

THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE CONVERT BASED ON LEVITICUS 19

HAIM A. GOTTSCHALK

In Leviticus 19 we come upon a series of laws that were given to help us become a holy nation:

When a stranger [ger] resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God (Lev. 19:33-34).

We read here two laws concerning how we treat the *ger*, who is defined as a stranger, a sojourner, resident alien, or a convert. The first law states that we must not maltreat the *ger*. The second law says that we must love the *ger* as ourselves. What do these two laws mean?

In order to interpret the meaning of these laws, we look beyond the Torah, which is the fundamental framework that provides guidelines for our actions and consider the rabbinic literature. This literature, including the Talmud and Midrash, expounds what the Torah is saying and provides us with the details of how and why we ought to carry out the laws of the Torah. The Sifra, a midrashic work of halakha to the Book of Leviticus, in Parshat Kedoshim Perek 8:1-4 considers the laws of Leviticus 19:33-34. The verses start with a *ger* and proceeds to the ban on maltreatment, then continues in the next verse to citizenship and finally reaches love. The Sifra proceeds in the same fashion. First it defines a *ger*. Then it continues with a discussion of maltreatment, followed by questions of citizenship and ending with love.

I have rendered the Sifra, using Everett Fox's translation of the Torah, as follows:

1. A stranger comes and says "I am a convert." What does it take to accept him as a convert? The sages say "with you [singular]." This means that the stranger is known to you. The sages quote the Torah: *Now when there sojourns with you a sojourner in your land* (Lev. 19:33). This is only applicable

Haim A Gottschalk has an MA in Education from the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Currently, he teaches Hebrew and Jewish Studies in a Jewish community high school in Phoenix, Arizona. Prior to coming to Phoenix, he was the reference manager at the University of Judaism - Ostrow Library.

in the land of Israel. How do we know it also applies outside of the land of Israel? The sages quote from the Torah "you [plural]." This refers to wherever you are. Therefore, why does it say "your (plural) land"? This phrase comes to teach us that we need to bring proof of conversion.

2. The Torah says *you are not to maltreat him* (19:33), which means that you should not say to the convert "yesterday you were once an idol worshiper and now you have become Jewish."

3. The Torah says *like a native born* (19:34). This phrase comes to teach us that just as a native born (citizen) accepts the entire Torah, so too does the convert accept the entire Torah. From this passage the sages teach "A convert who has accepted the entire Torah except for one mitzvah . . . is not accepted into the Jewish Nation." Rabbi Yosi son of Rabbi Yehuda says (Mishnah Demai 2:5) "This refers to even one rabbinic mitzvah."

4. The Torah says *like the native born among you shall he be to you, the sojourner that sojourns with you; be loving to him as one like yourself, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt* (19:34). This is similar to when the Torah says to an Israelite . . . *but be loving to your neighbor as one like yourself* (19:18). Thus it says concerning a convert *you shall be loving to him like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. Know well the feelings of the sojourner, for even you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

What questions do the sages attempt to answer, and what lessons are we meant to learn? It would appear that in the first verse of the Sifra the question implicitly raised concerns how we ascertain that the individual in question is a convert. Further, it compels us to ask if we should be skeptical about the person's claim and if we take that claim seriously. The Torah does not go into details, but the sages say that we need witnesses to verify the claim. In the second verse, the question raised asks what the Torah means when it states not to maltreat the sojourner. The sages say that this refers to verbal abuse. In the third verse, the sages address what the Torah means when it says *like a native born*. Is a convert to Judaism a full citizen? The sages answer that the convert must take on the responsibilities of a Jew like a natural-born Jew. In the final verse, the sages seem to ask why there is repetition of the phrase *be loving of your neighbor as one like yourself*. Would not the phrase equally apply to the convert as well? The sages answer by rewording a verse from Exodus 23:9, suggesting that, based on our experience in Egypt, we should

know well the feelings of the convert and thus be sympathetic.

These two verses in Leviticus show order and narration. The same is true in the rabbinic literature. The Sifra tells a story that addresses the relationship between the natural-born Jew and the convert. The Sifra instructs the convert to take conversion seriously and be wholeheartedly committed. To the natural-born Jew, the Sifra says to accept the convert wholeheartedly just as the one who is born Jewish is accepted. The Sifra starts out by validating the claim the individual is a convert. We accept the claim and now we, natural-born Jews, have to be careful not to remind this individual of his past, non-Jewish life. We treat this individual as we would any natural-born Jew. At the same time, we expect that the convert wholeheartedly accepts all the responsibilities of being Jewish. Just as we are to accept that the convert is a Jew in all aspects, the convert is expected to behave as a Jew in all aspects.

Finally, we must love the convert as we would love ourselves because we were sojourners in Egypt. The Sifra asks why we need the phrase *for sojourners were you in Egypt*. It answers that we need the phrase in order to remind ourselves that we should know the feelings of the convert. Just as we were strangers in a strange land, so to the convert is a stranger to us and we should be sympathetic to him.

The phrase *for sojourners were you in Egypt* appears four times in the Torah. Several commentaries ask why the phrase is needed. Rashi commenting on the verse in Exodus 22:20 says that we should not denigrate someone who is a convert for we too were strangers. Rashi's comment echoes the Talmud of Tractate Baba Metziah 59b, on the subject of never pointing out someone's shortcomings when we suffer the same shortcomings. Abraham Ibn Ezra, commenting on the phrase in Exodus 22:20, says something similar in that we should remember that we were no better than the stranger.

I would like to focus on the commentary of the Or Ha-haim and tie this to the Sifra. Haim ben Moshe Attar (1696-1743, Morocco), who wrote the commentary Or Ha-haim, provides detailed commentary on this phrase as it occurs in two of the four places, Exodus 22:20 and Leviticus 19:34. On Exodus, he says that while the Israelites resided in Egypt, their souls were in the same moral entanglement as the Egyptian souls. The Or Ha-haim continues this idea in reference to Leviticus 22:34, when he asks how the seed of a wicked nation can be equal to people whose fathers were loved by God. The

Or Ha-haim answers that their souls were intertwined with the souls of the Israelite people in Egypt. The convert, whose soul was part of the *klipot*, which is the spiritual negative domain, has come to seek refuge under the wings of God's *shechinah*, God's presence. His soul has returned to its holy roots. When the Torah says "for sojourners were you in Egypt," the Or Ha-haim seems to say that the Torah is elevating the status of the convert. He is reading the word "you [plural]" as referring equally to both the born Israelite and the convert.

The Or Ha-haim, I believe, had the fourth verse of the Sifra in mind, which ends by quoting the phrase *know well the feelings of the sojourner, for you too were sojourners in the land of Egypt*. The wording in the Sifra begins with *De'u me-nafshan shel gerim*, which is a reworking of the phrase found in Exodus 23:9 *ve-atem yadatem et nefesh ha-ger*. The word "*nefesh*" translated here as "feelings," is usually translated as "soul." The Sifra quotes this phrase immediately after the phrase "you shall be loving to him like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Based on my understanding of the Or Ha-haim, these two phrases are juxtaposed, leading to the interpretation that Israelite souls, which include the souls of the *gerim*, were entangled with Egyptian souls. According to this interpretation, the Sifra then tells us to be empathetic to the *ger*, because both the native-born and the convert were sojourners in Egypt together and because of this connection the *ger* is returning to his roots. It is as if the convert was doing *teshuva*.

The Sifra, by detailing how we should accept the *ger*, is teaching us a lesson. As long as the *ger* is serious about becoming Jewish, we must accept the *ger* wholeheartedly and treat him equally. The *ger* is treated like a native born, according to this understanding of the Or Ha-haim, because he has a historical spiritual connection to other Jews and in converting is just now discovering his Jewish heritage.