewish Law and ritual prior to one's conversion. As a result, Orthodoxy deems few as worthy candidates.

The non-Orthodox streams differ from one another in their respective expectations of levels of observance and adherence to *halacha* required of those who convert. Despite disagreements regarding the standards of observance to which converts must commit and adhere, however, there is no disagreement in the Jewish Community regarding the matter of the sincerity of the conversion candidate. All require that candidates express their unshakable commitment to become Jewish, their rejection of affiliations with other religions and their allegiance to the Jewish People. Admittedly, however, this may not always have been the case.

There was a time, perhaps as recently as twenty years ago, when matters of sincerity were considered as afterthoughts or peripheral concerns. Many rabbis of that generation will recall the occasional candidate for conversion who acknowledged that their primary motivation to convert was either to make their partner's parents, or grandparents, happy, or they were converting for some other reason. Conversion was an easy way to smooth over logistic and familial obstacles and, in turn, allow the wedding to proceed. In these instances, hastily arranged conversions were sufficient to enable rabbis to perform Jewish marriages.

More recently, however, conversion to Judaism in the non-Orthodox world has taken on new, more serious and more thoughtful significance. The cadre of new Jews within our communities is comprised of people of whom we should be proud. This new and inspired group is beginning to change the face of the American Jewish Community. Their sincerity can legitimately be compared to that of Ruth.

The sincerity of today's converts to Judaism is reflected in the fact that, in many Jewish communities, conversion to Judaism is no longer a necessity to acquire a place in the Jewish Community. In the Reform Movement, there are rabbis who will perform the interfaith ceremonies. Also, for Reform congregations, so long as one parent is Jewish, their children are considered to be Jews. (In the Conservative Movement, the mother must be Jewish in order for the child to be considered Jewish). Interfaith families can join many synagogues as full members. In many synagogues, non-Jewish parents and/or grandparents can participate in religious services. Our Jewish Federation, and others throughout the country, helps to fund organizations, such as "InterfaithFamily", which facilitate gatherings, arrange programs, provide resources and can

help to arrange for rabbis to perform intermarriages. One can easily be involved and accepted within the Jewish community without conversion. And, for all of these reasons one would expect that the numbers of those converting would be dwindling.

As the Rabbinic Chair of the Rabbi Morris Goodblatt Academy, a basic Judaism and Hebrew course for those considering conversion, sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly of the Greater Philadelphia region, I can report that this has not been our experience. Our thirty-week, two hours per week course continues to attract large numbers of students. My sense is that this phenomenon is felt, as well, in the more liberal Reform and Reconstructionist movements. Not only are our classes full, but the sincerity of our candidates is pure and unwavering. In addition, as the Founder and Rabbinic Advisor to our community Mikveh, I can report that, as a result of the availability of the Mikveh at Temple Beth Hillel – Beth El for use by rabbis and their candidates, from across the spectrum, of all for the purpose of conversions, it has become routine and expected that even those who convert from within the Reform and Reconstructionist Movements do so by utilizing our Mikveh. Lori, who directs our Mikveh reported to me that during the month of May, we had 28 conversion ceremonies performed at our Mikveh. Without the pressures of in-laws, family and stigma in the larger community, our conversion candidates come for only one reason: they genuinely want to be Jewish.

It is surely the case that the American Jewish Community is confronting and will experience in the future major structural and demographic changes. Even those of us who are optimistic about the future realize that the future face of the Jewish Community will look significantly different from the one which we saw as we grew up. Personally, I find the opportunities exciting and, despite the fact that the challenges are clear and daunting, I believe that our future will be bright. And part of my optimism relates to the fact that our newest Jews, this cadre of new converts to Judaism, are as sincere and committed as they are knowledgeable and energetic. They possess, in many cases, a degree of whole-hearted *shlemut* in their conversions which is celebrated on Shavuot.

If rabbis and Jewish organizational leaders can embrace and harness the potential within those who convert to Judaism, I believe our future will contain new strength and greater depth. And, I believe, the vast majority of those who convert to Judaism today do so in a way that would bring pride and satisfaction to our beloved ancestor, Ruth.