

Shavuot: Conversion - Graf Potozki

- Nisson Shulman. A discussion of conversion to Judaism using the story of Graf Potozki as the text.

CONVERSION: THE STORY OF GRAF POTOTZKI

(The high rate of intermarriage and the consequent desire of some to belong to the Jewish people should be addressed. There is, in some congregations, pressure to recognize non-Jewish spouses in some way. The Jewish attitude towards conversion must therefore be clarified to our congregants. This is especially true now that the issue has been brought to the fore by Israel's Chief Rabbinate.)

Today, the second day of Shavuoth, a man was put to death, cruelly burnt at the stake in Vilna, by the Polish government, because he had converted to Judaism and refused to forsake or betray his new-found faith. The funeral pyre was lit and he was executed on the second day of Shavuoth in the year 1729. The man was a great prince of Poland, one of the most famous converts of all time, Graf Pototzki.

A Jew disguised himself as a Christian in order to bribe the Polish guards so that he could remove some of the remains, some of this martyr's ashes. In this manner some remains of Prince Pototzki's body came to Jewish burial in the Vilna Jewish cemetery. From his grave grew a great tree which took the shape of the letter tzaddik, which also stands for the word tzaddik, attesting, they say, that Pototzki was a righteous man. The top of the tree resembled a hand with fingers pointing heavenward. Jews would come to this grave and this tree from far and wide, in pilgrimage, to recite prayers to God on ground hallowed by the proximity of the remains of the righteous martyr, Graf Pototzki, and in hope that the spirit of this righteous man would join in their own supplication before God.

The tree lasted until our own times, when finally the Nazis cut it down. The grave is still there, in the Vilna cemetery; the grave of a man who symbolized the righteous convert in history.

It is fitting that Pototzki, who chose to be part of our nation and to give his life for our faith, be remembered on this second day of Shavuoth the anniversary of his martyrdom and death. It is also appropriate that at this season we begin the book of Bamidbar, which deals essentially with our early development and maturing as a people. For we had come to Sinai little more than two months after we left Egypt, Bahodesh Hashelishi, at the start of the third month. In the book of Bamidbar we read that we left Mount Sinai a full year later, bashana hashenit, bahodesh hasheni, beesrim bachodesh... vayisu beney Yisrael lemasaeyhem bemidbar Sinay.

We achieved much during that first year. We received the Torah; built the Mishkan, the sanctuary; submitted to a spiritual discipline and accepted mitzvot; accepted priests and levites as spiritual heads of our people; established a judicial system, shoftim, and the executive branch of that system shotrim, and of course had pledged allegiance to God and His prophets, first amongst them, Moshe Rabbenu. We were counted, organized by tribes, our encampments arranged according to standards, and we were ready to march. And though we sinned by

worshipping the Golden Calf, God had forgiven us and His glory enveloped our sanctuary.

Nevertheless, we were ordered to move on. For all of this was not enough. We still had not truly become a nation. We had to march through a desert towards the Promised Land, undergoing much hard discipline, spiritual discipline of mitzvot and physical rigors too, until we were ready.

And the hardest trials of all were those to which we had to submit because of the converts to Judaism, the mixed multitude that came up with us out of Egypt. All of our tzarot, starting from the Golden calf throughout all the desert complaints and petty rebellions, started in the tents of that mixed multitude, haasafsuf asher bekirbo. And so our Rabbis were to say, kashin gerin leYisrael kasapachat, that the worst dangers for our people's future and well being come from the converts.

And yet, those very sages also declared that Israel was exiled amongst the world's nations in order to bring the world the Torah values; One God, ethics, morality, justice, God's great and eternal gifts. Are these two opinions contradictory? Hardly.

A true and righteous convert is an example to all Jews, like Abraham, the first ger tzedek, the first righteous convert, was an example to all his descendants.

But the asafsuf, the hangers on, were different. They had joined the people because of the advantages they thought would be theirs, having seen the plagues striking Egypt and having suffered because they had oppressed us. These Egyptians forsook their neighbors, friends and families, because they thought that by joining a people with such a powerful God they would live in luxury and wealth. In short, these people who forsook everything to join the victorious Jews -- were greatly disappointed when they discovered that they were expected to observe disciplines of mitzvot and to suffer hardship. And so they rebelled, taavu taava, they remembered all that they had in Egypt. These insincere converts are worse than a disease.

Ever since that time, Jews have had a clear policy with regard to conversion. We would willingly accept the sincere convert who comes to us. We would do everything we could to weed out the insincere convert who does not readily submit to all the commandments and rigors of Judaism; who does not accept upon himself our people's weal and woe, becoming part of our destiny.

This is logically consistent. By rejecting a convert we do not damn them to eternal suffering! They too can win salvation! They need only be good people, observe basic universal laws such as those establishing justice and respecting parents, life, property, worshipping One God, and they too will have a full reward in the hereafter. They don't have to become Jews. They are not required to enlist in the ranks of our people whose obligation to be an example for all other people requires much, much more from each of us.

That is why our Rabbis declared that Jews in their exile bring the Torah to the world, and indeed it is so.

Wherever Jews have settled, monotheism has taken hold. At least in theory, people have begun

to accept certain basic, universal laws, while in countries where Jews have not reached, parts of Africa, India, and China, polytheism still held sway. But even though we brought Torah's message to the world, nevertheless we did not do so by means of conversion, nor shall we ever need to do so.

The night before Graf Pototzki's execution, Elijah, the "Gaon" of Vilna, who had been very close to the martyr in his lifetime, had the prison officials bribed so that they would allow the Gaon's shamas to sit with Pototzki all through the night.

The shamas asked the prince: "What made you convert?" "I shall explain", said the prince. "At the time of Mount Sinai's revelation, the souls of all men on earth gathered at the mountain. When the Almighty offered the Torah to the non-Jews and they rejected it, do you think everyone of them really rejected it? But the minority who wanted the Torah had to go along with the majority. In the same way, there were surely Jews who were reluctant to accept the Torah, and had to do so because of the majority. In the course of years and centuries, those Jewish souls, which wanted to reject the Torah, had their wish. They became apostates. And the non-Jewish souls, which wanted to accept the Torah, had their chance to become gerye tzedek. I feel that mine was one of those souls."

Let those souls whose desire is sincere, willingly come to Judaism and we shall not reject them. Let others but be good men and righteous, and they and the world will be blessed.