

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

Is It Okay to Invite Someone to Become Jewish?

In the daily recitation of the *Amidah*, the main set of prayers at the heart of a Jewish service, we pray to be as worthy as *Geirei haTzedek*, the righteous convert. Those who choose to become Jewish are listed along with the great sages, leaders and spiritual giants of our people. And we say, “O God, may our lot be like theirs!”

That being the case, you might ask, “Why doesn’t Judaism proselytize? Other religions have grown enormously large due to their missionizing activities. Why don’t we aggressively ask others to convert to Judaism?”

The answer is found both in the sad history of anti-Semitism and in our natural aversion to making others feel uncomfortable and disrespected.

Roman authorities eventually outlawed conversion to Judaism, first as a punishment for our revolts against Roman tyranny, and then as a policy to promote Rome’s new state religion, Christianity. The prohibition against conversion to Judaism was law both in Christian Europe and Muslim countries. The punishment for conversion to Judaism was often a death sentence. Even so, many thousands of determined individuals took the risks and broke those anti-Semitic laws and became *Gerei Tzedek*, righteous converts. Still, the laws were oppressive and they greatly inhibited many people from joining us and caused us to be rightly timid about encouraging conversion.

Another reason we have long opposed active proselytizing is that we know what it is like to have other religions target us for missionizing. Just as we want others to respect our faith and allow us the freedom to practice Judaism without fear, we too pledge our respect for the valid blessings of other faiths.

Still, in this week's Torah portion, *B'haalotekha*, we find Moses movingly urging his father-in-law to join the family of Israel.

Numbers 10:29-32

כֹּת וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן־רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חַתָּן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה אֲתָנוּ אֲתָנוּ לָכֶם לָכֶם לָכֶם אֲתָנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ כִּי־יְהוָה דִּבֶּר־טוֹב
עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל: ל וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אִם־אֶל־אֶרֶץ וְאֶל־מוֹלְדֵי אֲלֹהֶיךָ:
לֹא וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־נָא תַעֲזֹב אֲתָנוּ כִּי עַל־כֵּן יָדַעְתָּ חֲנַתְנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהֵייתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינַיִם:
לֵב וְהָיָה כִּי־תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטּוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב יְהוָה עִמָּנוּ וְהִטַּבְנוּ לָךְ.

²⁹ Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which the Eternal has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for the Eternal has promised to be generous to Israel."

³⁰ "I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land."

³¹ He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide. ³² So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that the Eternal grants us."

Whether or not Hobab (also called Yitro) chose to join the Israelites is not clear.

Regardless, it is important to note that Moses not only urged his father-in-law to join us, he also made it clear that Hobab (Yitro) was a blessed and talented person who would be a blessing to us.

Indeed, those who choose to join our Jewish family are blessings to us. While we should never pressure another person who has a positive and cherished connection to another faith, neither should we make others feel unwelcome or unwanted. Sometimes, our non-Jewish loved ones wonder why we never ask them to learn more and to consider becoming Jewish. Let us gently and respectfully invite them to explore Judaism. It will be my honor to speak with all who are interested.

B'vrakhah, With blessings

Rick

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