

Are We Still Standing After Sinai?

Torah on Tap, 5/19/20

Rabbi Adam Roffman

I. Judaism Begins: Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88a

*And they took their places at the foot [or, on the underside] of the mountain (Exodus 19:17). Rav Avdimi the son of Hama the son of Hasa said, "This teaches that the Holy One, blessed is He, lowered the [detached] mountain over them like a vat and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, fine; but if not, there will be your grave.'" Rava said, "Even so, they accepted the Torah again in the days of Ahashverosh, as it is written (Esther 9:27): *The Jews fulfilled and committed themselves . . .* [saying they 'fulfilled' before they 'committed' implies that] they fulfilled what they had already [i.e., at Sinai] committed to."*

II. Becoming Jewish: Talmud Bavli Yevamot 47a-47b

The Sages taught: When a potential convert comes to convert, the judges of the court say to him: What did you see that motivated you to come to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them? If he says: I know, and I am unworthy, then the court accepts him immediately.

And the judges of the court inform him of some of the lenient commandments and some of the stringent mitzvot, And just as they inform him about the punishment for violating the commandments, so too, they inform him about the reward granted for fulfilling them...

If he accepts upon himself all of these ramifications, then they circumcise him immediately...When he is healed from the circumcision, they immerse him immediately, and two Torah scholars stand over him at the time of his immersion and inform him of some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot. Once he has immersed and emerged, he is like a born Jew in every sense.

III. Becoming Jew-ish: Steven M. Cohen and Rabbi Avi Olitzky, "Conversion shouldn't be the only path to joining the Jewish people" JTA, 11/29/13

In the United States, interest in becoming Jewish has grown, owing in part to intermarriage, intergroup friendship, and more positive feelings about Jews and Judaism. As a result of Judaism entering the marketplace of ideas, Jewish thought and ideas resonate with many people. And with the melting of hard social boundaries separating Jews from others, many have entered into marriages, friendships and close working relationships with Jews.

...In the Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011, 7 percent of adults who identified as Jewish reported that neither of their parents were Jewish. Of the 7 percent, 2 percent said they formally converted and 5 percent said they became Jewish by personal choice and not by way of religious conversion.

We believe that some prospective converts to Judaism feel that religious conversion demands what for them would be an insincere affirmation of religious faith. Perhaps they are agnostic or atheist or secular, or even committed to another faith tradition. Others

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may be wary of adopting Judaism as an exclusive religion so as not to offend their parents or other family members, or because conversion requires abandonment of religiously grounded customs and holidays like Christmas.

Even though significant numbers of Jews are secular, atheist or celebrate Christmas as a seasonal holiday, holding such positions and observing such practices present prospective converts with insurmountable barriers to conversion.

As a result, many would-be members of the Jewish people have no possibility of engaging in a course of study and socialization that would lead to public recognition of their having joined the Jewish people, and they have limited access to enriching their familiarity with “lived Judaism” – the actual culture and ethos of Jewish life as lived in families and communities. And we know that most people live out their Judaism more in the informal context of family and friends than in the more formal context of religious institutions.

In theory at least, broader access to Judaism beyond that already offered by rabbis, congregations, and religious movements could result in more non-Jews in Jewish families and friendship circles building Jewish homes.

To provide a viable alternative to religious route to becoming a Jew, we propose a second explicitly cultural pathway to join the Jewish people. This pathway, which we call Jewish Cultural Affirmation, would be clearly distinguished from Jewish religious conversion.

IV. Judaism Isn't an *Ism*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, [A Letter in the Scroll](#), 2000

Above all—and this has been my central theme—Judaism is not a theory, a system, a set of speculative propositions, an “ism.” It is a call, and it bears our name. Unlike the other great monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, and equally unlike the philosophies of the Greeks and their successors, Judaism is not a truth addressed to all mankind. It is a summons to us, mediated through more than a hundred generations of our ancestors, written in the history of their lives and now confronting us as our heritage and responsibility. One of the most profound religious truths Judaism ever articulated was that God loves diversity; He does not ask us all to serve Him in the same way. To each people He has set a challenge, and with the Jewish people He made a covenant, knowing that it takes time, centuries, millennia, to overcome the conflicts and injustices of the human situation, and that therefore each generation must hand on its ideals to the next, so that there will always be a Jewish people conveying its particular vision to humanity and moving, however haltingly, to a more gracious world. The most eloquent words God spoke to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and the prophets was to call their name. Their reply was simply *Hineni*, “Here I am.” That is the call Jewish history makes to us: to continue the story and to write our letter in the scroll.