

ROSH HA SHANAH FEATURE

IN HONOR OF ROSH HASHANA, JEWISH NEW YEAR OF 5728, THE LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE WILL PUBLISH A SERIES OF STORIES TO COMMEMORATE THE HOLIDAY WHICH FALLS ON THE FIRST TWO DAYS OF THE MONTH OF TISHRI, THURS., OCT. 5, AND FRIDAY, OCT. 6. ROSH HASHANA MARKS THE BEGINNING OF THE 10 DAYS OF REPENTANCE, AWE-INSPIRING DAYS, CULMINATING AT YOM KIPPUR, ON OCT. 14.

Problem of Converted

BY Dr. H. Rabinowicz

It is interesting to trace the traditional Jewish attitude to this problem throughout the ages.

Our Sages tell us that, in Bible times, as soon as Abraham arrived at a desirable location he would pitch two tents, one for Sarah and one for himself; then he would proceed at once to make proselytes and to bring them under the wings of the Shechina. Thus he induced men to proclaim the name of God. His example was followed by his descendants. Jacob, his grandson, declared that the only worth-while portion of his life was that in which he was concerned with the making of proselytes. So it happened that when the children of Israel left Egypt they were accompanied by a "mixed multitude" of non-Israelite strangers.

Diverse, detailed, and humane are the laws regarding the strangers. "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not do him wrong. The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself." Even the children of the Edomites and Egyptians could enter the congregation in the third generation; and though the men of the Moabites were for ever excluded from the Covenant, Ruth, the ancestress of David, was welcomed into the fold. Numerous, too, were the proselytes in the time of King Hezekiah and in the days of Queen Esther.

The prophets of Israel were not particularists. They preached a universal faith. Although Jonah betrayed reluctance to save the heathens, Isaiah looked forward to the time, when "the sons of the stranger that join themselves unto the Lord... even them will I bring to my holy mountain... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." "The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say: 'Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths.' For out of Zion

shall go forth the Law, and the world of the Lord from Jerusalem."

These sentiments were echoed by the later prophets, Zechariah and Malachi, and the vision still lives in Jewish liturgy. Thrice daily it is proclaimed in the synagogues that "the Lord shall be kind over all the earth; in that day shall the Lord be one and his Name one."

During the period of the Second Commonwealth, John Hyrcanus and later Aristobulus resorted to force of arms in order to compel the Idumeans and Itureans to embrace Judaism; events notable as the only two instances of militant Judaism in history. Compulsion was normally unnecessary. Josephus relates that many Greeks and heathens adopted the observance of the Jewish Sabbath, the Festivals and the dietary laws. Among illustrious converts were Queen Helena of Adiabene and her sons Izates and Monobazus; Flavius Clemens, cousin of the Emperor Domitian; and Aquilla, who translated the Bible into Greek. Legend has it that the descendants of Sisera, Nubuzaradan, Haman and the Roman Emperor Nero all eventually "saw the light" and embraced Judaism. Outstanding Talmudists, such as Shemayah and Avtayan, Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Judah ben Gerim, and Rabbi Meir, were said to be descended from proselytes. Hence R. Meir's maxim: "Even a Gentile who studies the Torah is equal to a high priest."

Converts were generally held in high esteem; a prayer was inserted in the Amidah for them: "Towards the proselytes of righteousness... may thy tender mercies be stirred." They were on the whole treated as equals and suffered few legal disabilities. "An injury to a proselyte is an injury to God." "The Holy One, blessed be He, greatly loves the proselytes." And according to the Palestinian teacher Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat, "Israel was dispersed for the divine purpose of winning proselytes."

The missionary activities of the early Christians were aimed at discrediting the Torah as a "dispensation of wrath" introduced "for the sake of transgressions," and on disparaging the Mosaic Code as "transitory, subordinate, and intermediate." The repercussions of Bar Kochba's revolt and the Hadrianic persecutions led to a radical reorientation of the rabbis towards proselytes. Views were expressed that "proselytes are as burdensome to Israel as leprosy," that "proselytes would not be accepted in the days of the Messiah," and that "evil is predicted to those who accept Gerim", because "they are corrupt, apt to become backsliders, and that they keep the practices of their fathers."

The rabbis categorically rejected the view of Philo that a proselyte is one "who abandons polytheism and adopts the worship of one God." They stressed that "a proselyte who acknowledges the whole Torah save one commandment is not accepted." Rabbi Jose ben Judah, a Tanna of the second century, asserts that the proselyte must observe "all the precepts of the Scribes, even the least of them" Genuine love of Judaism was the only qualification for admission. "Both a man who becomes a proselyte for the sake of a man; similarly a man who becomes a proselyte for the sake of the table of kinds (i.e., in order to become a king) or for the sake of joining Solomon's servants (i.e., in order to acquire an important post in the kingdom)-all these are not true proselytes."

Thus while Christianity was immersing reluctant multitudes in the baptismal fonts, and Islam was conquering many countries "with fire and sword" the Mother Religion was rigidly catechising proselyte? Jews at the present time are oppressed, harassed, rejected, and overcome by afflictions."

Despite Rabbinic discouragement, history records many momentous conversions. Entire Arab tribes embraced Judaism. The Khazar King, Bulan, and his nobility adopted Judaism- a story immortalized in Judah ha-Levi's Kuzari. The eighteenth century had its galaxy of illustrious names, among them the martyr Count Valentine Potocki (d. 1749) and England's erratic Lord George Gordon (1751-1793). According to Dr. Cecil Roth, from

the resettlement of the Jews in this country to the accession of Queen Victoria, forty-one converts (thirty seven of them women) were married under the auspices of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London.

The twentieth century, too, has its proselytes. During the last decade the villagers of San Nicandro Garganico, in Southern Italy, embraced Judaism en masse and transplanted themselves to Israel, where they founded the village of Alma, on the hill in Galilee.

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