

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE PERFECT CONVERT?

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The book of Ruth, which is read on Shavuot, contains some of the most beautiful words in all of Tanach. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, bids Ruth to stay in Moab but Ruth refuses, saying:

Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16-17)

The rabbis examined every word of this statement for its significance. They assumed that no word in the Bible is superfluous, so when they read Ruth's statement, they asked, "Why did she say all this? Why didn't she just say, 'I'm going with you.?' " In answer, they provide the dialogue that they imagined must have taken place to produce this statement.

"AND RUTH SAID, 'ENTREAT ME NOT TO LEAVE THEE, AND TO RETURN FROM FOLLOWING AFTER THEE.' ...I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of another. When Naomi heard this, she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion, saying, 'My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theaters and circuses', to which Ruth replied, 'WHITHER THOU GOEST, I WILL GO.' Naomi continued, 'My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no mezuzah, to which she responded, 'AND WHERE THOU LODGEST, I WILL LODGE. THY PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE' refers to the penalties and admonitions [of the Torah], 'AND THY GOD MY GOD' to the other commandments of the Bible. (Ruth Rabbah I:22)

Let us examine this midrash piece by piece before we look at its larger implications. First, Ruth testifies that she wants to be converted by Naomi. Naomi then begins to inform Ruth what it means to be a good Jew. There are certain things one must do beyond adopting the Jewish religion. For example, one must forego certain secular activities, such as Gentile theaters and circuses which had a deserved reputation for lewdness in those days. To be a good Jew means we must be aware that we are part of a larger family, the Jewish people, and that our actions redound to the credit--or shame--of that family. So we must behave maturely, controlling our desires, for the sake of that family honor.

Next, Naomi tells Ruth she must dwell in a house with a mezuzah. In other words, she must publicly identify herself as a Jew. A mezuzah on the door of a home is a very public way of proclaiming what those within that home believe. It is not just enough to say, "I am a Jew. I needn't let it show in any outside manner. It is an inward thing." This midrash seems to be saying that being a Jew is a public commitment as well.

Naomi then equates peoplehood with following the prohibitions of the Torah (the Torah, note, not a Jewish court of law) and faith in God as following all the other commandments in the Torah.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think of these criteria for dissuading (or persuading) a person who is choosing Judaism?

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2. Are these criteria good ones to use today in persuading or dissuading potential converts to Judaism? Why?