

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Renewed Commitments – Why be Jewish?

There is a curious phenomenon that I've noticed. Without scientific data to back it up, other rabbis I know have also noticed. It seems that more non-Jewish people want to become Jewish. One of my colleagues suggested this has been happening particularly since October 7, 2023 – the date of the most horrific, violent act of antisemitism since the Holocaust. Why now? While some may jump on a bandwagon of antisemitism, perhaps others are looking at the situation in a more sophisticated manner, asking the question: What is so special about the Jews that so many people are against them? This may seem counterintuitive, but it's happening.

Converting to Judaism is not a quick or easy process. Traditionally, rabbis are supposed to deny applicants three times in order for them to be fully sure of their decision. It usually takes at least a year, giving the candidate time to learn enough to decide if it is the right fit. Some people are choosing to convert to marry a Jewish person. Personally, I discourage that reason; I believe it must come from the heart in order to be sincere. You can be supportive of the Jewish community and family without becoming Jewish yourself. If someone is converting from another religion, I often caution them to examine if they are running away from something or running toward it. Because Temple Beth Torah is so welcoming of interfaith and multifaith households, non-Jewish family members in our community rarely feel a pressure to convert. More of the conversion candidates I work with are pursuing Judaism from the heart, without the external factor of someone else imposing that desire.

Conversion is not a graduation. There is not a final exam, but there is a concluding ritual. The candidate speaks to a "*Beit Din*," or "House of Judgment" to clarify their reasons for converting. The rabbi they have studied with is the leader of the *Beit Din*, and two others – often rabbis or cantors, but not required – interview them to clarify their intentions. Often, they write a statement expressing their desire. The final step is the mikvah, or ritual bath, immersing in water to cleanse away previous ideology and begin fresh. A convert to Judaism is a *Ger* – literally stranger or sojourner. Moses' first son was named Gershom, an indication of Moses' time as a stranger in both Egypt and Midian. The most repeated commandments in Torah are variations of "*Treat the stranger as one of your own, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" **The *Ger* is to be welcomed and embraced, and treated no differently than one who was born Jewish.**

Recently, two of my colleagues and I officiated three conversions in the same week. As I read the statements of these people about to become Jewish, I was amazed at the depth of their hearts and the beautiful descriptions they wrote about their desire to become Jewish. It made me think: "Why don't we ask people who were born Jewish to make such declarations as adults?" Bar and Bat Mitzvah students are asked to clarify their learning and commitment, but at 13, few students have fully thought through what it means to commit yourself to Judaism for life. Those of us who were born Jewish do not have to jump through the same kind of hoops that we ask of

converts. We take it for granted that because we were born Jewish, we don't have to say why Judaism is the right path for us.

What if adult Jews, periodically through our lifetimes, took time to clarify why being Jewish is important, and explain it? Theology, philosophy, values, heritage, tradition, community, culture...the list is long. And it is also different and unique for every individual.

Rabbi David Wolpe, in his 1999 book "*Why Be Jewish*," considers three primary reasons: To grow in soul, to join a people and to seek God. What are your reasons? Perhaps if each of us looked into our own personal reasons, and explained it to someone, it could renew our commitment.

As we approach Passover 2026, the holiday that brings us from oppression to commitment, let's explore how that commitment makes us who we are.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon