Yitro's Conversion--Lessons for Our Time: Thoughts for Parashat Yitro, February 2, 2013

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By

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Dr. Zvi Zohar of Bar Ilan University and the Shalom Hartman Center has come out with an excellent new book (in Hebrew): “Conversion in Our Times: A Study in the Halakhic Responsa of Rabbi Benzion Uziel.” The book was published by the Committee for the Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Uziel, and is available by contacting haravuziel@012.net.il

Rabbi Uziel (1880-1953) was one of the towering rabbinic figures of the modern era, having served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 until his death in 1953. He wrote numerous works on Jewish law and Jewish thought, and was a gifted teacher, orator and communal leader.

In Dr. Zohar’s new book, we find a thorough analysis of the responsa of Rabbi Uziel on the topic of conversion to Judaism. Rabbi Uziel offered a halakhically sound, compassionate and inclusive approach to conversion; he fostered a grand and loving religious vision. Instead of seeking every possible stringency to deter would-be converts from joining our people, Rabbi Uziel sought to find ways to encourage and include would-be converts to enter the Jewish fold. In cases involving the conversion of a non-Jewish person who was married to, or who wished to marry, a Jewish spouse, Rabbi Uziel was particularly insistent that such conversions be encouraged. This was important not only for the sake of the couples themselves, but for keeping their children within the Jewish people. He viewed himself as being very stringent in his opposition to the sin of intermarriage, rather than as being lenient in the rules of conversion.

Some rabbis argued that no convert should be accepted if he/she has ulterior motives for converting. Rabbi Uziel rejected this line of argument when it was evident that the would-be convert also had positive reasons for becoming Jewish. It is up to the beth din (rabbinic court) to determine whether the candidate for conversion—even if he/she has ulterior motives for conversion e.g. to marry a Jewish spouse—is sincere in his/her desire to convert independent of the ulterior motives.

Rabbi Uziel cited the Mekhilta on Parashat Yitro (1:6) in support of his approach. “The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses: I am the One Who spoke and brought the world into existence. I am the One Who brings close, not Who pushes away…. I brought Yitro close and I did not push him away. So you also, when a person comes to you to convert and comes for the sake of Heaven, you should bring him close and not push him away.”

This passage is reflecting on the Torah’s description of Yitro who identifies himself as the father-in-law of Moses, evidently taking pride in the greatness of his son-in-law. The assumption is that Yitro wished to convert because he had an ulterior motive i.e. to become a person on the highest rung of Israelite life by his close family tie to Moses.

Yet, the passage points out that God did not reject Yitro for this reason, but rather brought him close and accepted his conversion. Yitro was deemed also to have had sincere motives for conversion, not merely to gain social status. God Himself brings converts close and does not push them away; so certainly we should follow this example!

In one of his responsa, Rabbi Uziel reviewed the Talmudic passages dealing with conversion. He concluded: “From all that has been stated and discussed, the ruling follows that it is permissible and a mitzvah to accept male and female converts even if it is known to us that they will not observe all the mitzvoth; because in the end, they will come to fulfill them. We are commanded to make this kind of opening for them. And if they do not fulfill the mitzvoth, they will bear their own iniquities and we are innocent” (Mishpetei Uziel, 5724, no. 20).

Rabbi Uziel wrote strongly and passionately on the rabbinic obligation to undertake the conversion of individuals who are married to or engaged to marry Jews. He was adamant on the rabbinic responsibility to enable the conversion of children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, so as to provide a framework for them to grow up as part of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Uziel wrote: “I admit without embarrassment that my heart is filled with trembling for every Jewish soul that is assimilated among the non-Jews. I feel in myself a duty and mitzvah to open a door to repentance and to save [Jews] from assimilation by [invoking] arguments for leniency. This is the way of Torah, in my humble opinion, and this is what I saw and received from my parents and teachers” (Mishpetei Uziel, 5724, no. 13).

In our time when Rabbi Uziel's religious vision is vital to the well being of the Jewish people, we regrettably find so much of the Orthodox rabbinic world going in the opposite direction. The current Chief Rabbinate in Israel has created numerous obstacles for would-be converts. The rabbinic establishments in Israel, the United States and much of the diaspora have succumbed to an almost xenophobic attitude toward prospective converts, unless those candidates for conversion are willing to accept to live a fully Orthodox religious lifestyle. Stringency upon stringency is added. Candidates for conversion must often wait years before being approved for conversion, and even then must fear that the beth din might revoke the conversion in the future.

It is sincerely to be hoped that rabbis and laymen alike will read Dr. Zohar's new book, and will study the teachings of Rabbi Uziel with great care. These teachings offer keen insight into how our community can and should deal with the issue of conversion, and how we can and should deal with prospective converts. The goal must be to bring near, not to push away; to strengthen Jewish families and the Jewish community as a whole; to enable individuals and families come closer to God, closer to the Jewish people, and closer to their own personal fulfillment as Jews.

(To learn more about the life and teachings of Rabbi Uziel, you may read my book (in English): "Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel." Copies are available through the online store at jewishideas.org)

Angel for Shabbat