

The Story of Ruth

By Rabbi Robert Schenkerman, D.D.

Several weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending a celebration at Temple Shir Shalom, in Gainesville. The congregation was honoring its immediate past president and founder of that Temple, Mrs. Irene Frank.

It has been my privilege to know Irene Frank and to bear witness to the works of dedication that she has created and energized in her Synagogue. Three years ago Mrs. Frank wrote a column in her Temple bulletin which she shared with me when I recently saw her and I am honored to share her thoughts with you:

“My name is Ruth. My mother-in-law was Sarah (not Naomi). It is with pride that I acknowledge “I AM A JEW BY CHOICE”! It is not just the belief in one God, but what Judaism teaches that resulted in my decision. After studying for many months with the Rabbi of the Reform Temple to which Joe and I belonged, (Temple Israel in Dayton, Ohio), I chose to accept the responsibilities of living a Jewish life. Following a Friday night Service in July of 1948, a public ceremony was held at the request of Rabbi Ruslander. His reason for time and place was: “Because Jews ‘born into the faith’ had no idea of what it meant to become A JEW BY CHOICE”. (In those days the title was CONVERT).

It was Rabbi Ruslander who decided that RUTH was a fitting name. I believe that mine was the first public conversion in Dayton, Ohio, (and possibly the last). No one left when the Rabbi, announced that congregants were welcome to stay to witness this ceremony. As an added honor, two visiting Rabbis witnessed this rite that allowed me to proclaim publicly for the first time: “I AM A JEW.”

This very moving ceremony had its effect, not only on me, but all who attended that evening’s services. We were all reminded of the burden and responsibilities of being a Jew and that “this burden was being willingly accepted.”

Conversion should never take place under false pretenses; to please a spouse, his/her family or because some Rabbis will not perform a wedding ceremony of a “mixed marriage”. The decision to convert is of such magnitude that the only reason should be; BECAUSE IT MEANS SOMETHING TO YOU and that you have the strength of conviction and the sincerity of belief.

Conversion rites are as important as any Bar/Bat Mitzvah or Confirmation and in my view should be open to the congregation. I take my Judaism seriously. I have chosen the Torah and to be a part of Jewish history. I am proud that my children were raised to be part of that history and that I do have grandchildren who will continue to open their hearts to Judaism.

Converts must accept Jewish teachings with open minds and readily respond to their obligations. In many instances, some “born Jewish” proclaim themselves to be Jews due to the accident of birth and believe THAT makes them a Jew! Their belief is: I AM a Jew! I don’t need to belong to a Synagogue! Worship or attendance at services is not necessary. Why support Jewish causes? Why respond to the obligation of biblical imperatives that all needy human beings deserve help? Worse, if reminded of this obligation, some will show resentment and anger- Why aren’t these Jews aware of the “burden and responsibilities”? The true Convert will stand head and shoulders above such people.

We have been told that when we lose one Jew, we lose generations of Jews. Conversely, when we save one Jew we SAVE generations of Jews. When one chooses to

accept our religion, we add to the generations that follow. In our small Temple, and in Temple, we try to save Jewish lives. We try to bring them back to the observance of ritual, customs and education in Judaism. Such a simple way to save future generations.

My beloved Rabbi Ruslander and my beloved in-laws would have been proud had they lived to learn that my husband and I were involved in helping create a Reform congregation in Gainesville, Florida and in so doing, possibly made a difference for generations to come. I AM PROUD TO BE A JEW. This "Burden and Responsibilities" has given me as well as Joe, a special meaning to our lives."

Surely it is people like Irene Frank that our Talmudic Rabbis had in mind when they offered the rare and beautiful Blessing, ***Ken Yir-bu...***"So may there increase in the House of Israel." ...May we continue to be blessed with those who come to us and take the name of Ruth.