

2/5/83
Eshyan Broidy

GOOD SHABBOS!

Today we read Parsha Yitro, one of the most significant in the Torah. I want to concentrate on the namesake of this section - his history, his place in the lore of Biblical Judaism, and the part of the congregation that he represents - the Gerim, or converts. Then I would like to tell you about other Biblical converts and finally, why I find Yitro and the stories of other converts so interesting.

There are several classifications of converts mentioned in the Torah and rabbinic literature. The one that occurs most often is the ger tzedick or ger emet, the person who accepts the yoke of the covenant whole-heartedly, and is circumcised and/or goes to the mikvah. Because the process of converting is not an instantaneous one, there were classifications for people who had some relationship with Israel, but had not concretized it - They were gere toshov or gere gerurim - informal converts, who observed the Noachide laws and had rejected idoletry, but had not accepted formal conversion. The third classification is gere arayot, so called "lion converts", who converted from fear. The original Samaritans are given as an example of the gere arayot.

In the Aggada, Yitro is the model and example of the ger tzedick. Originally a counselor of Pharoah, he had association with Job, Balaam and according to some accounts,

Amelek. But he was unwilling to approve the bloody suggestions which Balaam made for the solution of the "Jewish problem" and fled to Midian. There he became an idolatrous priest, as is indicated by the Biblical phrase, "priest of Midian" (Ex 2.16). This is taken to mean that there was not a single heathen diety in the entire world which Yitro had not worshipped at one time or another. Today we might call him a spiritual seeker.

At sometime after the exodus, Yitro together with Zipporah and Moses' children joined Moses and his people in the desert. There is some controversy as to what prompted this visit - the dividing of the Red Sea, the defeat of Amalek, or the revelation of the Torah. There is another question as to whether he arrived before or after Matan Torah.

According to Midrash, because the camp was encompassed by the Clouds of Glory, when they arrived Yitro and his party could not enter, but wrote a message and shot it into the clouds. The clouds, which had not been letting anything pass, let the message land. In it Yitro expressed his desire to convert, adding an appeal that if Moses was unwilling to accept him for his own merits, he should do so for the sake of Zipporah and her children.

"This appeal was answered by God Himself, who said to Moses: "I, I, who said the word by which the world came into being, I am One who welcomes, not One who repels. I am He

who brought Jethro near and did not keep him at a distance. So also you, when a man comes to you wishing to become a convert, so long as he comes for the sake of heaven, do you also bring him near and not repel him. -- Hence you learn that one should always bring near with the right hand even while repelling with the left.

"The Midrash goes on "And Moses went to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed and kissed him, and they inquired each man of the other about their welfare, and they came into the tent" (v.7). Every mark of respect and honor was shown Jethro; Aaron and his sons and the elders also went out to greet him, and "some say the Shekinah also went with them." Immediately after greeting Jethro, Moses accepted him as a convert.

"And Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done," etc. (v.8). Moses gave an account of God's providential care of Israel with deliberate intent to bring Jethro near unto the Torah. The phrase "all that the Lord had done" refers to the revelation at Sinai.

"Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods" (v.11). This indicates plainly that previously Jethro had not admitted this fact. He could however make this statement with a positiveness that would have been laughable in anyone else, for there was not a single heathen god which he had not worshipped."¹

"Following this we have the account of Jethro's advice

to Moses regarding the establishment of a better organized system of government (vv. 13-16). There is however the difficulty that this system, which is ascribed in Exodus to the suggestion of Jethro, is represented in Deut. I as directly commanded by God. This contradiction is harmonized by the principle that "we bring about merit through the meritorious."

"It is also stated in two sources that the manna first descended on the day when Jethro arrived in the camp, and on his account."²

"Exodus 18 concludes with the simple statement that Moses dismissed Jethro, who returned to his land. But in Num. 10.29 we have a fragmentary colloquy between Moses and Hobab-Jethro, in which Moses urges his father-in-law to travel with them to Palestine, while the latter declares his wish to return to his home. This passage is treated very fully in the Rabbinic sources. According to the Mekiltas, Moses urged upon Jethro that the advice given by the latter had been approved by God, and therefore he should continue to direct them. Jethro replied that he was like a lamp in the presence of the sun and moon (Moses and Aaron), whereas a lamp is suitable only in a dark place. He would therefore return to his home and convert his countrymen.³ This he did with great success.

In thinking about this drosh, I realized I was having a hard time putting the "I" into it.-- I think this, I feel

this. It's also hard for me to stand in front of such a Jewishly educated group and talk Torah to you; it's very intimidating. Who am I, after all? And that is one of the most important things that I want to say -- who I am. I'm a convert, too.

That's a hard thing to say out loud, because the idea that a convert is never to be reminded that she is a convert cuts both ways -- it seems to limit the convert and prevents her from identifying herself as a convert and with other converts -- and that translates into feeling that it's a secret, and eventually, a source of shame -- exactly the thing that the original prohibition was trying to prevent.

I know that it's bad form to separate oneself from Klal Yisrael, but the reality is that I do feel separated -- not in a punitive way, but in a special way. It's said that the highest mitzvah is one which is commanded, the one that you have no choice about. But I've always thought that to choose to take on a mitzvah must be very special to God also, which leads me to a story . . .

"The Holy One loves converts greatly. A parable: to what is this comparable? To a king who had a flock which went out daily to pasture and returned at evening. Once a gazelle entered with the flock, joined the goats, and pastured with them. When the flock entered the sheepfold, it entered with them; when they went out to pasture, it went with them. -- When the King perceived this, he loved it

dearly. When it went out to the fields, he would order that it should have the choicest pasture it wished, that no one should strike it, that all should be careful of it. When it returned with the flock, he would tell them: Give it water to drink. --They said to him: My Lord, how many rams, ewes and kids thou hast and thou never chargest us about them! Yet thou givest ordinance about this gazelle every day! The king replied: As for the flock, willy nilly, its way is to graze in the field by day and sleep in the sheepfold at night. The gazelles sleep in the wilderness; it is not their way to enter human settlements. Shall we not be pleased with (lit., grateful to) this one, which has left the great broad desert and come to dwell in a yard? --Thus, we must be grateful to the convert who has left his family, his nation, and all the peoples of the world and come to us. Therefore does (the Bible) give special care for him."⁴

Each of us has his or her own history -- his-story, her-story. I'm not saying that to be a convert is to be higher or holier than to have been born Jewish -- God forbid. I will always have to ask myself -- If God wanted me to be Jewish, why wasn't I born Jewish? Did I need that battle? Did I need to be turned away, again and yet again? Did I need to feel that no one could hear me, again and yet again? Apparently, I did. I know what a special blessing it was to finally break through and align myself in the world the way that I felt aligned in my heart.

We learned a few months ago that Avraham was the Ivri -- he went over the spiritual river for all Jews and that legacy is inherited father to son, mother to daughter, so that those people born Jewish don't have to cross over, and don't have to forget their past. It's enough to say "A wandering Aramean was my father," and to remember. For me, it's more immediate and I sometimes feel the need to talk about it, not to forget it, as the tradition instructs. Theoretically, the convert has no antecedents, no past; upon immersion in the mikvah, he or she is a new person, sinless and pristine, with no previous transgressions. In theory, I understand that, but as a person whose life has been very much involved with the process of seeking, I don't want to forget. As an adult with steadily improving familial ties that have taken years to build, I don't want to abandon my natural family. I don't think there's much chance of them dragging me back to the fleshpots. And it's my past, search and struggle that is to a large degree, my strength. And I want to bring that to Judaism, to this community, because I think it's a valuable offering.

I only get this way a few times a year, at Shavuot, around Megilat Rut and now, with Parsha Yitro. Feeling different, inside the fold and yet a little bit outside at the same time, I look for role models. Having been brought to the Torah through Midrash and misas, I find it reassuring to know that converts are mentioned over 30 times in the Torah

and that it's always for a blessing. The very fabric of the Bible seems to include converts, setting them aside with special recognition and yet including them, us, right in the heart of things.

We've already mentioned Avraham and of course Sarah, in whose name converts are called to the Torah -- the son or daughter of Avraham our Father and Sarah our Mother, connoting the direct lineage. Jewish legend tells of the Oak of Abraham that withdrew its shade from idolators, so that he knew at once those in need of missionary efforts.

Another Biblical convert I want to mention is Bithyah, the daughter of Pharoah, who rescued Moses. Again, according to Midvash, Bithyah was at the Nile purifying herself from the idols of her father's house. Seeing the baby Moses, in her pure state, she naturally took pity on him, saved and raised him, thus ensuring herself in a place in history. Her rewards were many: although a first born, she was saved from the Plague of the First Born; she received a new name, Batya, daughter of God, for the Holy one said, "Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son; so also you were not my daughter yet I call you my daughter." She married Caleb and was one of a handful of Biblical characters who went up to their reward without dying.⁵

We can also see what happens when a righteous would-be convert is rejected because of intolerance by examining Amalek's story. According to Midvash, Timna, Amalek's mother,

approached all of the Patriarchs for conversion and was rejected. Finally she married Eliphaz, Esau's son, in order to be at least peripherally involved with Avraham's family. Because of this injustice to Timna, by the principle of Mida k'neged Mida, Israel was to suffer mightily at the hands of her son, Amalek.⁶

Which brings us back to Yitro. As a result of his experiences and his telling over of his-story, God's greatness became publicized throughout the world. For this reason, the Torah devoted a special section to him, calling it by his name.

"Dear are converts, for the Holy One adds to their name. For so you find with Jethro. At first he was called only Jether (Ex. 4.18), but when he was converted, he was called Jethro . . . When one is converted, he receives a reward as if he had labored in the Torah all his years, for it is said (Num. 10.29) 'Come thou with us and we will do thee good.'"⁷

The names Yeter and Yitro are derived from Yatar, to add. The story of his arrival was not placed at the end of the portion, when it probably happened, but at the very beginning, a great honor. (I'm sure all you Bible critics could tell us other reasons for the placement, but that's your drosh).

I find it interesting that Yitro is the namesake for this wonderfully significant portion, for in this portion we also find Matan Torah, the great equalizer between Yitro and

B'nai Yisrael. I call Sinai the great equalizer because during that event, all the souls there accepted the yoke of Torah, were immersed and converted. What Yitro experienced as an individual, B'nai Israel experienced as a nation.

And it was the universality of the commandments which changed Judaism from a national, particular religion to one embracable by any and all so moved to affirm the oneness of God contained therein. It is this universalism, born in the Torah and amplified by David and the prophets that makes me feel most at home, needed. If, as Jewish mysticism teaches us, there are sparks of good trapped in even the lowliest vessel, and it's Israel's responsibility to free them so that they can fly back to God, and bring about the Messianic Age, then maybe I'm one of the freed sparks and I, and others like me, are important to Israel.

"Why was the Torah given in the desert? To say that just as the desert is free (mufkar) to all men, so the words of the Torah are free to anyone who wishes to learn. Let no one say: I am a son of the Torah, for the Torah was given to me and my fathers; but you and your fathers are not sons of the Torah: your fathers were converts." [Therefore read not "Judaism is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut 33.4) but read "Judaism is the inheritance of all who choose to congregate in Jacob."]⁸

FOOTNOTES

¹Bamberger, Bernard J.; Proselytism in the Talmudic Period. Ktav Publishing House, Inc.; New York, N.Y. 1939, at p. 186.

²Bamberger at p. 187.

³Bamberger at p. 187.

⁴Bamberger at p. 155.

⁵Bamberger at p. 182.

⁶Bamberger at p. 180.

⁷Bamberger at p. 155.

⁸Bamberger at p. 160.

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