



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

Parshat Ekev: On Loving the Convert Rabba Sara Hurwitz

President and Co-Founder, Maharat

The conversion process to Orthodox Judaism is often long and arduous, with the goal of ensuring potential converts demonstrate commitment to the Jewish community and its laws. However, all too often, the process can be untenable, causing potential converts to despair, souring their connection to the Jewish people. Yet, the Torah obligates us to welcome and embrace those seeking to live an authentic Jewish life and treat them with love.

In our parsha, the Torah demands:

God carries out justice for the orphan and widow and loves the convert... And You shall love the convert for you were strangers in Egypt” (Devarim 10:18).

עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוּם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאַהֲבֵב גֵּר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם
וְשִׂמְלָה: יִט וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרָיִם: (דְּבָרִים י"ח)

Not only does God love the stranger (*ger*), but the Torah explicitly and emphatically says “You shall love the stranger” as well. “Stranger” in rabbinical literature refers to a *ger tzedek* (a righteous convert) who desires to become part of the Jewish people. We must, enjoins the Torah, love the *ger*.

Yet, many of the traditional sources can be interpreted as encouraging Rabbis to initially reject any potential convert. There is a tradition to send a potential convert away three times before beginning a conversation with him or her. At first glance, this appears to be an orientation to reject the convert. However, the origin of this practice was not because we automatically suspect every candidate’s motivation, but rather to help converts understand that historically Jews were persecuted. A person, with pure motives to become Jewish, should understand the magnitude of his or her choice. We are not automatically supposed to reject the convert. But rather, embrace and empower him or her.

The oft quoted gemara (Shabbat 31a) narrates a time when a gentile went first to Shammai and then Hillel saying: “Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai immediately dismisses the convert. But Hillel accepts him as a convert, teaching “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary; go and learn it.”

Some commentators criticize Hillel for watering the Torah down to one, perhaps over simplistic, law, but Hillel was suggesting a methodology of working with converts. Our orientation should not be to automatically reject a convert, but to embrace and empower him or her. If there is truly a Jewish soul peeking out, looking for a home, that soul can and must be nurtured, embraced and loved. And in fact, the gemara concludes with the convert saying: “Shammai’s impatience”—the rabbi who scorned converts, and turned them away—“sought to drive us from the world, but Hillel’s humility brought us under the wings of the *Shekhina*.”

Perhaps our model for working with a *ger* should be Avraham and Sarah. In a beautiful midrash, Rabbi Hunya describes the way in which Sarah and Avraham converted people to Judaism: “Abraham our father would bring them into his house, feed them and give them drink, and demonstrate love toward them and bring them near and convert them and bring them under the wings of Divine Presence. From this we learn that one who brings one person under the wings of the Divine Presence, it is as though he created him and formed him and fashioned him” (Shir Hashirim 1:3)



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

What a mitzvah—to create another Jewish soul, by inviting them into our home, showing them the beauty and the laws of a Jewish home with love.

I have worked with many converts who have longed to be Jewish for years, and have been turned away from countless rabbis. But the Torah demands that we love the *ger*, because “you were once strangers in Egypt.” We know what it feels to be an outsider and therefore we can bring the *ger* (convert) into our world with compassion and love. The initial rabbinic response should not be to push away a convert, but to embrace and empower him or her.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin, 99b) recounts the story of a biblical character, Timna, who wanted to convert and so she came before Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. And so, distressed, she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esav. From her came Amalek who afflicted Israel. “Why so? Because they should not have pushed her away!”

Not every candidate is going to complete the conversion process. But we must embrace and empower those who are trying to learn more, who are committed to halakha, to one God, to Jewish peoplehood and community. And we must do so because our community stands to benefit from the many gifts and unique dedication that converts bring to our world.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.