

The Conversion Principle

When a person elects to become Jewish, he or she is given a Hebrew name to establish his/her identity as a member of the people of Israel. That name includes the term, ben or bat Avraham, “ the son/daughter of Abraham “. Why do we designate a newly arrived member of our people as a descendent of Abraham?

There are two central reasons for doing this. First of all, Abraham chose to accept God and thereby, became the first Jew. Secondly, all Israel descends from his seed. Hence, we as Jews, whether by birth or by choice, are all equal. The fact that we all are descendants of Abraham, points clearly to the truth, that the core issue in being Jewish is choice.

Remember, our forefather Abraham was the first “convert” to Judaism. Neither he nor Sarah were not born Jewish. They chose to become adherents to the one God. It was an act of internal transformation and one of great faith. It was specifically because of this devotion and faith, that God designated Abraham and Sarah to become the father and mother of the people of Israel.

Our existence as a people and as a religion originated in faith and in choice. Abraham, as an individual, chose to serve God alone and God in turn, chose Abraham as the forefather of a people that were to be dedicated to divine service.

That very principle replicates itself even on the ritual level. When an individual comes to read from the Torah, they are accepting, voluntarily, the obligations of Torah and the Commandments. It is an act of volition and of dedication.

In Judaism, there is absolutely no difference between one who is born Jewish and one who chooses to become Jewish. Under Jewish Law, once a person becomes a Jew, it is forbidden as morally wrong to ever mention their past or refer to them at any time as a convert. The Jewish people are not a biological race, nor is Judaism a by product of birth. Judaism is a faith and a way of life that one has chosen to accept. We are all children of Abraham and Sarah.

Judaism teaches that worship, study and moral integrity are the core expressions of a spiritual and religious life. Learning and applying that which is learned to daily life, is the essence of a truly Jewish existence. This requires continually developing ourselves morally and spiritually, through the course of our earthly lives. As such, being Jewish demands a lifetime of willful and purposeful commitment. Our entire way of life as Jews, is predicated therefore, above all else, on choice and on devotion.

To be Jews, we have to choose to be Jews, by consciously pursuing a life of faith, a life of service to God and a deep commitment to Torah, God's teachings. Choice and devotion, determination and consistency are the hallmarks of the Jewish way of life.

It was on this very principle, that the Jewish people were constituted in the first place. What attracted God's attention was Abraham's own inner work, his own conversion, and his deep and abiding faith in God. We become children of Abraham and Sarah, and fulfill our commitments to be Jews, when we willingly acknowledge God and continually seek to do the divine Will. That commitment translates into worship, into study, into the moral and ethical imperative that God articulated at Mt. Sinai.

Learning, delving into and following the precepts of God is how we evolve spiritually. That is how the Covenant with the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel and Leah is observed. Keeping the Covenant, keeping faith with God requires both personal choice and the resolve to learn continually, to make Torah practical and relevant in our lives, and thereby to serve the Divine Purpose.

To be Jewish in the truest sense, we must all go through conversion. We must emulate Abraham and Sarah. We must go through the work of inner transformation, reaffirm our faith and attune our daily lives to the still small voice of God within us, harmonizing our worldly existences with the Divine Will, through trust and devotion. We cannot simply accept Judaism. We must choose to be Jews.

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