

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE PERFECT CONVERT? (Part II)

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We continue our learning about Ruth and the different ways her statement of fealty to Naomi is interpreted by our sources.

Midrash Ruth Rabbah, from the Land of Israel, gives us another version of what the perfect convert does.

Another interpretation: **WHITHER THOU GOEST I WILL GO**: to the tent of testimony, to Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, and the Permanent Temple. [These were the different places where the sanctuary rested before it settled in Jerusalem.] **AND WHERE THOU LODGEST I SHALL LODGE**: I shall lodge overnight with the sacrifices. [According to Deuteronomy 16:7, one had to stay overnight in Jerusalem on the first night of festivals after the sacrifice had been offered.] **THY PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE**, in that I will destroy all idolatry within me, and then **THY GOD SHALL BE MY GOD**, to pay me the reward of my labor. (Ruth Rabbah I:23)

If Hadassah or ARZA were to write a midrash on the book of Ruth, they might well come up with something similar to this interpretation: it is quite Zionist in tone. Here, the primacy of the Land of Israel, and particularly the obligation to appear there during the pilgrimage festivals, is emphasized as a key mitzvah in Judaism. Ruth is portrayed as eagerly agreeing to go wherever the tent of Testimony--later to become the Temple--rests. Commitment to Judaism is expressed through loyalty to the land and its holy place and adherence to Jewish communal norms.

In the Babylonian Talmud, however, Ruth's statement is interpreted in a much different light.

"We are forbidden" Naomi told her, "to move on Shabbat beyond the Shabbat boundaries!" "**WHITHER THOU GOEST, I WILL GO**," Ruth replied.

"We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman."

"**WHERE THOU LODGEST I WILL LODGE**."

"We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!"

"**THY PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE**."

"We are forbidden idolatry!"

"**AND THY GOD MY GOD**."

"Four modes of death were entrusted to the Beit Din!"

"**WHERE THOU DIEST I WILL DIE**."

"Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beit Din."

"**AND THERE WILL I BE BURIED**." (B. Yebamot 47b)

Now, if we look back at our text we see that Naomi is portrayed as following rabbinic procedure as she adjures Ruth regarding her wish to convert to Judaism. And here is where the Babylonian version differs from the version of this drash created in the Land of Israel. Instead of emphasizing the Land of Israel and community norms, in essence, Naomi defines becoming a Jew as submitting to rabbinic authority. Ruth must obey the Techum Shabbat, the border beyond which no one may travel on Shabbat, which was ordained by the sages, not the Torah. She must forego any private meeting of man or woman, again a rabbinic edict. She must obey the commandments as outlined by the rabbis and submit to any punishment the Beit Din, a court of rabbis, may mete out. This is quite a different emphasis from

that of our first interpretations, which focused more on values, identity and loyalty to the Land of Israel.

Discussion Questions:

1. What could account for the different ways the two groups of rabbis saw the conversion process and what they valued in converts to Judaism?
2. Can you see any parallels between the way Jewish identity in Israel and in the Diaspora today are like those in these rabbinic sources? What parallels? Why do you think they exist? What do you think they mean?