



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

**DISTRIBUTION DATE:**

**TUESDAY MAY 26, 2009 / ג' סיון תשס"ט**

**PARSHA:**

**2<sup>ND</sup> DAY SHVUOS / יום ב' דחג השבועות**

**SERMON TITLE:**

**WHO WERE THE FIRST JEWISH CONVERTS?**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל Emil W. Herman  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

## 2<sup>ND</sup> DAY SHVUOS

### WHO WERE THE FIRST JEWISH CONVERTS?

When Barack Obama spoke at the AIPAC convention last year around this time, he said some very strong things about Israel: That he would always support Israel, that an undivided Jerusalem would always be Israel's capital, that he would not let Iran acquire nuclear weapons, and so on.

True, he said good things—but the question is whether they are what he really thinks and if he will indeed act accordingly as time goes on.

In a certain way, it's similar to how we scrutinize a man who wants to convert to Judaism.

Jewish law derives the laws of conversion from the holiday of Shavuos. When the Jewish Nation left Egypt, it underwent a conversion as an entire nation. As Maimonides writes: "With three things did Israel enter the Covenant [with G-d]: With circumcision, with immersion [in a mikvah] and with sacrifice."

When the Jewish Nation wanted to forge a pact with G-d to become the Chosen People and separate from the nations of the worlds, it first needed to undergo a process of conversion. "Circumcision occurred in Egypt—Moshe Rabbeinu circumcised them, as they all had abandoned circumcision in Egypt except for the Tribe of Levi."

Circumcision is a mitzvah that was given to our Patriarch Avraham well before the Giving of the Torah. But in Egypt, only the Tribe of Levi actually kept the mitzvah of circumcision—the majority of the people did not. Therefore, when they brought the Korbon Pesach, the Passover Sacrifice, Moshe circumcised everyone who wanted to eat of the sacrifice—because, as the verse instructs us, "No uncircumcised individual may eat of it."

We can imagine what was going on back then the day before they left Egypt. The mohelim were really busy. And it's no wonder that everyone was grouchy on the way out.

Later, when they had already arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai on the first of Sivan, G-d arranged a full program of preparations for receiving the Torah—one of which was that the entire nation would have to immerse in water and purify themselves before Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah. As Maimonides continues, "the immersion occurred before Matan Torah."

The third thing was the fact that they brought sacrifices. And it is from all three that we learn the process of conversion.

This is the process we use for converts today. When a non-Jew wants to convert and accept upon himself the yoke of Torah, he must do three things: One, if the non-Jew is male, he needs a circumcision—a little painful but not terrible; two, he needs to immerse in a mikvah in the presence of a Jewish court of three Orthodox rabbis—in this, male and female non-Jews are equal; and three, in the times of the Temple he or she would need to bring a sacrifice—all just like Matan Torah.

But the most important thing that happened at Mt. Sinai is the fact that the Jewish Nation accepted upon itself the yoke of Torah. As we read at the end of the Torah portion of Mishpatim regarding what happened before Matan Torah, Moshe Rabbeinu “took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the ears of the nation, and they said, ‘All that G-d has spoken, we shall do and hear.’” Rashi explains that the “Book of the Covenant” here was comprised of the Torah “from Genesis until the Giving of the Torah, and [included] the mitzvos they were commanded in Marah.” Moshe informed them of a few mitzvos, and they resolved to keep all of it.

It’s the same thing with a convert. As Maimonides writes, “To properly do the mitzvah, when the male or female convert comes to convert, we check whether he or she is perhaps motivated by money or power or fear.”

The convert needs to convert because he or she loves Judaism and wants to keep the mitzvos, and not because of some side reason such as marriage, money or fear.

Historically there were converts who converted out of fear of the Jewish People. As the Talmud tells us, towards the end of the First Temple era, Sancheriv, Assyrian King conquered the world. He had enough territory under his dominion in which to relocate any tribe or nation from one place to another. He moved entire nations from country to country so that no one would be able to claim ownership of the soil. So when he conquered part of the Holy Land, he did the same thing—he exiled ten of the Twelve Tribes and replaced them with another group called the Kutim, or the Shomronim. But when they came to live in the Holy Land, they were attacked by lions!

The Kutim decided that this had happened because the G-d of the Jews wanted them to accept the Jewish faith, and so they indeed converted. But the Sages didn’t like it, since they hadn’t converted because they discovered the beauty and wealth of Judaism but rather, had done so out of fear of lions. That’s why they were referred to as “lion converts”—and because they had done it because of fear and not out of free

choice, they didn't really stick with Jewish faith but continued to worship idols, and the Jewish People only suffered because of them in the course of the generations.

That's why the halachah states that one needs to check whether the convert indeed wants to convert because he wants to attach himself or herself to the Jewish religion and not for another reason. Because the entire reason he is converted is the fact that he wants to accept "the yoke of Torah"—and if he's doing it for other reasons, then the moment that the other reason ceases to exist, it's reasonable that he'll not feel obligated any more towards the Jewish religion.

Still, Maimonides concludes and says that if it so happens that "a convert who was not checked into or who was not instructed about the commandments and their punishments [went ahead] and circumcised himself and immersed... he is a convert. Even if it is known that he is converting for a[n undesirable] matter, since he circumcised himself and immersed, he exits the category of 'goyim'... and even if he reverts and worships idols, he is like a Jew whose nuptials are valid... since he immersed, he has been made like a Jew."

On Shavuot, the Jewish nation accepted the yoke of the Torah by saying, "we will do and hear." The Jewish Nation obligated itself to do everything that G-d would say, even before they knew what they were talking about. True, they had a certain understanding of several mitzvos, but nothing more—and still, they said "We will do and hear."

This is what we learn from the holiday of Shavuos.

Each year, G-d looks to us to say, "We will do and hear." He looks forward to the Jew making this commitment to the Jewish Nation and to Judaism, so that when he or she is asked to join some Jewish endeavor, he or she immediately responds, "I'm in!", only later asking what it entails.

Indeed, we have quite a few individuals like that right here in shul. When I ask any one of them to do something, he or she will say, "Count me in," only then asking, "Let me hear what I just obligated myself to do, and I hope I can afford it."

This is what we learn from Mt. Sinai. This is what we look for in a convert. And this is what we look for in ourselves. It doesn't matter what you're talking about—it's our business, and we need to be a part of it.

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