Caring for Proselytes--and God's Good Name--Thoughts on Parashat Naso, June 6, 2009

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"When a man or a woman shall commit any sin, to commit a trespass against the Lord..." (Bemidbar 5:6)

This passage has been taken to mean that a sin committed by one human being against another human being is also considered to be a sin against God. Laws governing interpersonal relationships are essential elements in our religious tradition. They are not less important--and may in fact be more important--than laws governing our ritual relationship with the Almighty. It is not possible to be "religious" if one is not honest, kind, compassionate and considerate of fellow human beings. It is fashionable today to refer to a "religious" Jew as a "shomer Shabbat". While being a Sabbath observer is a wonderful virtue, it does not in itself testify to a person's religiosity. If a person observes Shabbat but is dishonest and disrespectful and cruel--such a person is surely not an exemplar of Torah Judaism.

The medieval Italian Jewish biblical commentator, Rabbi Obadia Seforno, cites a midrashic passage that refers this verse specifically to the sin of oppressing a proselyte. One who betrays the trust of a convert to Judaism is committing a sin not only against the convert, but against God. The Seforno writes that one who steals from a proselyte desecrates God's name. The proselyte, who chose to become Jewish and to live "under the wings of the Divine Presence", will become disillusioned by being mistreated by those who claim to follow the ways of Torah. The oppressor of the proselyte hurts the victim: but also undermines God's good name as Author of a righteous and compassionate Torah.

A basic characteristic of a religious Jew must be a loving, compassionate and respectful attitude toward those non-Jews who have chosen to become Jewish, who have sacrificed much to join our people, who have accepted upon themselves the obligations of our Torah. How deeply saddening it is to read of rabbinic courts that harass would-be proselytes, who treat them with disrespect, who delay the conversion procedures unnecessarily, who create ever-more stringencies to block the way of proselytes. How profoundly anti-religious are those "rabbis" who invalidate--or call into question--even the conversions of those

who were converted under the auspices of responsible halakhic Orthodox rabbis. The sins against the would-be proselytes and against the proselytes are incalculable: but these sins are also sins against God. They profane His name, and undermine the loving teachings of God's Torah.

In the current issue of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, we have included an article (anonymously) by a long-standing Orthodox convert. She describes poignantly some of the sufferings and indignities she has had to face over the years. (Her article is now also posted as the feature article on our website: jewishideas.org) The story she tells could be repeated, with variations of details, by a great many other Orthodox converts to Judaism. The sad truth is that things are becoming worse for converts, rather than better. The sad truth is that the Orthodox rabbinical establishment is part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. The sad truth is that many members of our community really don't care about this issue, or are not sufficiently sensitive to the feelings of converts and would-be converts.

It is time--well past time--that our community take responsibililty for developing attitudes and policies that are halakhically appropriate, compassionate and inclusive. It is time--well past time--to insist that the Orthodox rabbinic establishment (starting with the rabbis of our own congregations) take the lead in this process.

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