

Elie Wiesel:

Some very beautiful and moving stories can be found in our religious tradition about converts. Their kindness, their sense of devotion, their selfless love. But there are others who are rather bizarre. Listen: Long ago around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and its Holy Temple, there lived a famous but strange man of whom little has been recorded. We know only that his name was Onkelos, son of Kalonykos. And that he had with great skill and passion translated the Bible into the Aramaic language. Sorry, there is something else.

[00:01:00] We also know that he was the nephew of General Titus, the cruel and bloodthirsty conqueror of Palestine, and destroyer of Jerusalem. And we know that he subsequently converted to the Jewish faith.

So listen to a disturbing legend, noted in the tractate on divorce, called *Gittin*, and I quote: "Onkelos, son of Kalonykos, who married Titus' sister, wished to espouse the fate of the Jews. So he brought his uncle back from his grave, and asked him. 'Which people enjoys the highest respect in the other

world?' 'The people of Israel,' said the former emperor.

'Should I belong to it?' asked Onkelos. 'Jews are subjected to many laws,' answered the former emperor, so as to discourage him. 'You will never manage to [00:02:00] obey all of them. My advice: persecute them instead. (audience laughter) And you will become famous. For it is written in Midrash Eichah, on Lamentation, it's quoted that "'Whoever oppresses Israel acquires the status of leadership.'"

So Onkelos asked, 'Have you been punished for your acts?' And the former emperor said, 'Only that which I invented for myself.'" What was the punishment? The same tractate tells us that, we call him Titus, or Titus, "Titus had ordered his body to be incinerated and his ashes dispersed throughout the seven seas. So as to prevent the God of the Jews from finding him and bringing him before the celestial tribunal. 'And that's exactly what is happening to me now,' said Titus. 'That's how I'm being [00:03:00] punished. But I am enduring it every day. Day after day, my body is being incinerated and its ashes thrown into the seven seas.'" "

"Not satisfied with Titus's answer, Onkelos summoned the wicked prophet Balaam from his grave and asked him the same question.

'Which nation is the most respected in the other world?' 'Oh, Israel,' said Balaam. 'Should I belong to it?' 'No!' said Balaam, quoting a biblical verse, 'Do not look for Israel's peace and prosperity.'" In other words, why suffer like Jews? With Jews?

"Having received two negative opinions, Onkelos wanted a third. And so he brought back Jesus from the grave, and asked him the same question. 'Which is the most respected of nations in the other world?' 'Israel,' said Jesus. 'Should I become Jewish?' [00:04:00] And Jesus answered, 'Adhere to what in the Jews is good, but not to what is not. For whoever touches the Jews may hurt the apple of his eye.'" At the end, Onkelos converted.

Well, there is in this tale something bizarre, if not incomprehensible. First of all, Titus' behavior. Just imagine, the supreme enemy of the Jewish people. Whom is he quoting? Jeremiah. Has he studied Jeremiah? Where has he learned the text of Jeremiah? And then, next question, how is one to understand Onkelos' weird investigations? What motivated him? Profit? Success? Did he wish to obtain a good position in heaven? Because he always asked about heaven. Or maybe he

wanted fame? As a literary figure? [00:05:00] Was there nothing spiritual in his quest?

And then, of all people was Titus the right source for objective information about Jews? And then, why did he practice something which is forbidden by the faith he wants to join? Namely talking with the dead? (audience laughter) How could Onkelos hope to become Jewish if he began by violating the law of the Jews, the Torah? Didn't the future translator of the Torah know that it is forbidden by the Torah? And didn't he know that sorcery or necrophilia is punishable by death? But soon we shall return to Onkelos.

But now, let us offer some preliminary remarks. None of our annual encounters has ever taken place without them. One, have I sufficiently emphasized [00:06:00] my passion for the study of Midrashic commentaries? It keeps growing. And all I want really, is it to be contagious.

The Talmud is a universal reaching character as well as theme. One discovers in it ancient preoccupations that concern us to this day. The past is more than prologue, the past lives in the present. We learn from masters who lived and worked 20

centuries ago, as if we were their immediate disciples, such is the power of Talmud. The more we draw from its depth, the more we contribute to its resources. A Talmudic passage must be studied with the mind and the heart alike -- one emerges from it as from a hallucinatory journey to an enchanted land.

Two: our topic links us to the present. Today [00:07:00] conversion is of general interest. I mean, it is not limited to Jews alone. What is the Jewish attitude towards it? Some men or women convert to Judaism for various reasons. But in principle, the Jewish tradition refrains from proselytizing. In fact, it discourages conversion. Other faiths do not. Islam's recent successes have worried Christians. Just as some Southern Baptist ambitions have amused some of us. We shall return to them later. Our explanation tonight, we'll deal with the possible changes Judaism has undergone in its thinking on this subject since biblical and Talmudic times.

Three: as in preceding years, this study session is dedicated to the memory of Rebbe Saul Lieberman, *zichrono livracha*. My teacher and friend from whom I have received more than I could ever give back. It is not for nothing [00:08:00] that the Talmud commands a disciple to mourn over the passing of his

teacher the same way a son mourns for his father. Each time I open a Talmudic tractate, each time my finger runs through one of its pages and stops at an obscure passage I recall his face. I yearn for his clarity, his simplicity, as well as his faith. I see his penetrating blue eyes, I am encouraged by his smile. And then I realize that thanks to him I live a moment of grace.

If I may paraphrase Lieberman, who himself better paraphrased the Talmud in his daily messages left on my answering machine. He would say, "If so many people are eager [00:09:00] to study, and if all of them are outside, *Torah, mah tehei aleha* what will become of Torah?" So why are they waiting outside? (audience applause)

Well, we spoke earlier of Onkelos ha-Ger, [00:10:00] the proselyte, but I have not mentioned yet that I admire him for his glorified translation of the Bible. We read it as part of our weekly ritual. I also love him for his deep religious commitment, which makes him break with his illustrious family and sacrifice his vast fortune.

Still, on many other levels he is somewhat perplexing. If the stories about him are not enough to confuse us, we are presented

with another theory. That actually they are not-- the stories are not about him, but about another convert, also a translator, whose name was Aquilas. And some legends are generous and therefore they attribute all of them to both.

Listen to a story from the tractate of *Avodah Zarah*, which deals with issues concerning [00:11:00] idolatry. And this story too, is about Onkelos, but here his father's name is recorded not as Kalonykos, but as Kalonymus. As the story begins, Onkelos is in Palestine already converted. And his uncle, the emperor is still alive. Must these contradictions be reconciled? We may wonder.

The Talmud is not afraid of contradictions, and nor are we. In fact the Talmud is not afraid of anything. Except for those who don't understand it. There is no religious literature in the world whose texts are so audacious, even iconoclastic. Whether by negating hard facts or arguing with the almighty himself. In this legend, the Talmud imagines the Roman emperor furious with his nephew [00:12:00] Onkelos who gave up luxury and security at home so as to share in the misery and dangers of Jews far away.

He dispatched a company of soldiers to Palestine to get hold of the young convert and bring him back to Rome. Onkelos met the soldiers in a friendly manner, and recited poetry to them. And so impressed were the soldiers that they converted to Judaism. (audience laughter) Stubborn, the Emperor sent another company of soldiers and ordered them not to speak to his nephew. But he forgot to warn them not to listen to him! And while he was their prisoner he talked to them.

And this is what he said: "It is the custom for the servant to carry the torch for his superior [00:13:00] at night. And the superior for his superior, and so on until the supreme leader. But can you tell me," asks Onkelos of the soldiers, "For whom does he, the leader carry the torch?" "For nobody," reply the soldiers. "How could he? There is no one above him. No one superior to him."

"You see," said Onkelos, "in our traditional it is different. We believe that the Lord, blessed be he, himself carries the torch for his people, the people of Israel. As it is written in the Torah: 'And the Lord walked before them, to guide them in a pillar of cloud during the day, and the pillar of fire during

the night.'" Suffice it to say that the new soldiers also converted.

Beside himself the emperor sent a third military unit to bring back his nephew. [00:14:00] And this is what his instructions were: "Above all," said the Emperor, "do not argue with him. Avoid any conversation with him." But they too, they too could not help but listen to Onkelos's words. And were passing before a door with a *mezuzah*. He placed his hand on it and wondered aloud, "Do you know what this is?" "You tell us," said the soldiers.

"It is customary for the king to stay inside his palace while his guards protect him from the outside. In our tradition, it is different. The Lord, blessed he, is outside at the door. And he protects those who serve him and are inside, as it is written, 'The Lord will protect you when you leave, and when you return, now and always.'" Again, all the armed soldiers and the officers converted. Was the Emperor afraid of losing his entire army? At this point [00:15:00] he stopped sending soldiers to Palestine.

Well, the story is beautiful even if it doesn't sound plausible. The Talmudic sages have been known for their capacity to exaggeration, in order to illustrate an idea, and attitude, a legal opinion. You want proof? It is sufficient to quote one sage who stated simply that at the end of his life, Titus-- or Nero according to another sage-- the brutal enemy, the ferocious assassin actually became a Jew.

Without going that far, the story of Onkelos gets even more complicated while learning that another convert, Aquilas, he too a nephew of the emperor, had stimulated Talmudic fantasy. He too asked his uncle for advice about conversion. But in this case, the emperor was Hadrian.

So let us listen to [00:16:00] their dialogue. It begins as a routine business discussion, much like one we might hear among investment bankers. "Appearing before the emperor, Aquilas explains the reason for this visit. 'I wish to do business,' says he. 'And therefore, before I start I need to get the opinion of experts. Above all you, my dear uncle. How does one succeed in this field?' And the Emperor said, 'Should I send the soldiers somewhere?'" That mic, dead mic, it soon

[00:17:00] will be resurrected, don't worry. Sound engineer.
Now? I told you so.

So the emperor answered, "My dear nephew, it's simple. Buy low, sell high." Or in his own words he said, "'When you see a trade that fell to low esteem, cling to it. For it will go up again.'" Aquilas thanked him and left the Imperial Palace. Next, we find him already in Palestine. Where he studied at the Yeshiva with such enthusiasm that Rebbe Eliezer and Rebbe Yehoshua took interest in him. He did not look well. 'That's probably because he studies too hard.' [00:18:00] The sages thought."

You know, this is what we believe in the Talmud. That "*HaTorah machlishah*" the Torah weakens you. And therefore, the place where I come from in Eastern Europe-- whenever the matchmaker used to praise the husband, praise the groom. He would say, "He's so intelligent, he's so delicate, he's so weak," you know, he is... (laughing) And by the way, at the end of every-- whenever we've finished one of the *Chamisha Chumshei Torah*, when the books -- that we finish the last passage, what do we say? *Chazak chazak v'nitchazek*. Why? Because of that, because we believe having read, we became weak.

So, he was weak. "Aquilas was weak and they noticed it. And then they got acquainted, and he asked them questions of interpretation and *halakha*. And they responded. [00:19:00] Eventually, he returned to Rome to see his uncle. The emperor also noticed how pale he looked. 'What happened to you,' he asked. 'Have you lost money? Have your business dealings gone sour? Has anyone done you harm?' 'No,' said Aquilas. 'Nobody has wronged me.' 'Then why do you look so sad-- so bad?'"

"'Oh, the truth uncle, you want the truth? Because I've studied Torah. In fact, I asked to be circumcised.' Hadrian was enraged. 'Who told you to do that?' And the emperor was ready to punish on the spot the evil advisor who has corrupted his beloved nephew. 'Who told you to do that?' Hadrian demanded. 'You did,' Aquilas quietly replied. It is your advice I followed.' 'When did I give you such advice?' shouted the emperor."

"'Oh,' said Aquilas. 'When I asked you about my desire to go into business, didn't you counsel me [00:20:00] to choose the trade people denigrated most for it would surely rise again? Well, with your words in my ear I began studying people and nations. And found that no one is as humbled, as humiliated as

the Jewish people. So I understood that one day it will be respected again.'"

One easily imagines Hadrian's wrath. Hadrian, the wickedest of all emperors. The pagan leader who sought to exterminate the spirit, the culture, and religious fate of Jews. By sentencing their teachers, disciples, and friends to death. He could blame only himself, for his own nephew was becoming a Jew.

Interestingly, whereas Titus seems to have broken all relations with Onkelos, Hadrian apparently continued to receive him, to entertain him, to discuss with him various aspects of the Jewish religion.

And at the same time, Aquilas pursued his studies with Rebbe Eliezer and Rebbe Yehoshua. [00:21:00] Now these two converts-- or was it one? Occupy a place of honor in Talmudic literature and in the Jewish tradition. Just as Onkelos translated the Torah into Aramaic, Aquilas translated the prophets into Greek. And you see, the high esteem our masters held for translators. And you will understand mine, for my own. Who is my wife.

But in truth, are these two translators beloved because they were excellent linguists? Or because they were converts? Here

as in other areas, Jewish tradition follows the biblical path. In the Bible, we are commanded to love the proselyte, but not to subject others to forced conversion.

The only exception deals with Jacob sons, Shimon and Levi. To avenge the dishonor the prince of Shechem [00:22:00] brought upon their sister Dinah they managed to manipulate the males of the entire tribe in being circumcised. When all the men of Shechem were in pain and defenseless, Shimon and Levi attacked and killed them.

Incidentally, the author of Kli Yakar, the commentary on the Bible, raises a pertinent question. From the text we learn that the tribe of Shechem had many powerful friends in the region. Why didn't they come to its assistance? And his answer is-- I'm using it to a certain extent, true-- when the men of Shechem got circumcised, they became Jewish. And no one is ever ready to help Jews. (audience laughter) But Jacob, the father, on his deathbed reprimanded his sons. Because the victims were converts? No. He reprimanded them because the avengers were Jews.

[00:23:00] The Bible relentlessly urges the believer to show special affection, special love for the proselyte. The commandment, "*V'ahavta et ha-ger,*" "And you shall love the *ger,*" the friendly stranger -- appears thousands of times in scripture. Here the term *ger* does not apply yet to converts. It refers simply to one who is not Jewish, but who lives near us, with us. Sharing our bread and our pain, our joy and our solitude. In other words, the law does not deal with religious allegiances, but its social and geographical ones. *Ger* derives from the word *lagur*, *mehgorim* means residents. The *ger* may freely practice his own religion in our midst, he will not be revered loved less for that.

But we must see him or her, we must continuously feel his or her presence. Isn't this the most moving aspect of tolerance? We want the stranger to remain [00:24:00] who he or she is. True to himself and his own tradition. We can benefit from each other's experience -- only if that experience is authentic.

Granted, we had our own proselytizers, Abraham and Sarah. They were the first. Hence they are the spiritual father and mother of all converts, past and future. They did try to convert others but only to monotheism, not to Judaism. Whenever the

word *ger* appears in scripture it refers to Gentiles, never to converts.

When in biblical times, Gentiles did leave their faith for hours he or she was not called convert, but Jew. Take the beautiful, heartbreaking example of Ruth. Was there any woman more filled with grace, endowed with a deeper sense of devotion and identification. Even today, these are her words that the candidate for conversion repeats, [00:25:00] "*Ameich ami.*" "Your people is mine. Your God is my God." "*ba'asher teilkhi, eileikh* "Wherever you go, I go. Wherever you dwell, I dwell. Wherever you die, I die."

In the Talmud the concept of the *ger* undergoes a metamorphosis. The *ger* is now by definition a "*ger tzedik.*" A just stranger or I would translate it as -- a stranger inspired by justice. Someone who converted by conviction, someone who joined our people to be united to its destiny. And so, in the Talmud, the commandment, "*V'ahavta,*" ordering us to love the *ger*. The stranger who ceased to be a stranger is understood in purely religious and judicial terms. Of course we speak here of converts to, not from, the Jewish faith.

The Jewish religion does not accept, nor does it recognize the possibility [00:26:00] of leaving our faith for another faith. A Jew will forever remain Jewish. In medieval times many Jews were forced to convert. Some remained Marranos, others chose death rather than abdication.

But what about those Jews who voluntarily converted to Christianity or Islam? Theirs is another story; who were the outsiders not the ignoramuses. One feels sorry for them without condemning them. Outsiders were erudite, they had learned if not truth, then at least its consequences. They used their knowledge of Jewish laws and customs as a weapon against the Jewish people. They are what the term *zar* refers to. The hostile stranger who was forbidden to come near anything sacred. Having excluded himself from the community, he is banned from the community.

But in the Middle Ages, learned rabbis [00:27:00] were forced by kings to defend their beliefs in public. They frequently confronted renegades, Rabbi Yechiel in Paris. And the Nachmanides, the Ramban in Barcelona had to take part in disputations with converted Jews who remembered what they had learned as Jews. And they brought shame to their people.

Now, just as the self-isolated renegade is to be banned, the convert to Judaism is to be loved, shielded, surrounded with affection. We are bound together in solidarity and gratitude. The convert is existentially and even empirically attached to Abraham and Sarah, our common forefathers. And to Ruth, whose loyalty will be rewarded with the promise of the Messiah being her descendant.

On Passover at the Seder, like all of us, together with all of us the Convert recites the story of Exodus. [00:28:00] Do The Four Questions of "*Mah nishtana*," "why is this night different from all others?" He too, the convert answers: *Avadim hayinu l'paroh b'mitzrayim*. This night is different. Everything in our life is different because we had been Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. What? The man or woman who yesterday was a child of Christian, or Muslim, or Buddhist parents --has a personal connection with slaves in ancient Egypt? Yes.

The moment a convert enters our covenant, he or she shares not only our future, but also our past. Thus converts must feel not only that like us, they fled Egypt. But also that together with all Jews, they stood at Sinai and received from God himself the

law that still governs Jewish existence everywhere. But is that technically, rationally possible? How [00:29:00] could one have been at Sinai without really being in Egypt? How could one have been at Sinai without physically having been in Egypt?

And to this logical question the Talmud offers a logical answer. By chance. Yes, says the Talmud, "On that morning, in the month of *Sivan*, the converts had found themselves by sheer luck together with the entire people of Israel at Sinai. And they silently listened to God's voice addressing each and every one individually. "*Anochi Adoshem Elokekha*" "I am the Lord, thy Lord who brought you out of Egypt."r

When the convert prays, he says what we say: "*Baruch atah AdoShem, elokeinu v'elokei avoteinu.*" "Blessed be thou, our God, the God of our ancestors. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." How can he say "the God of our ancestors?" [00:30:00] Since when have the patriarchs and the matriarchs been part of his family tree?

But in this case, the retroactive legislation is in place. While it is assumed that God himself cannot change man's past, in the case of converts he can. In accepting the law of Jews --

the Convert receives their history as well. It is as if a new collective memory had been given him, replacing his own. No one is supposed or allowed to remind the convert of his or her personal past. It's simply ceased to play a role, it ceased to exist, it has been eradicated.

The act of conversion transforms the convert into a newborn infant. A new kind of infant with no link to his biological balance. And so in theory, but in theory only, we may imagine a situation [00:31:00] in which a woman convert is allowed to marry her son who is also a convert. After all, why shouldn't two babies decide to get married? But Sigmund Freud would say about such a law, when it is pushed to its extreme limits is a subject for analysis, and therapy.

But clearly, the Talmudic sages have done everything in their power to prevent the convert to Judaism from feeling excluded or marginalized by the Jewish community. The convert must never feel inferior to other Jews. All the moral obligations and religious duties that have been assigned to the Jew by birth apply to the convert as well.

Does the *ger* enjoy additional privileges? Yes, he does. In the Bible, love for the *ger* is almost an obsession. The *ger* is frequently found [00:32:00] in the warm company of the *Levi*, the Levite, who ranks just below the *Kohen*, the priest. One must make a special effort to understand the special problems facing the *ger*.

In fact, the status of the *ger* is so exalted, the laws favoring the *ger* so compassionate. That according to the Midrash, Moses objected. "Why do converts deserve such favoritism?" He asks. And God explained it by the convert's purity of heart. God said to Moses, "Do you remember what I had to do to persuade the people of Israel to accept my law? I had to free them from bondage, feed them in the desert, protect them from their enemies, impress them with continuous miracles! One more astonishing than the other. While the *ger*, the convert didn't need all these signs.[00:33:00] I didn't choose him. I didn't even call him! And still he came. In other words, the convert is someone special because his or her Jewishness is a matter not of birth, but of choice."

And yet, certain realities must be confronted. The privileges accorded to the proselyte are accompanied by some restrictions.

For instance, a convert cannot be crowned king, nor can he assume the role of prophet. That's not all. A convert cannot be appointed to the judiciary. Why can't he serve as judge? Because a defendant must be tried "by his brothers."

Do we therefore infer that the convert is not my brother? But you just said he is. [00:34:00] He is. And his son may very well be appointed to the court. But he himself must be patient and accept the law even if he fails to understand it. Just as he would not understand the next law, which prohibits him to become a priest. And here the Talmud offers us explanations which may not please the convert. The most moderate being: "A convert cannot become a priest, not because he is not of the priestly tribe, but because the *Shekinah*, God's presence as it were, does not dwell in him."

Other explanations are worse. But why such discrimination? Is it to show us that special privileges are not meant to be limitless? Or that some converts have aroused suspicion? In the Talmud converts fall into three distinct categories. First, there are [00:35:00] those who convert out of fear. Yes, fear of Jewish political power, or of social influence. In that

case, all the anti-Semites should convert. They always live in fear of our power.

But for instance, in the book of Esther, we find Persian citizens who converted to Judaism after Queen Esther and her uncle, prime minister Mordechai *hatzadik* emerged victorious over Haman, the enemy of the Jews. They were afraid of what Jewish survivors might do to them, so they converted.

Then there are the converts motivated by envy. Who wish to be more successful socially, or financially, or politically. And that occurs when Jews live in conditions of security, prosperity, and peace. As under the reign of David and Solomon. Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi, known as the Rif, explains this phenomenon as follows: "At that time, converts were not accepted.

[00:36:00] Why not? Because the land of Judea knew periods of happiness, and those who wanted to become Jewish came for the wrong reasons."

Lastly, there are the true converts, those who have no hidden agenda. And to act out of sincerity, and they adhere to Judaism because they believe in its truth. Is that why a candidate for conversion must submit to rigorous questioning? To detect his

or her true motive? The candidate is asked whether he knows, whether he really knows Jewish history? Which is filled with stories of persecution, oppression, and suffering.

He's told of the relentless efforts made by all the new enemies to undermine Jewish survival. The candidate learns the history of Jewish martyrdom in ancient and medieval times. And he's asked again and again, since he's aware of all that, why does he wish to be part of it? Why reject the life [00:37:00] of material and sometimes spiritual comfort and choose an uncertain future? In other words, a rabbinic tribunal uses all the logical arguments at its disposal. So as to discourage the candidate from going ahead with his plan to begin living a different life, in a different family, in different surroundings.

But the question must be raised: Why does the Jewish tradition make things so difficult for the person wishing to espouse it? Is it that we are, or ought to be, frightened of newcomers? Are we concerned perhaps, that the convert will not succeed in the long run in freeing himself from past habits and customs? Is that why for so many centuries, the Jewish people refrain from practicing compulsory conversion?

There were several exceptions. One occurred around the year 135 of the Common Era, during the reign of Johanan [00:38:00], or John Hyrcanus. It was he who sought to force Edomites to convert to Judaism. Some 30 or 40 years later, King Yannai ordered the massacre of defeated Moabites. Defeated in battle, who refused to accept the Jewish faith. And as our teachers commented, "We live to regret it." In general, we must insist on this. The official line was to discourage conversion.

In some quarters, converts were considered uncharitably. Some expressions were not too laudatory. Rabbi Chelbo, for instance, stated that: "*Kashim gerim l'Yisrael ke'sapahat.*" "Proselytes are as bad or as harmful to Israel as the plague." And I confess, each time I come across these words I must try to conquer my indignation. [00:39:00] How could a master, a sage in Israel make such generalizations? How could he condemn an entire category of good men and women? Let's assume that he had personally encountered insincere and unworthy converts. Why condemn all the others?

Naturally, we could remind ourselves of the fact that similarly harsh expressions about people and things can be found in the

vast Talmudic literature. Examples, the first may irritate the physicians in the audience. It says: *Tov she'b'rofim l'gehinnom.* "The best of medical doctors is destined to go to hell." And that was before managed care! (audience laughter) Well, there is nothing comparable about lawyers. [00:40:00] But, would the physicians here be consoled by positive interpretation? Namely, that the best will go where they are needed most, meaning in hell. You are right, not very convincing.

In truth this saying is part of a series of verbal exaggerations in the Talmud. Such as: *ha-tov sheb'nachashim ratzotz et mocho* "The best of the snakes crushes its head." "*ha-tov sheb'ovdei cokhavam harog.*" "The best of the pagans should be killed." And here too, there is an interpretation which leaves us off the hook. It says, *ha-tov sheb'ovdei harog* "The best of the pagans," "*harog* "wants to kill." In all fairness, such an easy way out is to be discarded.

What has been said is what we read. And we must read it in the spirit it was written. But we must not forget that it is not the Talmud that makes such statements, it is someone in the Talmud. And such statements carry no force of law, [00:41:00]

they were never put to practice. And therefore the same is true of Rabbi Chelbo's negative opinion of the converts.

We cannot but take it seriously, since he does, as does Rashi. *Mah parash Rashi?* What does Rashi say? Rashi, our old teacher, guide, and friend accepts Rabbi Chelbo's theory. And Rashi explains, "The converts are indeed dangerous." And he says, "Why? They are dangerous because they cannot or they are unwilling to obey the *mitzvot* at all times Jews do. It's a matter of mentality, of habit." When I read Rashi's comment I was puzzled. Rashi? Also generalizing?

But then I am not alone in my astonishment. It is shared by Rabbi Abraham Ha-Ger, the proselyte. A great Tosafist of the 12th century. But he [00:42:00] interprets Rabbi Chelbo's judgment quite differently. He says, "Converts are dangerous for the opposite reason. They are too good. (audience laughter) They are better than ordinary Jews," he says. "Their practice of *mitzvot* is more authentic. So much so that God uses their virtues against ordinary Jews. Saying, 'Look at yourselves -- and look at them. You have been Jewish longer than the proselytes, and yet you are surpassed by them in piety and *mitzvah*.' That is why Rabbi Chelbo resented converts.

But I repeat, he belongs to the minority. The majority favors the convert. Said Rabbi Yochanan: "When a candidate for conversion comes to you, let your left hand push him away. But your right hand must draw him closer." In other words, even when you try to discourage the convert, don't overdo it.

(audience laughter) Said the great amora, Palestinian amora, Rabbi Yochanan: [00:43:00] "Why was Abraham punished with the exile of his descendants to Egypt? Because at least in one case, with Lot and Sodom he did not enable some people to join the community of God. And that happened when he rescued refugees from war. And he handed them back to the king of Sodom instead of bringing them under the wings of the Shekhinah."

The Talmud itself shows no lack of converts. Granted, only seven names have been recorded, but the city of Mechuza was full of them. We know that from an incident that occurred there. When Rabbi Zeira, of whom we spoke years ago here, one of my favorite. Rabbi Zeira came to speak on the complicated and painful issue of the illegitimate children. And then he made a disparaging comment about converts. So his audience threw stones at him, because most of them were themselves converts.

Among the great teachers, we find [00:44:00] Shamaya and Avtalion, whose proteges included Shammai and Hillel. Their ancestors were pagans who converted to Judaism. And legend has it that they were descendants of the wicked Assyrian king, Sennacherib. Rabbi Akiva, son of Yosef, Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, was also a descendant of converts. As well, Rabbi Yehuda ben Gerim. And Rabbi Meir.

Said Rabbi Akiva: "If a convert fulfills one mitzvah, only one, he will have his place in paradise." He had a student, Binyamin of Egypt, also a convert --for whom he showed particular affection. Calling him "my son." Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta, a discussant of Rabbi Akiva, was himself a proselyte. And he became a proselyte, how?

Again a story: A poor Jew sold his cow [00:45:00] to a pagan. Who after a week or so brought her back to him. Why? Because the cow refused to work on the seventh day. In desperation, the Jew whispered in her ear saying, "Cow, cow, don't you know the law? (laughter) As long as you were mine, you had to observe the Shabbat. But you don't have to anymore, since you belong to him." And the cow must have been intuitive and responsive. From then on she worked on Shabbat. Stupefied, the pagan

implored the seller to explain the miraculous transformation of the cow. After hearing the answer he exclaimed, "If this cow which has neither intelligence nor language is able to acknowledge her creator, how can I who understand and speak [00:46:00] ignore mine?" He converted to Judaism. And his name, Yohanan *ben torta* means "Yohanan, son of the cow."

Other dramatic cases have been recorded in Midrashic literature. For instance, that of Queen Helene, who is evoked with great affection and gratitude. Having studied Torah she adopted its laws. For 14, or according to other sources, 21 years she lived ascetically. Her sukkah in Lydda was the largest, the tallest, the widest. She gave a golden lamb to the Temple. Her son, King Monobaz, had the *mezuzah* put on his cane which never left his hands.

Another legend, even more spectacular than the previous ones, describes Emperor Nero, who at the end of his turbulent life allegedly converted to Judaism. And if you wish to learn why, and how, again listen: [00:47:00] "While his invincible legions besieged Jerusalem, Nero realized one day that whenever he shoots an arrow in any direction it falls on the Jewish capital. Intrigued, he did what all sages used to do in those times. He

stopped a child, a Jewish child, a Jewish boy who happened to be there. And he interrogated him on the biblical verse he had studied that day in school.”

“And the child quoted the prophet Ezekiel. ‘I shall entrust upon Edom - Edom which means Rome -- to avenge my honor and inflict punishment on Israel.’ And so Nero refused to serve as God’s cruel instrument, and he exclaimed, ‘The Lord intends to destroy his house and use me as a pretext?’ He ran away, converted to Judaism.” The Rabbi Meir was his descendant.

Admit it, [00:48:00] Talmudic sages did have powers of imagination. (audience laughter) Nero had nothing else to do but question a Jewish child about his Torah studies. The emperor abdicated his throne in order to convert. All this makes us smile.

But the legend does contain a lesson. For a Jew, racism is never an option. Purity of bloodlines has never been a Jewish concept. It is not blood or skin color that make the human being the man he is, created in the image of God. Man is defined by his commitments, not by his origins. The descendant

of a killer is not a killer. The descendants of Haman himself established the Yeshiva in Bnei Brak, according to a Midrash.

And the great-grandson [00:49:00] of Nero became known as a master in Judea. Is this why various celebrities have then converted? To have renowned grandchildren? The fact is that in spite of the tradition to discourage conversion, there were throughout the centuries men and women who opted for the Jewish faith. Especially in diaspora. In the Tractate of Pesachim, a sage goes so far as to claim that God exiled his people with the aim of attracting converts.

There were converts in Babylonia, Egypt, and in Europe. In the Hellenistic period, Jews served in the armies of Alexander the Great, they settled in Alexandria and married there. So their wives became Jewish. Josephus Flavius notes in his memoirs that there is no Greek or barbarian city -- which means pagan city where inhabitants do not observe the Shabbat. Light candles [00:50:00] for holidays, and practice *tzedakah* or charity. Philo maintains, the philosopher, that many nations then imitated Jewish laws.

What was it in the Jewish religion that attracted converts? The special relationship that exists between Jews and God? That may have been true in antiquity. But what about later in the Middle Ages? Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi, who we already quoted, writes:

"When Jews lived in peace they oppose conversions. But these days, when Jews endure suffering and humiliation -- converts are welcomed with open arms, with no proper investigation."

Is it that converts were attracted by Jewish suffering? The promise of an eschatological change of redemption perhaps? Was it the desire to belong to a small people, so vulnerable, but so thirsty for meaning. So infatuated with God and with destiny. Was it the desire to share its consuming passion [00:51:00] for memory.

We are almost at the end of our exploration tonight. Perhaps, this is therefore the moment to analyze the meaning and the reality of conversion. What is it? Is it a breakdown of existing structures? An escape towards the unknown? A reorientation of the mind? A rupture of being? A metamorphosis of the soul? A transfusion of memory? A mysterious urge to self-destruct so as to begin again? What is the role of

environment? Of education? Of peer pressure in a decision such as that?

Certain converts spoke of having discovered truth, others felt closer to God. Still others in medieval times -- so to acquire suffering and become martyrs whose agony strangely resembles happiness. But martyrs are not [00:52:00] converts, although some converts become martyrs. A martyr is someone who refuses to deny his or her faith, his community, his links to the past.

The convert on his part has already rejected what used to be essential to his previous existence. In Christianity of the Middle Ages, conversion to Judaism was punished by death. In certain provinces, Jews were accused of seducing Christians into conversion. Severe collective punishments followed. To protect their communities, great rabbinic authorities such as Rabbi Gershom ben Yaakov of the 13th century, implored their congregants not to discuss theology with Christians. So as not to be accused of trying to influence them.

But there were Christians, renowned Christians who converted. Obadiah the Proselyte, he came with the Crusaders to Jerusalem and converted in 1102. [00:53:00] The personal confessor,

Bishop Aleman Bodo of King Louis the First converted. A priest named Vitzelenius. Rabbi Abraham at Augsburg, Joseph [Ceravolo?] in Italy. Katrin Zalasowska in Krakow in 1539. Count Valentin Pototzki, Lord George Gordon in England.

In conclusion only this; conversion must be voluntary, and individual. It must never be done under coercion, but as a result of proselytizing propaganda. A Christian did not become Jewish to be respected by Jews. The same applies to the Muslim. I insist on this because earlier this year, as I have already said, a regrettable discourse was heard in our land. It came from the Southern Baptists who announced their intention to convert all Jews in America. [00:54:00] Well, that is some ambitious project. Now what are they really thinking?

That these are the dark Middle Ages? Or that God remained there, a prisoner of the Middle Ages' fanaticism? I wonder, do they have no other worries? No more social problems to resolve? No homeless people to befriend? No sick children to console? No victims of AIDS or Alzheimer's to comfort? Are there no more wars in the world? No more bloodshed? No more hunger? Is conversion of American Jews their absolute priority? (audience laughter) And what happens if we say no? Would they use force?

Luckily, we heard from another group of Christian reformists, much smaller, that stated just the opposite. That Jews and Muslims no longer need to convert in order to go to paradise.

But the Southern Baptists are larger in numbers. [00:55:00] Are they a real threat to us? No. Should we engage in dialogue with them? Dialogue implies mutual respect. But then, their plan shows total lack of respect towards an ancient people who maintains a 3000 year old tradition. If they persist in trying to convert all American Jews, well, let them start with me.

(audience laughter)

As far as our attitude towards converts is concerned, let us open the Talmud again and go back to Shammai and his old adversary, Hillel. "When the Shammai was rigorous with candidates for conversion, Hillel showed them understanding and tenderness. Remember the pagan who heard Jewish children repeating tales of the high priests magnificence and glory? He became so envious that he decided to convert, so as to become high priest himself."

"And he presented this idea to Shammai and Hillel. [00:56:00] Shammai turned his back on him. Whereas Hillel began studying

with him the biblical laws regarding priestly privileges and duties. At one point, they arrived at the passage the "*v' hazar hakareiv yumat*" forbidding the stranger to come near the Mishkan, the sacred tabernacle--a transgression warranting the death sentence. 'To whom does it apply?' asked the pagan. 'To everybody,' said Hillel. 'To everybody who is not a priest, even to King David.' And so the pagan understood that the Jewish religion does not discriminate in essential matters, and he converted."

But then, the most beautiful story is the next one. Again with Shammai and Hillel. "A pagan, maybe the same, wanted Shammai and Hillel to teach them the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai chased him away without a word. But as Hillel gave him the familiar advice, "*Da'ahlakh s'nei l'chav'rakh lah ta'aveid.*" 'What you don't want others [00:57:00] to do unto you, don't do unto others.' 'Unbelievable, that's the entire Torah?'

Well, few among us know or want to know that it was meant only as a beginning. That there is another half to the sentence. And the other half reads, "*v'idakh,*. "'On the other hand, *zil g'mor* go and study. The pagan converted." But those who don't

have to be converted, because they are who they are -- I suggest they should follow the same advice. " *v'idakh, zil g'mor*" Let's study, again and again. (audience applause) [00:58:00]

M:

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