PARTNERS ON THE PATH

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Number of Member Units: 60
Region:  Pacific Central West
Rabbi: Yitzhak Miller
Outreach Chair: Shoshana Miller (New Beginnings facilitator)

Brief Description: A 4-session group specifically for Jews whose partners are exploring conversion to Judaism.

Program Goals: More integrated family support for the individual in the conversion process. Participants will gain an understanding of a partner’s process of change and, at the same time, explore his/her own identity development in the context of a partner’s conversion.

Target Population: Jews whose partners are exploring conversion to Judaism.

Number of Participants: Four in the case of Congregation Emeth.
Number of Sessions: Four, 2-hour sessions
Staffing: One program facilitator with sufficient skills in counseling/facilitation and understanding of conversion issues.
Total Cost: Minimal (a few Xerox copies and some fruit & cookies)
Fees: No fees
Logistics: One very private room, set up as desired (circle recommended). Child care appreciated, but not provided in this case. Limited refreshments provided.

Facilitator Instructions: The biggest challenge is keeping participants focused on their own challenges in the process rather than on their partner’s issues, challenges, and development. Using texts (attached) helped participants find characters with whom they could identify. Text 70 (Moses’ insecurity about converts) is a particularly evocative and simultaneously comforting text for participants, as are the comprehensive conversion stories (texts 1-4). Text 70 is a great place to start to establish that participants are not alone in their feelings—even Moses had them!

Evaluation: We chose to run this program in parallel with “New Beginnings”—a 8-session program for people exploring conversion. During four of the sessions Jewish partners were with their partners in the New Beginnings group; during the other four sessions the groups were separate and Jewish partners participated in “Partners on the Path”. This format worked very well as it encouraged Jewish partners to be present for New Beginnings and to set aside some time to focus on the processes at work in their family.
Participant Evaluation: Participant evaluation is critical in this program. Primary forms of evaluation were reserving some time at both the beginning and end of each session for participant reflection, and allowing the choice of topics explored in each session to be significantly participant-guided.

Follow-up: Follow-up was provided on a personal basis as needed by both facilitators.
An Opportunity for Jews
Whose Partners are Exploring Conversion

"Jews don’t proselytize—Did I pressure him into this?"
"I feel like he knows more than me about my own religion!"
"If she could give up her religion, could I ever give up my Judaism?"
"Does he really understand what it feels like to be Jewish?"
"I’m glad she’s going to be Jewish, but I don’t want to go to Temple every Friday!"
"Did I miss all of this in Sunday School?"

What? Four-hour sessions held in parallel with New Beginnings. Jews will have a chance to focus on issues and challenges they face as their partners explore conversion to Judaism.

When? Every other New Beginnings session (participants are encouraged to be present with their partners for the other four New Beginnings sessions).

Why? Because conversion to Judaism involves the whole family. Because it’s so easy to be focused on our partner’s challenges that sometimes we forget that we are going through a process too.

How? Primarily through exploration of conversion stories and texts from Jewish tradition, we will identify and examine issues and challenges we face when those we love are changing identities.

Contact: Yitzhak Miller—Partners of the Path Facilitator
Shoshana Miller—New Beginnings Facilitator
Issues Raised by Participants

1. Did I pressure him/her into this?
2. Could I ever give up my Judaism?
3. (S)he knows more than me.
4. We don’t “have” to learn all that stuff. Why do they “have” to?
5. Does (s)he have a clear picture of Judaism?
6. Sure, (s)he knows a lot about Judaism, but does (s)he really feel Jewish?
7. (S)he’s motivating my own Jewish development.
8. The kids go to him/her with their Jewish questions!
9. I resent the time (s)he’s spending on Judaism.
10. I can’t tell him/her how insecure I feel in this process because it would derail his/her process.
11. Are we supposed to be bringing people to Judaism? Am I doing that? If so, for whom am I doing it—me or them or Judaism?
12. This identity development stuff is a real roller coaster.
13. Where can I go for my own issues? How can I talk to my partner about them?
Texts to Facilitate Exploration

Goal: Help Participants Explore their own Feelings and Challenges by Identifying

with Characters or Issues in the Texts

Jethro’s Conversion
LEGENDS OF THE JEWS, VOL. III, LOUIS GINZBERG, JOHNS HOPKINS, 1998, P. 72-75 (Use the whole text.)

It had been part of God’s scheme to reward Jethro for the love he bore the Torah; and for this reason did...the Holy Scriptures...devote a whole [weekly Torah] portion to...Jethro. This, however, is not the only reward for Jethro’s piety, who, in his love for the Torah, excelled all converts. ...

Amid great marks of honor, and provided with rich gifts, Jethro returned to his home, where he converted his kinsmen and his compatriots to the belief in the true God, as he had intended.

Asenath and Joseph
LEGENDS OF THE JEWS, VOL. II, LOUIS GINZBERG, JOHNS HOPKINS, 1998, P. 172-174 (Use the whole text.)

Asenath desired to kiss Joseph, but he warded off the intimate greeting with the words: “It is not acceptable that a God-fearing man, who blesses the living God, and eats the blessed bread of life, who drinks of the blessed cup of immortality and incorruptibility, and anoints himself with the fragrant oil of holiness, should kiss a woman of a strange people, who blesses dead and unprofitable idols, and eats the putrid bread of idolatry, which chokes the soul of man, who drinks the libations of deceit, and anoints herself with the oil of destruction.”

These words uttered by Joseph touched Asenath to tears. Out of compassion for her, he bestowed his blessing upon her, calling upon God to pour out His spirit over her and make her to become a member of His people and His inheritance, and grant her a portion in the life eternal. ...

Joseph confirmed all she had said, and they embraced and kissed each other in token of their betrothal, which they celebrated by a banquet with Potiphar and his wife. The wedding took place later in the presence of Pharaoh, who set a golden crown upon the head of the bridegroom and the bride, gave them his blessing, and made a seven days’ feast in their honor, to which he invited the magnates and princes of Egypt and of other countries.

Ruth’s Path to Judaism
RUTH 1:1-22 (Use the complete text.)

It came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. ...

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned from the country of Moab; and they came to Beth-Lehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.
Texts Which Suggest that God Seeks Converts

1. A Reminder to Esau, the Twin—Pesikta d’Rav Kahana

[Why was the Torah given in the month of Sivan?] It was given in the third month, in Sivan, under the constellation of Gemini (Twins) as a reminder to the children of Esau, Jacob’s twin brother, that they were welcome to repent and to become Jews.

2. God Attaches all Righteous People to Israel—Shir Hashirim Rabba 6:10 on Song of Songs 6:2

My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the bed of spices to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies.

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said: “the lilies,” they are the righteous whom [God] takes for Himself. This is like to a king who had a dearly beloved son. In his great love for [his son], he planted a beautiful orchard and bestowed it upon him. When the son obeyed his father, the latter traversed the breadth of the earth to find lovely trees and transplant them into his son’s orchard. But when the son was disobedient the father would cut down the trees of the orchard. So, too, when Israel does the will of the Holy One of Blessing, God traverses the earth, and wherever God finds a righteous man, God attaches him to Israel, as God did with [the two famous Biblical converts] Jethro and Rahab. But, when the children of Israel provoke God, the Holy One removes the righteous from their midst.

3. Exile for the Purpose of Adding Converts—Talmud P’sachim 87b

Rabbi Eleazar said: The Holy One exiled Israel among the peoples only in order that converts might be multiplied, as is said, “I will sow her to Me in the Land” (Hosea 2:25). Does not a man sow a seah [seed] in the ground only so that it may bring in many kor [of harvest]?

4. They Shall Spring up as the Grass—Isaiah 44:3-5

For I will pour water upon the thirsty land, and floods upon the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your seed, and my blessing upon your offspring; And they shall spring up as the grass, as willows by the water courses. One shall say, I am YHVH’s; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall write on his hand The Lord’s, and surname himself by the name of Israel.

Approaches to / Methods of Conversion: Reaching Out to Potential Converts

5. A Hand of Welcome—Vayikra Rabba 2:9 on Leviticus 1:2

When any person...brings an offering...

Why does it say “any person”? This is to include converts...The sages have taught thus: If [any man, including] a heathen seeks to become a convert, a hand of welcome should be held out to bring him under the wings of the Shechinah. Thereafter, the converts in each succeeding generation are there to [reach out to] their heathen brethren.”
6. Befriend Him and Do Not Repel Him—Mechilla d’Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Amalek
on Jeremiah 23:23

BEHOLD I AM A GOD THAT BRINGS NEAR, SAYS YHVH, AND NOT A GOD THAT REPELS
This God said to Moses: “I am One who welcomes, not One who repels.” As it is said: “Behold I
am a God that brings near, says YHVH, and not a God that repels” (Jeremiah 23:23). “I am He
who brought Jethro near, not keeping him at a distance. So also you, when a man comes to you
wishing to become a convert to Judaism, as long as he comes in the name of God for the sake of
heaven, do you, likewise: befriend him and do not repel him.”

7. Gentiles who Perceive Greatness in Judaism
Onkelos and the Troops of Romans—Talmud Avodah Zarah 11a
When Onkelos son of Kalonymos became a convert, Caesar sent a troop of Romans to arrest him.
But he won them over by citing verses from the Torah, and they too became converts. Caesar
then sent another troop of Romans and instructed them: Say nothing at all to Onkelos.

After they seized him and went off [with him], he said to them: May I speak to you about a
matter that is not the Torah? A torchbearer carries a torch before a litter carrier, a litter carrier
before a commander, a commander before a general, a general before the emperor. But does an
emperor bear a torch before other people? They replied: No. Then he said: But the Holy One
carries a torch before Israel, as is said, “And YHVH went before them by day in a pillar of cloud,
by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light” (Exodus 13:21). At that, all of them too became
converts.

Then Caesar sent still another troop and enjoined them: Do not engage in any conversation
whatsoever with Onkelos. As they seized him and went off with him, they saw a mezuzah
affixed to the doorway, and when he put his hand on it and smiled, they asked him: Why are you
smiling? He replied: It is the way of the world that a king is seated inside while his servants
stand guard outside. But the Holy One—His servants are inside, while He stands guard outside,
as is said, “The Lord shall guard your going out and your coming in,” etc. (Psalm 121:8). At
this, they too became converts. Caesar did not send soldiers for him again.

8. The Jewish Sense of Justice

To satisfy their vengeful feelings [Jewish tradition holds that Saul killed the Gibeonites], the
Gibeonites demanded the life of seven members of Saul’s family. David sought to mollify them,
representing to them that they would derive no benefit from the death of their victims, and
offering them silver and gold instead. Though David treated with each one of them individually,
the Gibeonites were relentless... But God punished Saul through his children.

The cruel fate that befell the descendants of Saul had a wholesome effect. All the heathens who
saw and heard about the punishment exclaimed: “There is no God like to the God of Israel, there
is no nation like to the nation of Israel; the wrong inflicted upon wretched converts has been
expiated by the sons of kings.” So great was the enthusiasm among the heathens over this
manifestation of the Jewish sense of justice that one hundred and fifty thousand of them were
converted to Judaism.
9. **Zebulun: Agent between Israel and the Nations**


Zebulun was the tribe that more than all the other tribes devoted itself to commerce, and in this way acted as the agent between Israel and the other nations, selling the products of Palestine to the latter, and foreign wares to the former. Hence the blessing that Moses bestowed upon them: “Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out” on commercial enterprises; at your instance shall many nations pray upon the sacred mountain of the Temple and offer their sacrifices.” For the people that came into Zebulun’s realms on matters of business used to go from there to Jerusalem to look upon the sanctuary of the Jews, and many of than were converted through the grand impression that the life in the holy city made upon them.

**Regarding Interactions with /Feelings about Converts: Interactions with Converts**

10. **Only the Portion of His Life Spent Making Converts**


Jacob was not exempt from the lot that falls to the share of all the pious. “...they expect to enjoy life in tranquility...Verily, few and filled with evil had been the days of the years of Jacob’s pilgrimage, for the time spent outside of the Holy Land had seemed joyless to him. Only the portion of his life [which] passed in the land of his fathers, during which he was occupied with making converts, in accordance with the example set him by Abraham and Isaac, did he consider worthwhile having lived, and this happy time was of short duration.

11. **Boaz’ Impression of Ruth**—Ruth 2:8-12

Then said Boaz to Ruth, “why don’t you listen, my daughter? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go away from here, but stay here close to my maidens. Let your eyes be on the field that they reap, and follow after them; I have charged the young men that they shall not touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.” Then [Ruth] fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, seeing that I am a ger?” And Boaz answered and said to her, “It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before. The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by YHVH God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”


YOU SHALL NOT VEX A GER

If there is no reality to idols, why does [the Torah] call them ‘gods’?” Rabbi Phineas ben Hama replied, “In order to reward all those who forsake [idolatry]. Said the Holy One: ‘Though there was no reality in it, once a man forsakes it, I account it to him as if he had been worshipping something real, but then had come to Me.’

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13. Rabbi Judah Praises the Romans—*Talmud Shabbat* 33b

[It happened that while] Rabbi Judah, Rabbi Yose, and Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai were sitting together, [a man named] Judah [who was] the son of converts happened to join them. Rabbi Judah began the discussion by observing, “How noble are the works of this [Roman] nation! They laid out streets, they built bridges, they erected bathhouses.” Rabbi Yose remained silent, but Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai spoke up and said, “All that they made, they made to serve themselves: they laid out streets to settle harlots in, baths to pamper themselves in, bridges to levy tolls on.” Judah the son of converts went off and retold the sages’ words, until they were heard by the Roman government, which decreed: [Rabbi] Judah, who acclaimed [Rome], shall be acclaimed [as spokesman for the Jews]; [Rabbi] Yose, who remained silent, shall be exiled to Sepphoris; [Rabbi] Simeon, who vilified [Rome], shall be put to death.

**Impressions about Converts**

14. Your Children are like Olive Plants—*Bemidbar Rabbah*, 8:9, on Psalm 128:3

*Happy are those who are in awe of YHVH, who walk in YHVH’s ways... Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine... Your children like olive plants around your table* (128:1-3).

...it is written, *Your children are like olive plants.* [What does this mean? It means] as the olive tree yields olives for food, olives for drying, and olives for oil, while the oil it yields burns brighter than all other oils, and its leaves do not fall off either in the summer season or in the rainy season, so do the sons of the converts turn out: some of them as masters of the Torah, some as masters of Mishnah, some as business men, some as sages, some as men of understanding, and some having a knowledge of the right time for a thing. Moreover, they will possess seed that shall endure forever.

15. Blessing for the Righteous—Prayer Liturgy: Weekday Amidah

Let Your tender mercies be stirred for the righteous, the pious, and the leaders of the House of Israel, devoted scholars and faithful converts. Be merciful to us of the House of Israel. Reward all who trust in You. Cast our lot with those who are faithful to You. May we never come to despair, for our trust is in You. Praised are You, Lord who sustains the righteous.

16. Dearer than Jewish Saints—Simeon ben Yohai, *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*

Converts are dearer to YHVH than Jewish saints.

17. Converts Become Roots like Israel—*Vayikra Rabbah* on Hosea 14:8

*They shall return, dwelling in His shadow*  
Rabbi Abbahu said: The converts who rest in the shadow of YHVH become roots like Israel.

18. Converts shall Become Essential—*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:2 on Hosea 14:8

*They shall return, dwelling in His shadow; they shall grow like corn and flourish like the vine; their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.*

Rabbi Abbahu began a discourse by citing ‘They shall return, dwelling in His shadow’ [The text was understood to mean]: These are the converts who come and take refuge in the shade of the Holy One. ‘They shall grow like corn’ [is understood to mean] they shall become essential like
Israel... ‘and flourish like the vine’ [to understand this] you may cite (Psalm 80:9) ‘You didst pluck up a vine out of Egypt.’ Another explanation of ‘They shall grow like corn and flourish like the vine’: His remembrance is as the wine of Lebanon. Said the Holy One: the names of converts are as dear to Me as the libation-wine that is offered before Me on the altar.

19. Dear Are Converts—Mishnat Rabbi Eleazar on Exodus 4:18

Moses returned to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him: “Let me go, I beg you, and return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive.” And Jethro said to Moses: “Go in peace.”

Dear are converts, for the Holy One adds to their name. For so you find with Jethro. At first he was called only Jether, but when he was converted, he was called Jethro... When one is converted, he receives a reward as if he had labored in the Torah all his years, for it is said (Numbers 10:29) ‘come you with us and we will do you good.’

20. The Gates are Always Open—Shemot Rabbah 19:4 on Job 31:32

The gates are not disqualified outside. The gates are open at every hour, and anyone who wants to enter may enter... Said Rabbi Berekiah: “To whom does this verse apply? (It applies to converts and means) that the converts are destined to be priests serving the Temple..., and they are destined to eat of the sacred offering-bread because their daughters will marry into the priesthood.”

21. Where to Place the Blessing for the Converts—Tosefta Berakhot 3:25 on Psalm 29

The Eighteen Benedictions which sages ordained correspond to the eighteen [times God’s name YHVH is] invoked in [the psalm which begins]: Ascribe to YHVH... [Psalm 29; Cf. Mishna Berachot 4:3]. One inserts [a curse] for the heretics in [the blessing] for sectarians, and [the blessing] for the converts in [the blessing] for the elders.

How One Should Interact with Converts

22. Do Not Remind the Convert of His Pork-Eating Past—Various Midrashim based on Mishna Baba Metzia 4:10 (Cf. Tosefta Baba Metzia 3.25, Talmud Baba Metzia 59b, Sifre to Deuteronomy Piska 281, Talmud Gerim 4.1, Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, Mishnat Rabbi Shimon)

Just as there is exaggeration in buying and selling, so too there is wrong done by words. [Thus] one must not ask his fellow: “What is the price of this article?” if he has no intention of buying it. If a man was a converted [heathen], one must not say to him: “Remember your former [sinful] deeds.” If the man was the son of a convert, one must not taunt him: “Remember the deeds of your ancestors.” [One must do this] because it is written: “You shall neither vex a ger nor oppress him” (Exodus 22:20)

You must not remind the convert of his pork-eating, idol-worshipping past. If he comes to study the Torah you must not say to him, “Shall the lips that gobbled forbidden foods and creeping abominations mouth the words of God?” Such verbal mockery is worse than dishonesty in
business. It is comparable to the worship of idols. Wounding the feelings of a convert or oppressing him involves transgression of three negative injunctions. If you ridicule him he has every right to retort with, "You, too, were a ger in the land of Egypt." Reproach not your fellow with your own fault. The older convert is especially enjoined to treat the newcomer kindly inasmuch as he knows the soul of the ger. Should a convert be in financial difficulties the Jew is required to help him, even to anticipate his difficulties.

23. The Torah Was Given in Public—Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Bahodesh on Exodus 19:2

They encamped in the wilderness.
The Torah was given in public, openly in a free place. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world: "You have no share in it." But now that it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly in a place that is free for all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it. One [might want to] claim that it was given at night, but the Torah says: "And it came to pass on the third day when it was morning" (Exodus 19:16). One [might want to] claim that it was given in silence, but the Torah says: "When there were thunders and lightning" (Ibid.). One might [want to claim] that they could not hear the voice, but the Torah says: "The voice of YHVH is powerful, the voice of YHVH is full of majesty," etc. (Psalm 29:4) Rabbi Jose says: Behold it says: "1 have not spoken in secret," etc. (Isaiah 45:19). When I gave the Torah from the very start, I gave it not in the place of a land of darkness, not in a secret place, not in an obscure place.

24. Abraham Waited to be Circumcised—Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Nezikin on Genesis 17:1ff

And when Avram was 99 years old YHVH appeared to Avram and said to him: "...I will make my covenant between me and you...Every male among you shall be circumcised...And Avram...circumcized the flesh of [his] foreskin that very day.”

Beloved are the gerim. It was for their sake that our father Abraham was not circumcised until he was ninety-nine years old. Had he been circumcised at twenty or at thirty years of age, only those under the age of thirty could have become converts to Judaism. Therefore, YHVH bore with Abraham until he reached ninety-nine years of age, so as not to close the door to future converts.

25. Love both Neighbor and Convert as Yourself—Mishnat Rabbi Eleazar on Leviticus 19:33

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
"Just as 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself' is said of Israel, so of the convert is said 'you shall love him as yourself.'"
26. 48 Reminders to Love the Ger—Midrash Tanhuma, Vayikra three on Deuteronomy 10:18

[God] Loves the Ger
Said Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Shalom: You find that the Torah warns us forty-eight times against (mistreating) converts, and warns us the same number of times against idolatry. Said the Holy One: It is enough for him that he has left his idolatry to come to Me; therefore I admonish you concerning him, for I love him, as it is said (Deuteronomy 10:18) ‘and He loves the ger.’

26. The Judge Prejudiced against a Convert—Mechilta d’Rabbi Shimon
Rabbi Simon ben Lakish, a third century Palestinian Amora warns a judge who may be prejudiced against converts. He declares, “He who perverts justice against a convert is deemed as though he had turned against God himself.”

Insecurities About a Convert’s Judaism

27. A Convert who Changes His Name—Tosefta Gittin 6:4
A male convert who changes his [Israelite] name to a gentile name—[his conversion remains] valid.

28. Conversion in a Gentile Society—Tosefta Shabbat 8:5
A convert who converted while living among gentiles and who performed a prohibited act of labor on the Sabbath: Rabbi Akiba declares him guilty, but Monobases declares him innocent. [Monobases argues] reason suggests that he is innocent since one who performs a sin inadvertently must bring a sin-offering, but one who does so deliberately should be excommunicated. Now just as one who performs a prohibited action deliberately is guilty only when he does so informedly, so one who does an act inadvertently should be guilty only when he does so informedly, [and one who is living among the gentiles has not violated the Sabbath informedly].

29. Their Destiny was at Mt. Sinai—Talmud Tractate Shabbat 145b-146b on Deuteronomy 29:14

NOT WITH YOU ALONE DO I MAKE THIS COVENANT, BUT ALSO WITH THOSE WHO ARE NOT HERE WITH US THIS DAY.

“When Israel stood at Mount Sinai, their abominations ceased; but as the idolaters did not stand at Mount Sinai, their abominations did not cease.” Hearing this, Rabbi Aha ben Raba asked Rabbi Ashi: What about converts? The latter replied: “Though they were not there (at Sinai), their destiny (mazzal) was there, as it is written ‘with him that stands here with us this day before YHVH our YHVH and also with him that is not here with us this day.’”

Insecurities About One’s Own Judaism Because of Converts

30. If the Israelites had not Witnessed the Thunders—Midrash Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 6
Dearer to YHVH is the convert who has come of his own accord than all the crowds of Israelites who stood before Mount Sinai. For had the Israelites not witnessed the thunders, the lightnings,
the quaking mountain and the sounding trumpets (shofar), they would not have accepted the Torah. But [the convert], who witnessed none of these things came, surrendered himself to the Holy One, and accepted upon himself the Kingdom of Heaven. Could any be dearer than he?

31. Moses' Insecurity—Yalkut Shimoni on Deut 10:18

[GOD] LOVES THE GER

Said Moses before the Holy One: Master of the World! Does this convert mean as much to You as [my tribe] the Levites? [God] replied: [The convert] is important to Me because he converted for My sake.

Regarding Interactions with Potential Converts: Interactions / Attitudes which Encourage Conversion

32. Akilas, Hadrian Caesar's Nephew—Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 5

Akilas, who was Hadrian [Caesar]'s nephew, wished to become a convert but was afraid of his uncle Hadrian. So he said to him: I want to go into business. Hadrian: Does that mean you are in need of silver or gold? My treasures are open before you. Akilas: I still want to go into business, to get outside, to learn what people think. And I seek your counsel on how to go about it. Hadrian: Any merchandise whose price is depressed, all but sunk in the ground—go and deal in it, for in the end its price will rise and you will realize a profit. So Akilas went to the Land of Israel and studied Torah.

After a while Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua came upon him, and, noticing a change in his countenance, they said to each other: Akilas is apparently studying Torah. When he came into their presence, he proceeded to put many questions to them, which they answered. Then he went up to his uncle Hadrian, who asked him: Why is your countenance changed? I suspect that either your merchandise sold at a loss, or can it be that someone has distressed you? Akilas: No. You are my kinsman—would any man dare distress me?

Hadrian: Then why is your countenance changed? Akilas: Because I have studied Torah. What is more, I have had myself circumcised. Hadrian: Who told you to do so? Akilas: It was you I consulted. Hadrian: When? Akilas: When I told you that I wanted to go into business, and you said to me, “Any merchandise whose price is depressed, all but sunk in the ground—go and deal in it, for in the end it will rise in value.” I then went around among all nations and found none held in lower esteem and deemed to be more deeply sunk in the ground than Israel. But in the end they will be exalted, as Isaiah said, “Thus says YHVH, the Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, to him who is despised of men, to him who is abhorred of nations, to a servant of rulers: Kings shall see him and rise, princes, they shall prostrate themselves” (Isaiah 49:7).

33. Why would Moses Speak Alluringly?—Rashi on Exodus 18:8 based on Mechilta

Moses Told His Father-In-Law Everything That YHVH Had Done to Pharaoh and Egypt for Israel’s Sake—All the Trouble That Had Befallen Them on the Way—and That YHVH Had Rescued Them.

[Why would Moses need to tell Jethro all that YHVH had done? Does it not already say seven verses earlier in 18:1: “Jethro...heard all that God did for Moses and for Israel...”? Therefore Moses must be repeating the story for a reason. What is this reason?] Moses [repeated the story] to draw [Jethro’s] interest, to attract Jethro to the Torah.
34. **Befriend Him and do not Repel Him**—*Mechilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Amalek* on Jeremiah 23:23

**BEHOLD I AM A GOD THAT BRINGS NEAR, SAYS YHVH, AND NOT A GOD THAT REPELS**
This God said to Moses: "I am One who welcomes, not One who repels." As it is said: "Behold I am a God that brings near, says YHVH, and not a God that repels" (Jeremiah 23:23). "I am He who brought Jethro near, not keeping him at a distance. So also you, when a man comes to you wishing to become a convert to Judaism, as long as he comes in the name of God for the sake of heaven, do you, likewise: befriend him and do not repel him."

35. **Words Which Penetrate Their Hearts**—Nathan of Nemirov's *Paper*

Help me to speak to these people words, which penetrate their hearts, words of truth, words of holiness. May their hearts be truthfully awakened....

36. **A Compliment to Jethro**—Rashi on Exodus 18:5

**JETHRO, MOSES' FATHER-IN-LAW CAME WITH HIS SONS AND HIS WIFE TO MOSES INTO THE WILDERNESS.**
...into the wilderness. The words are superfluous as we know that the Israelites were in the wilderness! But the fact is repeated as a compliment to Jethro that he left the comfort of his home for the hardships of the wilderness to learn the Torah.

37. **A Sack Full of Nuts**—*Shir haShirim Rabbah* 6:11 on Numbers 23:10

**WHO CAN COUNT THE DUST-GRAINS OF JACOB, EVEN ONE QUARTER OF ISRAEL?**
Just as a sack full of nuts that is in your hand can still receive many sesame grains and mustard seeds, and can hold them all—so many converts have come and been added to Israel.

38. **A Hand of Welcome**—*Vayikra Rabbah* 2:9 on Leviticus 1:2

**WHEN ANY PERSON...BRINGS AN OFFERING...**
Why does it say "any person"? This is to include converts...The sages have taught thus: If [any man, including] a heathen seeks to become a convert, a hand of welcome should be held out to bring him under the wings of the *Shechinah*. Thereafter, the converts in each succeeding generation are there to [reach out to] their heathen brethren.

39. **Why Should You Be a Stranger?**—*Midrash Tanhuma, Lech l'cha* 6 on Jeremiah 14:8

"Our Rabbis say: Dear is the convert, for the Holy One had written of Himself 'Why should You be as a ger in the land?' Said the Holy One: Thus do I cherish the convert."
Interactions / Attitudes which Discourage Conversion

40. Judah Stands Up before the Assembly—Tosefta Yadayim 2:17-19

Judah, an Ammonite convert stood up before them in the [place of assembly]. He said to them, “Am I allowed to enter the congregation (be converted)?” Rabban Gamaliel said to him, “You are prohibited.” Rabbi Joshua said to him, “You are permitted.” Rabban Gamaliel said to him, “Lo, it is written, ‘An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of YHVH [even to the tenth generation]’ [Deuteronomy 23:3].” Rabbi Joshua said to him, “and are Ammon and Moab still living in their land? Already Sennacherib, king of Assyria, has come up and mixed up all the nations…” Judah the Ammonite convert said to them, “What shall I do?” They said to him, “You have already heard the ruling of the elder. Lo, you are permitted to enter the congregation.” Rabban Gamaliel said to them, “Also an Egyptian convert is in the same status as this one…” Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said to them, “The preciousness of Torah redresses their uncleanness.”

41. They Ought Not to Have Repelled Timna—Talmud Sanhedrin 99b

Timna was a princess (Genesis 36:10, 12, 29), for her brother was a prince (Lotan). She wanted to become a convert, and she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they would not receive her. So then she became a concubine of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, for she said, “Better to become a handmaid of this nation than a princess of any other.” Her son was Amalek, who wrought great trouble in Israel. Why? Because they ought not to have repelled her.

42. We Are Commanded to Love Converts—Responsa Rambam (ed. Freimann), no. Concerning the vexations and humiliating words violently addressed to this convert by certain Jews, Maimonides writes to him: Toward father and mother we are commanded honor and reverence, toward the prophets to obey them, but toward the converts, we are commanded to have great love in our inmost hearts…. YHVH, in His glory, loves converts…. A man who left his father and birthplace and the realm of his people at a time when they are powerful, who understood with his insight, and who attached himself to this nation which today is a despised people, the slave of rulers, and recognized and knew that their religion is true and righteous…and pursued YHVH…and entered beneath the wings of the Shechinah…. YHVH does not call you fool [Hebrew kesil], but intelligent [maskil] and understanding, wise and walking correctly, a pupil of Abraham our father…

43. The Man who Violates is own Teachings—Avot d’Rabbi Nathan

Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar said: I will offer you a parable. To what might Adam be compared? To a man who married a convert and used to give her instruction, saying, “My dear, do not eat bread when your hands are defiled, do not eat untithed produce, do not profane the Sabbath, do not make vows rashly, and do not associate with another man. If you break one of these rules, you will die.” Now what did the man do? He arose and ate in her presence bread although his hands were defiled, he ate in front of her untithed produce – he profaned the Sabbath and made vows rashly – and also offered her some (of the food). What could that convert have thought to herself? All that my husband forbade me in the beginning was without foundation. She thereupon went and transgressed them all.