

Conversion Story

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In this week when we talk so much about names, it seems only fitting to start off with a story about names. Nearly two years ago, after my mother died, I knew I wanted to say *kaddish* for her. And although there's a lovely *minyan* here at Temple every weekday morning, I couldn't get here and still get to work on time. So I started going to morning *minyan* at the Conservative congregation here in town. They were wonderful to me, warm and welcoming. Everyone there knew I was a member at Temple; I was blessed that there were other members of our community that also attended there, and they introduced me around and looked after me. I started going every weekday morning, and I was pretty much holding my own...I figured out when to stand and sit, I bought a *kippah*, and even though I was only getting about half way through each of the silent prayers (because I am here to tell you that their entire *siddur* is in Hebrew, and it is *not* transliterated, and they go *fast*), I like to think I was generally acquitting myself pretty well and not bringing any dishonor to Temple's good reputation. After I had been going for a few weeks, one of the rabbis there came over and very gently explained that it was their custom not to give *aliyot* to mourners during *shloshim*, but after I had completed those first thirty days of most intense mourning, they would very much like to honor me by calling me to the Torah, if that would be alright. It seemed daunting—I'd never even had an *aliyah* here at Temple—but it seemed like the right thing to do, and I thought my mother would have been pleased, so I said yes. A few more weeks went by, and God bless them, they'd given me fair warning, so I practiced the blessings and watched carefully every time there was a Torah service, so I'd be ready when the moment came. And one Thursday morning, just before prayers started, the rabbi asked me if I'd be willing to accept the *aliyah* that day, and I said yes. When we got to the appropriate moment in the service, they took the Torah from the ark, and as various congregants were leading the *hakafah*, the Ritual Director motioned me up to the *bimah*. He leaned over, and in a whisper, he asked for my Hebrew name, and I whispered back: Yosefa bat Avraham v'Sarah.

I had heard the phrase "his jaw dropped" before, but I'm pretty sure that prior to that moment, I thought it was just a figure of speech. He looked like something out of a cartoon. Now, I'm sure many of you already know what he had just figured out, but in case you don't know the code, let me decipher

it for you: my Hebrew name includes the words “daughter of Abraham and Sarah” because I don’t have Jewish parents of my own. I converted to Judaism, and like all converts, I claim my Jewish heritage through the patriarch and matriarch of all Jews everywhere.

He recovered nicely, called me to the Torah, and I chanted the blessings without a hitch. After prayers were over, both the Ritual Director and the rabbi in attendance that morning came over to me and started stammering: “Your Hebrew name is very...that is, generally speaking, when one hears the sort of Hebrew name that you’ve got...what I think the Rabbi means to say is that it would be possible to guess from...we were wondering....” And to save them both the embarrassment of having to ask outright, I went ahead and told them that I had converted several years earlier at Temple. There was a hearty round of Mazel Tovs and handshakes and compliments for my Hebrew (for which I gave all credit to Temple and Jan Timmons), but a sudden realization washed over me: They had no idea I hadn’t been born Jewish. I had *passed* (and at a Conservative *shul*, *nu?*) It was the proudest moment of my Jewish life.

I play that story for laughs, and it **was** funny. But I think it reveals a deeper truth, one that Jewish tradition, and especially this week’s Torah portion, has been telling us for millennia. This was a community that had *welcomed* me, that had taken *care* of me, that had granted me the inestimably precious gift of their presence every single morning so I could say kaddish for my mom; but they didn’t **know** me, they couldn’t know who I really was or how I had come there, until I told them my name.

We are a people consumed with names, with naming things and people, and changing our names, and reciting names, and invoking names. And even by our own fairly elevated standards, this week’s portion is a little obsessive. Oceans of ink have been spilled talking about the names in this *parsha*...who gets named and who doesn’t, what the names mean and how they came to be. Just a few of the names that have drawn the commentator’s attention: To start with, we call the portion *Sh’mot*, literally “names,” from the first line of the portion which lists the names of Jacob’s sons. Then we have the **unnamed** king who orders the death of all the male babies born to the Hebrew women, and the very much **named** midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who defy the edict. There’s the Levite couple, **unnamed** in the portion but known to us as Amram and Jochebed, who have a son and put him in the wicker basket, where he’s found by the **unnamed** daughter of the **unnamed** Pharaoh, who eventually **names** the baby Moses. Moses grows up and eventually is forced into exile in

Midian, where he eventually meets the man who will become his father-in-law, who we usually know as Yitro but who is here called Reuel, marries Zipporah, and has a son, Gershom. And finally, in that episode so uncanny it can still raise the hair on the backs of our necks, the voice coming from the bush that burned but was not consumed; God's voice naming God's self: "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*," which we usually translate as "I Am Who I Am."

So in a *parsha* with so many rich ideas to talk about, why did I start with telling my story about the *shul* down the street? Well, when Mimi and Rabbi Robbins asked me to give today's *d'var*, I knew that we would be welcoming our guests from HUC, who are here as part of the Shusterman Outreach Weekend, learning about many of the amazing ways that Temple reaches out to those in interfaith families and those considering conversion. So it had occurred to me to talk about my conversion. But I was reminded of the story a few weeks ago, at one of our Young Adult Shabbat dinners. After dessert, I was standing and talking with one of my friends, who happened to have converted to Judaism at another synagogue, and another of our friends, who at the time was just days away from going to the *mikvah* and completing her own conversion, when we were approached by *another* of our friends, who asked if he could introduce one of *his* friends, who was considering conversion and had questions that he, having been born Jewish, didn't feel qualified to answer. Of course we said yes, and we all chatted for awhile and talked about the process here at Temple, and exchanged email addresses, and we all said: Call us anytime. You can ask us anything. Any of us, or any of the other people in the room who have converted, and we pointed them out, her and her and him, and probably some more we don't know about. And one of my friends laughed and said it would be nice if we had a secret handshake, or a special sticker on our name badges, so we could find each other, so everyone would know that they could talk to us and ask us anything, that we had walked just a little bit different a path to end up at that dinner.

And it struck me...we do have a secret handshake. Our Hebrew names are like that sticker on the name tag; if you know the code, when you hear our names you'll know something about us that you might not have known otherwise. I was so glad, in that moment, that the handshake wasn't so very secret, that our friend knew that the three of us had converted and were happy to talk about it. And suddenly my pride at having passed at the Conservative *minyán* a couple of years ago didn't seem quite so funny anymore. Surely, there was no harm in having been able to fly under the radar there. But if I had been able, however inadvertently, to fool them, how many other times had I let a

moment pass when telling my story might have made a real difference? How many people that I had worked alongside at Mitzvah events might have been considering conversion, and might have been glad to meet someone who had been through the process? How many people that I work with on committees might have a loved one who had gone through conversion, and had questions they wish they could ask someone who'd been there? How many people that I had chatted with at Shabbat services might have been pleasantly surprised to be reminded how welcoming this community is to Jews by Choice, and how many of us serve as Hebrew Teachers and Committee Chairs and Volunteers and Board Members? I am proud to be not only Jewish, but a convert to Judaism, and of course I always tell my story when I'm asked, but how many times had it just been easier not to say anything?

Judaism has a long history of not talking openly about conversion, and the reasons for not doing so are mostly honorable. Historically, the rabbis forbade even mentioning that someone had converted, primarily out of concern that the convert might feel embarrassed, or that they would not be accepted by the community. I think that a lot of us in the Reform Movement, especially those of us active in Outreach activities, or just generally open and friendly to the idea of conversion, assume that this historic bias against talking about conversion in a Jewish context is a relic of the past, or at least that it's now confined to Orthodox circles. But the truth is that the taboo is deeply culturally ingrained, and despite our best intentions, we often fall into the pattern of politely not mentioning the issue for a variety of reasons. The decision to convert is intensely personal, and many of us don't always know how to express those feelings, or how much to share. None of us want to become the Judaic equivalent of the hosts of one of those lame real estate investor call in radio shows..."I converted to Judaism in six easy steps! Ask me how!" And I think most importantly, all of us that have had positive conversionary experiences will tell you categorically that we made the decision freely and without coercion, and it's one of our greatest fears that something positive we say about converting might be construed as pressuring someone else to make a choice they don't want to make. So as much as we might be willing to share our experiences, we hold back for fear that our words will hurt instead of help.

So all of that was percolating in my mind as I studied this week's portion, and I ran across a lovely *drash* that I think can really give us a beautiful lesson in the value of sharing who we are. When Moses is standing at the burning bush, God says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and God proceeds to command Moses to go to Pharaoh and

free the Israelites. But Moses pushes back, and demands to know God's name...not just *what* God is, but *who* God is. And God answers, "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*." The Hebrew there is deliberately obscure, and as well as Jan taught me, I confess that it went over my head until I read an essay by Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, the Director of Interfaith Affairs at the ADL. We usually translate God's words as "I am who I am," or more poetically, "I am who I am becoming." But Rabbi Bretton-Granatoor points out the trick in the Hebrew: *Ehyeh* means "I will be"—the future tense—but the future tense in biblical Hebrew can be read as the past tense, and the present tense of the verb "to be" is normally understood, but not articulated. "Taken all together," he says, "perhaps the best way to translate this sparse three-word name is 'I was, am, and will be as I was, am, or will be.'" As the rabbi points out, this name doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, but I love it. I was and am and will be as I was and am and will be. Not just the past, and not just the present, and not just the future, but all three, continuously and contemporaneously and forever. We are all, all of us, was and am and will be. God is there; God sees us all where we were, and where we are, and where we are going. And when we begin to share the truth of who we were, are, and are becoming, we open up whole new possibilities. We all have stories to tell about how we got here, and when we share those experiences, we share the spark of the divine within ourselves; we allow others to see us as God sees us. For some of us, those histories will be of namings and consecrations and *b'nai mitzvah* and confirmations and weddings here at Temple. For some of us, those histories will be of other congregations and communities, whether across town or halfway around the world. And for some of us, those histories will be of a Jewish soul in search of this home. But all of us can put a name to those stories and invest them with power, simply by sharing them with one another.

Before I close, let me make one thing perfectly clear...Those who have converted to Judaism don't *owe* anyone anything. I tell people it's like the old joke about Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire's dancing...Ginger did everything Fred did, but backwards and in high heels. We all have the same challenges and hang-ups and frustrations as the rest of the Jewish community, but we had to write essays about it. I'm not arguing that Jews by Choice have some moral duty to share our happy stories for the edification of others; anyone who has done the work that it takes to convert has no obligation to explain, or justify, or even share that choice. I have never, not for one minute, regretted my decision to convert, but it would be a lie to say that it wasn't hard, and sometimes lonely. It was a choice freely made and a path freely followed, but

parts of the journey are difficult. Most of it, though, was joyous and full of promise, and just, inexplicably, *right*. So I won't speak for anyone else, only for myself. I have many names. I am Peggy, daughter of Allen and Sheila. I am Peggy, sister of Don and Erin. I'm Peggy, wife of Rob, and Peggy, student of Oren and Jan and Philip and a thousand others, and I'm Peggy, fan of Coach K and everything Duke. I'm also Irish, and I like to talk, so it's a running joke among my friends that if you talk to me for more than ten minutes you're guaranteed to have been forced to listen to a story about at least three of those preceding five. But I'm also known in the House of Israel as *Yosefa bat Avraham v'Sarah*. It's part of my story, one that I share happily with you and one that I hope will continue to be a blessing. *Ken yehi ratzon*, so may it be God's will. Shabbat Shalom.