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Behaaloscha

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONVERTS

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The Contribution of Converts

Good Shabbos!

Every now and then, the media focuses its attention on the social hierarchy in India. As many of you may know, it's referred to as the caste system.

In the caste system, there are the highest castes, which are considered the most important. Then you have the lowest castes, of which the lowest have no rights at all; everyone else treats them like slaves.

So today, I'd like to tell you the story of an Indian doctor named Bhagirath Prasad.

Dr. Prasad was born in Mumbai and belonged to the highest caste. He grew up and studied to become a doctor, and in his free time he trained at a local gym.

At the same gym, several English-speaking priest were also regulars. They befriended him and invited him to join him for Bible study classes.

Hinduism, the religion into which he was born and raised, contains many aspects of actual idol worship. And so Dr. Prasad had always been looking for something more spiritual, especially since his wife was Christian. So when this group suggested that he join their Bible study classes, he was only too happy to do so.

But he noticed that the entire mission of the class was to convince him to become a Christian—at every class, they asked him if was prepared already to accept the Christian faith. And they pressured him so much that he finally decided to quit the classes.

Before he left, however, they gave him a gift: his own copy of the Bible. But it came with a condition—that he was to only study what they called the “New Testament” and the Book of Psalms.

However, Dr. Prasad had his own ideas.

He started studying the Bible from the very beginning. And then, when he discovered the Ten Commandments, it created a change in his life. He understood that this was what he had been looking for his entire life, and that if he only adopted these ten points, then he would find inner peace. He decided that he was ready to abandon his standing as a physician of the highest caste in India just so that he could convert and join the Jewish Nation.

He later related that he could have been a millionaire if he had stayed in India like many of his friends who made it. But his soul craved to join the Jews.

But then he discovered that converting was no easy thing at all.

There were many obstacles on the path. Every Jewish community that he tried to be accepted by pushed him off, and he did not succeed in finding someone ready to convert him.

Ultimately, he gave up. He accepted that he'd never be a Jew—but perhaps his children would merit to be Jews. Nevertheless, he never gave up his faith in G-d, and never stopped praying to Him. He even changed his name at one point to Aharon Abraham.

And then on one fine day he met one of the shlichim in Mumbai, Rabbi Gabi Holtzberg, רבי גבי. The first time they met, Gabi told him, “I can’t help you. Chabad doesn’t deal with conversions.” But Rabbi Holtzberg still forged a connection with him, and they started studying together.

And so they ended up studying together for whole nights—to the point that Rabbi Holtzberg once said, “Now you’re ready to convert.”

And so the doctor, his wife and their three children converted to Judaism, and the bond between the Holtzbergs and the Abrahams only strengthened.

Then the most awful thing happened.

In November 2008, terrorists from Pakistan took over the Mumbai Chabad house and murdered six Jews, including the young couple, Rabbi and Mrs. Holtzberg.

It fell to the sad duty of Dr. Aharon Abraham to serve as a medical supervisor of the victims’ bodies to ensure that the Hindu doctors in India did not conduct any autopsy on the Jewish bodies, which is against Jewish law. Dr. Abraham made sure that the bodies remained intact.

After the attack, Dr. Abraham met several reporters from Israel. He forged a connection with one of them, and the reporter helped him make Aliyah to Israel along with his entire family.

Dr. Abraham and family settled in Kiryat Arba, not far from the Maarat Hamachpeilah, where our Patriarch and Matriarchs are buried. Why? Because that was his father’s resting place.

As everyone knows, converts are considered son of our Patriarch Abraham—spiritually speaking if not philosophically or halachically. When a convert gets an aliyah to the Torah, he is called up by his full Hebrew name followed by “son of Avraham.” And so Dr. Aharon Abraham was proud to live near the Maarat Hamachpeilah, the tomb of his spiritual ancestor.

Today, what he loves the most about Judaism is that there are no castes.

There are no official social groups in Judaism—there is no upper or lower class. Everyone has a direct connection with G-d. Dr. Abraham says that if all of mankind would just keep the Ten Commandments, the world would be good and perfect.

In March of 2014, Dr. Abraham’s daughter Sara represented Israel in Muay Thai kickboxing, winning the world championship at age 18.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Behaaloscha, we read again about Yisro, the father-in-law of Moshe Rabbeinu, who had heard about all the miracles that G-d had done for the Jewish Nation. He then left all the comforts of his native Midyan behind, heading out into the desert to attach himself to the Jewish Nation. As Rashi puts it: "He had been sitting in the glory of the world but his heart motivated him to go out to the desert, a wasteland, to hear words of Torah" (Shmos 18:6).

In this week's Parshah, we find the Jewish Nation at about one year into the desert and just about ready to enter the Holy Land. So Moshe turns to his father-in-law Yisro and invites him to join them for the trip into Israel. "We are traveling to the place about which G-d said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be good to you." In other words, come along with us and we'll see to it that your every need is met.

Moshe offered him the full package. But Yisro graciously declined and answered, "I shall not go, for to my land and my birthplace I shall go" (Bamidbar 10:29-32).

But Moshe pressured him, saying, "Please don't leave us, for because you are familiar with our encampments in the desert and you will be eyes to us"—we want you with us. You're important to us. You will be our eyes—meaning that you will be our guide. You will show us our way.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) explains that Yisro knew the desert well and so he knew how to lead them where to go. But in our parshah it's not clear if Yisro accepted Moshe's advice or not.

In the Talmud (Yerushalmi, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 17:1), there is a rule: "The words of Torah are poor in one place and rich in another place." This means that if the Torah doesn't complete a story in one place, you need to search the Torah to find the ending in another place.

Rashi's opinion is that the episode of Yisro here in our parshah is merely part of the story that was already related in the Book of Shmos in the parshah of Yisro itself. There, the Torah tells us what ultimately happened with Yisro. The Torah states: "And Moshe sent forth his father-in-law, and he went his way to his land." Ultimately, Moshe did not succeed in convincing Yisro to join the Jewish Nation on its way to the Holy Land; rather, he went back to his native land of Midyan.

Why did he do so? Rashi says, "to convert his family members."

But here we can ask the question: Why did Moshe press his father-in-law to join the Jewish Nation? As a general rule, it's not common for a son-in-law to pressure a visiting father-in-law to "do me a favor—stay a little longer!" If anything, it's the opposite!

So what got Moshe to go against the typical way of things and to beg his father-in-law to stay with them? Especially when Yisro acted like a genuine Jewish father-in-law—he gave Moshe advice. I don't know anyone who loves getting advice from everyone, and certainly not from his own father-in-law.

So perhaps we can say that the answer lies in the continuation of the parshah, after Yisro leaves.

Later in the parshah, we read the words, "And the nation became like complainers." The Jews at that point began complaining (again) against Moshe and against G-d Himself.

But when we look into this, we notice something amazing—as long as Yisro was in the desert with the Jews, there were no complaints. It's a miracle! For Jews to not complain for almost an entire year is something not to be believed! But Yisro indeed had the “magic” power to get the Jews to not complain, and so it's no wonder that Moshe himself begged Yisro to not leave them.

But what really got Yisro to leave?

Yisro had been the “pope” of Midyan, the high priest. He had been the supreme religious authority in a nation that worshipped idols. He had been on top of the world. But he left it all behind and went out to a desert so he could hear the Ten Commandments.

He was very moved by them. He said, “If only the entire world would accept the Ten Commandments, we would have a perfect world.” And so in front of Yisro, a man who had made such a personal sacrifice and a powerful choice, the Jews simply could *not* complain—they were *embarrassed* to complain about Moshe and about G-d in the presence of such a man.

Everyone knows that when there's a stranger in your midst, like when you have a first-time guest in your house, everyone is suddenly at their best behavior. Couples will not fight in front of strangers. Even little kids know that you have to behave yourself when there are strangers around. And so as long as Yisro was in the desert with his fellow Jews, there were no complaints—how could we show our faces to anyone if we complain about things for which this former non-Jew was prepared to sacrifice it all?

My friends: Nowadays, thanks to Internet social media, you're “outdoors” wherever you are—you're always in the public eye.

Today, we don't have the luxury of doing things behind closed doors without anyone knowing about it—there's no longer the concept of “keeping it between us.”

And so everyone needs to remember that everything that he does is not known about by one “Yisro” but possibly billions of people, and within days.

So the lesson, my friends, is this: Let us be Jews by choice, not Jews by accident. Let us embrace the Torah and the mitzvos like converts. Let us make them our own—something that we have to work for, not just inherit.

Good Shabbos!