

The Convert's Power

Category: Shemos, Yisro

Why is the story of Yisro so compelling?

A Conversion Story

Every summer, we have Chabad high school & Seminary girls join us at Solon Chabad to help lead our Camp Gan Izzy.

At our first Shabbat dinner of the summer, I usually ask each to introduce themselves. Often, they come from different places, and it's always fascinating to hear their stories.

Several years ago, a counselor who hailed from Holland shared that both her parents were converts. That's quite unique; it is far more common to find couples in which just one converted to Judaism.

That perked my interest, and I immediately asked: "What moved them to tie their fate to the Jewish people?"

She related that her paternal grandfather was a man of the cloth, at the Dutch Protestant Church in a small town near Rotterdam, in Western Holland, who grew up in the post Holocaust atmosphere where both her grandfather and grandmother had a very positive attitude towards Israel after they met in the mid-60's in Israel and got married when returned to Holland.

This approach was a result of their reckoning with the Holocaust. The Protestant church didn't protect Jews during the holocaust and was even complicit in their persecution. Therefore, in the Holocaust's aftermath, the church decided to send an ambassador to Israel who would report back in first person and share his impressions firsthand from the Jewish states to the members of the Protestant community.

In 1982, her grandfather and grandmother were sent as these ambassadors for a 6-year period, the potential of it being extended for another 6 years. That year, the first Lebanon war broke out, and the entire world was shocked to hear about the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, where Christian militants massacred

Palestinians in a refugee camp looking for the perpetrators who killed the Christian president-elect in a bombing attack. The press widely condemned Israel for allowing the attack to happen under its control, but her grandfather and grandmother— both with iron will and iron principles — went on Holland's written media and defended the Jewish State (much to the consternation of the Protestant community leaders).

At the time of their move, her father was 15 years old, and he enrolled in Israeli high school.

It opened a new world to him. At church, he had always learned that Christianity was a thriving religion, while Judaism was a story of the past. In Israel, he discovered that Judaism was thriving, while Christianity (at least in Israel) was actually laying low.

There was something else that caught his attention. As a young teenager, he was always full of questions, but in his Christian faith he was taught that questions were tantamount to apostasy. In Judaism, he discovered, questions were very much encouraged. The entire Talmud was based on the give and take of a discussion. That was something he found fascinating.

His Israel experience set him on a path towards Judaism. But it didn't happen immediately. When he finished high school, he returned to Holland for technical university in Delft while his parents remained in Israel. The culture was so different that it took him quite some time to reacclimate to the atmosphere of his home country.

His younger sister, who was 8 years old when they arrived in Israel, took a quicker path to Judaism. She enrolled in the army when she finished high school, and while in the IDF, she converted to Judaism, met a religious man, and established a fine Jewish home in Ramat Gan.

Soon enough, our counselor's father found his way as well. He would return to Israel to visit his family each summer, and on one visit he met a Hollander girl whose Christian family loved Israel and came there on a one-year sabbatical.

They began a relationship, married in Delft and continued to meet when they both returned to Holland. For work, they moved to a city called Amersfoort. Neither of them was Jewish, but it was always clear to both of them that they wanted to

return to Israel. Knowing that this would only be possible if they underwent a conversion, they began to look around to see their options, and soon came to the conclusion that they wanted to do a full Halachic conversion, and in Amersfoort, joined a local Jewish community that is close to 300 of years old.

One of the amazing parts of the story is that part of the ancestry of his family had been one of the founders of the synagogue they had just joined. Ultimately, they never ended up returning to Israel; they converted in Holland and remained in Amersfoort, where he is the gabbai of the same shul which his grandfather's grandfather helped establish.

The Convert's Power

This week's Torah portion, Yisro, tells the story of the first official convert to the Jewish people. Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, came from Midian to the Sinai desert to join the Jewish encampment, accompanied by his daughter Tziporah, and her children Gershon and Eliezer.

Moshe hosts a fine reception. He and the entire nation welcome the new arrivals outside the camp, and Moshe then hosts a dinner in which he personally serves as a waiter. The Torah tells us that Moshe told all of the experiences that happened during the exodus from Egypt, and that Yisro recommended a system of a judicial system to help alleviate the stress on Moshe's time. Right afterwards, the Torah proceeds with the story of the giving of the Torah.

The story falls into the narrative in a very bizarre way. The book of Exodus has a very consistent storyline. It tells us about the exile and servitude in Egypt, the birth of Moshe, and how he was sent by G-d to redeem the Jewish people. He metes out ten plagues, the Jews leave Egypt, split the sea, and have a series of experiences in the desert. It's all leading to the climax — the story of the Giving of the Torah. But before actually getting there, the story suddenly pivots to Yisro arriving at the desert. Isn't it out of place?

The Rebbe cited a teaching of the Zohar which relates that the Torah could not be given to the Jewish people until Yisro came, because he was the first one to publicly recognize G-d's power over all other gods. Once he arrived, the Torah was able to be given.

On a superficial level, this is a very difficult teaching to understand. Were Moshe,

Aharon, and the entire Jewish people so unworthy that they didn't deserve the Torah? And was Yisro's contribution so dramatic that it suddenly changed the stakes?

The Rebbe explained that Yisro was acquainted with every form of pagan idol worship in the world. He was an expert in all pagan ideas and philosophies of his time. When a person of his stature recognized G-d's greatness, it was a new level of recognition in the world. It brought a new sense of legitimacy which strengthened the faith of the Jewish people as well.

During a class, I once mentioned that I have no desire to eat pork. Everyone laughed. "Of course you don't," they said. "You've never tasted it." You can only give an opinion if you've actually experienced it.

The same is true with regard to faith. A person could be convinced that Judaism is the one true religion, but that might be because he never had the chance to approach another. If he received an intense Jewish education from his earliest childhood, his opinion might not be that convincing.

But that's different for a person who's experienced it all. A convert to Judaism could look around and say, "I've been there. I've tried all those approaches." Such a person has a power that others do not.

This week, when we receive the Ten Commandments anew, it's a good time to recognize the unique sacrifice of those who left everything behind to join the Jewish nation — and enriched us all in the process.