

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Parshat Yitro — “Becoming More Jewish”

Shabbat Yitro | February 13, 2009

Over the past three decades, we in America have seen a tremendous surge in the number of people converting to Judaism.

As a Congregational Rabbi these past twenty years, I have been privileged to participate in the conversion of scores of Jews by choice, from many religious background, men and women from the United States, Australia, Turkey, France, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Georgia, Russia, Egypt, Malaysia, Japan, China, Canada, Peru, Columbia, England, Poland and more.

Some come to Judaism because of romantic relationship with a Jew, some from a personal spiritual search, some because of attraction to such Jewish traditions as pluralism, intellectual inquiry, moral realism, emphasis on the deed, personal responsibility, and more.

The process of conversion involves a period of education, attendance at Synagogue, practice of central commandments, and finally, for men, a circumcision (or symbolic letting of blood for those already circumcised) and for men and women conscious acceptance of the commandments and immersion in a Mikveh, a ritual bath.

While converts come from many different journeys, they often share a similar hesitation as the day of conversion approaches. They wonder if they are “ready”, if they will “fit in”, if they will find their place in this confusing, formidable amalgam of ethnicity and faith which makes up Am Yisrael, the people of Israel.

Our Torah Portion this week, Yitro, describes the preparation of the Israelites for the reception of Torah at Sinai. Although these people have experienced the miracle of the Exodus, and centuries of shared persecution in which they kept their language and customs, they still undergo the same rituals which will later prepare converts for Judaism. The men are circumcised (according to the Midrash in the days just before the First Passover), and all the people enter a Mikveh when they step into the sea before the waters part (Exodus 14:22), and accept the commandments absolutely. “All the Lord has spoken we will do and understand” (Exodus 24:3).

Whether we are novitiates nervously approaching the Mikveh, or Jews long wizened through study and sacrifice, we are never “ready”. Judaism is a process, a discovery of sparks of holiness hidden throughout our daily routines. The challenges of enlightening oneself, building community, and repairing the world, are those which Jews never master, but are always privileged to embrace.