

What We Can Learn From the Convert

Parashat Mishpatim - Rabbi Herb Cohen

This week's Torah portion tells us not to oppress the stranger. The commentators inform us that the Hebrew word for stranger in this passage refers to a convert. One exegete, the Or HaChaim, notes that we might be tempted to look down on converts because their lineage is not from Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. However, the Torah reminds us that we as a people came from idol worshippers and were influenced by the moral degeneracy of Egypt. Therefore, in a cosmic sense, we all have converted from the immorality of Egypt, and we should take a positive view of one who has, of his or her own free will, decided to accept the yoke of Torah and Mitzvot.

This classic interpretation of how we should relate to converts fits my own experience in dealing with newcomers to Judaism. As a rabbi in Atlanta and Denver, I observed many people gravitate to Judaism out of an honest intellectual search, and accept upon themselves with purpose and excitement the mitzvah life of observant Jews. It was and is inspiring to me to watch such people pray with a heightened sense of piety and passion.

A few weeks ago, I hosted a family of recent converts at my home in Dallas. They were friends visiting from Denver who were in town to attend a training session for a new entrepreneurial venture in which they invested. "Why are you doing this," I asked. The husband said: "The burden of day school tuition is enormous, so I felt I had to develop a second income stream." I asked him what his new business was. He told me it was Pet Butler, a service that provides pet owners with weekly removal of animal droppings from their yard.

I stood in awe of my friend. Here he was preparing to take on a very unattractive job so that he could pay his children's tuition and also contribute his fair share to the survival of Jewish day



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schools. I inwardly wondered how many born Jews possessed such dedication to Jewish educational institutions.

Converts can teach us many things, not the least of which is to develop the right priorities in life, to understand that the Jewish education of Jewish children is a supreme value that requires our total support, even when the task of supporting Jewish institutions of learning is difficult and unpleasant.

And so the Torah reminds us that we should not oppress the stranger, the convert; for not only were we strangers/converts in our own history, but we can also learn from a convert's uncompromising commitment to establishing a Jewish life for himself and his family.



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