

Ba'al Teshuvim in History: If I Were Only Half The Man These Were

By Yehudah ben Shomeyr

Though I was born a Jew, I was not born Jewish. I was not born into a Jewish home, I was born into a Christian Home, I discovered my Jewish heritage later in life and I officially converted. I am considered a Ba'al Teshuvah, or "One who Has Returned." Those who are Ba'al Teshuvim are held in high regard because they have tasted of the forbidden fruit of this world and have yet nonetheless still chose the way of Torah. It is almost regarded as a sin to refer to a Ba'al Teshuvah as a convert. Once the conversion has taken place, his goyish (gentile) past is never to be remembered or mentioned by the Jewish community ever again.

I look at Jewish History and discover several converts; those who were not born into Judaism, or come from Hebraic Stock yet became great people in Judaism. I look in admiration and wish I could be half the man, half the scholars that they were.

Luke: Luke penned the words to the book that bares his name and the book of the Acts of the Apostles. He was a covert, a physician, a scribe of sorts, a historian and a Missionary. He accompanied and was a faithful companion of Rav Sha'ul (The Apostle Paul).

Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi Akiva was one of the greatest and revered Rabbi's who ever lived. He was the son of a convert and was educated late in life (age 40) yet he wasted no time in learning all the intricacy's and nuances of the Hebrew language, Torah, Talmud and even Kabbalah. Most children who grew up in Judaism who had memorized the Torah and much of the Talmud by age 13 had nothing on this guy!

"Rabbi Akiva (approximately 50-135) was one of the greatest of the Tannaim (Scholars of the Mishnah, the earliest written form of the Oral Torah). He was also a founder of rabbinic Judaism.

Akiva was not educated as a youth. His wife Rachel encouraged him to study. It is said that he began to study Torah at the Yavneh academy at the age of forty. It is said he studied for thirteen years without expressing any opinion. And that the first opinions he did express were brilliant. His logic, method of exposition, and memory made him an extraordinary student. In time, Akiva, with novel and liberal views, became a leader at the Yavneh Academy.

After receiving a bequest that made him financially secure, Akiva opened his own academy in Bene Berak. Akiva's success as a Torah Scholar is revealed by the fact that his name is mentioned over 270 times in the Mishnah.

When the Romans declared they would build a pagan temple on the site of the destroyed Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews, led by Shimon Bar Kochva, rebelled. Rabbi Akiva became the spiritual leader of the Bar Kochba Revolt. Rabbi Akiva even proclaimed Bar Kochva to be the Messiah early in the struggle, but he later retracted this opinion.

Despite Roman decrees against teaching Torah, the aged Rabbi Akiva continued to teach. Akiva was arrested by the Romans. Some say he died in prison. Tradition, however, says that after being imprisoned for three years, he was put on trial and sentenced to death. While the Romans were torturing him to death, he recited the Shema and explained to those present that now he understood the true meaning of loving the Lord with all they heart, soul, and might.” – About.com: Judaism

Rabbi Akiva was also an inspiration and motivator of the Jewish people, encouraging them through the darkest times of exile and Roman occupation. He ended up dying a martyr and even found a place of remembrance on the Hebrew Calendar.

“The origins of the holiday begin with the time of Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud (*Yevamot 62b*) states that 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students died from a mysterious divine-sent plague. The Talmud then goes on to say that this was because they did not show proper respect to one another, befitting their level. Jews celebrate Lag Ba’omer as the traditional day that this plague ended. This is the view recorded in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, 120:1-10.”

His downfall was that during a Roman revolt to unite and rally Israel to fight he believed General Bar Kochba to be the Messiah which caused a division between the Jews at large and Natsarim Jews who believed Yeshua was the Messiah and therefore could not fight under a false Messiah. It was at this point that Judaism as a whole caused the Natsarim to be outcasts and unaccepted in the Jewish community, and unfortunate schism that is felt even to this day.

Onkelos: Onkelos is the name of a famous convert to Judaism in Talmudic times (c.35-120 CE). He is considered to be the author of the famous Targum Onkelos Which is an exposition of the "official" interpretation of the *pshat* (or basic meaning) of the Torah, as received by Rabbi Eliezer (c.110 CE). – Information

taken from Wikipedia.com. These Targums are widely revered and used even to this day.

“What do we know about the conversion of Onkelos? The Talmud tells us in Masechet Gittin (56b-57a) that on the return of Titus to Rome from Yerushalayim, where he had defiled and destroyed the Holy Temple, HaShem wanted to drown him with a huge wave. Titus said, “The G-d of the Jews has power only on water, where he defeated Pharaoh...come and do battle with me on land.” HaShem said, “O wicked son and grandson of wicked men...I have a certain small creature; go onto land and do battle with it.” When Titus reached land, a flea entered his nose, then moved to his brain, where it proceeded to grow immensely, causing Titus indescribable pain. On his deathbed, he told his servants, “After I die, cremate me and scatter my ashes over the Seven Seas, so that the G-d of the Jews will not be able to find me and bring me to Justice.”

At this time in history, Rome was a persecutor of Israel, but at the same time, many thousands of Romans, impressed with the religion of the Jews, and with their fierce devotion to it, were converting to Judaism. In the same Gemara, we find, “Onkelos, son of Kalonykos, was the son of Titus’ sister, and he wished to convert to Judaism. He raised by witchcraft the spirit of Titus from the dead. He asked his uncle, ‘Who is on top in the World-to-Come?’ Titus answered, ‘Israel.’ Onkelos asked further, ‘I am thinking of converting to Judaism. What is your opinion of that?’ The spirit answered, ‘The Jews have to fulfill too many Laws – you will not be able to do it all. Instead, persecute Israel, and you will be on top, at least while you are alive...’ Onkelos asked him, ‘What is your punishment?’ He answered, ‘What I decreed upon myself. Every day I have to find wood, which is used to burn me, and my ashes are scattered over the Seven Seas.’ ” Despite the advice of his uncle, Onkelos did convert to Judaism, and studied Torah under the greatest Sages of the Jewish People. So great and holy was his translation of the Torah into Aramaic, the language of the People at that time and the language of the Talmud, that we find in Berachos (8a-8b), “Rav Huna bar Yehuda (alt: Rabbi Ami) said, “A person should always finish the Torah with the Community by reciting the text twice and the Targum once, and even for place-names like Atros and Divon (where the Targum seems not to add much by the mere repetition of the names). For anyone who does so will have his lifetime increased.”” -- <http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/rabbis/onkelos.htm>

Shalom,
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