

Shavuot Insights

In the final stage of converting to Judaism one confirms their commitment, echoing the Jewish people's pledge at Mt Sinai.

We are a nation of converts. And since the revelation, the door has remained open.

Throughout our history there are converts to Judaism who have made an indelible mark on the Jewish people — and indeed the world. As we approach Shavuot, I am sharing four short snippets of incredible converts and a teaching they shared among thousands of others.

Sometimes when we learn about others, we learn more about ourselves. There is something about the active choice of converts that I find inspiring. It invites us to consider what we choose and how intentional we are about our choices, so that we can live up to our calling as a 'choosing people'.

Ruth

For wherever you go, I will go;
wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Ruth (1:16)

כי אל-אֶשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי, אֵלָהּ;
וּבְאֶשֶׁר תֵּלִינִי, אֵלָיו;
עַמִּי עַמִּי,
וְאֱלֹהֵי אֱלֹהֵי.

רות (א:16)

One of the most famous converts to Judaism is Ruth. Born into the Moabite royal family, she turned away from palace life, with all of its luxury and comfort. Ruth paid the price of temporary hardship because of her incredible dedication to the nation, something that, to her, was worth so much more. Ruth went on to marry the leader of the Jewish people, Boaz.

Their descendants went on to found the eternal monarchy: the Davidic Dynasty. She was the ancestor of King David and according to tradition, the future Messiah, among so many other greats that would never have come to be, had it not been for her fateful choice. Her story is chronicled in the Bible and read every Shavuot, sending the message that true leaders are always guided by the ultimate truth.

Ben Bag Bag and Ben Hey Hey

Ben Hey Hey said: According to the effort is the reward...
Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it (the Torah) over, and [again]
turn it over, for all is in it...

Ethics of our Fathers (5:22-23)

בֵּן הָא הָא אֹמֵר: לְפֹעַם צַעֲרָא אֲגָרָא...
בֵּן בַּג בַּג אֹמֵר: הַפֶּךָ בָּהּ
וְהַפֶּךָ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ...

משנה אבות (ה:כב-כג)

In order to hide from the Roman authorities (who forbade conversion), two famous scholars picked up interesting nicknames — Ben (son of) Bag Bag and Ben Hey Hey. Their names have the numerical value of the letter ה - hey. This letter represents Hashem (God), a consciousness they deepened in their lives and is the same letter that was added to the first converts (and indeed the first Jews), Sarah and Abraham.

These two legendary converts lived their true selves despite the difficulties. And their messages are complementary. According to the effort is the reward. What you put in, is what you get out. But to truly see this, one needs to peer below the surface. Everything lies within the world of Torah and the Torah can be found in every facet of the world, as long as we look deeply enough.

Johannes, son of Dreux (Obadia)

That I might know, that I might know
What to speak within the gates,
What I should say, what I should say,
And you should answer – teach me!

Song of Obadia the Convert: Teach that I may know

ואדע מה, ואדע מה,
אדבר בשערים,
ומה אומר, ומה אומר,
ומה תען - למדי!

שיר של עובדיה הגר: למדני שאדע

Born into an upper-class family in southern Italy during the late 11th century, Johannes had a twin brother, Roger, who went on to become a knight. It was as if two paths lay before the two boys, but Johannes took the path less travelled.

Instead of accepting the aristocratic cards he was dealt, he chose Judaism in a time of crusades against Jews (and was the target of antisemitism as a result). Johannes was inspired to follow the Archbishop of Bari who'd become so enamoured with Jewish learning that he moved to Constantinople and converted. He chose the name Obadia, lived all over the Middle East, including in the Land of Israel, and became a noted scholar. The oldest surviving piece of Jewish sheet music is a Shavuot prayer penned by a noted scholar and convert to Judaism – Johannes, son of Dreux aka Obadia.

Teach me, he says, so I may know. Learning is a lifelong journey and it is a major theme of Shavuot as many have the custom to stay up all night learning: So that we may know.

These four personalities represent just a fraction of the stories and influence that thousands of other converts to Judaism have had.

How will they impact you?
How will you impact others?
The choice is yours...