I Will Be What I Will Be:
Biblical Texts for Those Who Are Becoming Jews

Meir C. Bargeron

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
Los Angeles, California

2020
Adviser: Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

It takes a *kehillah kedoshah,* a holy community, to raise a rabbi. I am honored to acknowledge the following people who provided critical support and assistance throughout my rabbinic education and in the writing of this rabbinic capstone project.

I am utterly beholden to my husband Howard Tam for everything that he is, and for always paying attention.

My advisor and teacher Rabbi Dvora Weisberg, provided encouragement, motivation, abundant torah, and delightful editing. Dr. Bruce Phillips taught me what I needed to know about Jewish social science, as well as some of the finer points of the "Bakersfield Sound." I am grateful to my teachers at HUC-JIR in Los Angeles, especially Rabbi Rachel Adler, Rabbi Adam Allenberg, Rabbi Karen Fox, Rabbi Joshua Garroway, Dr. Candice Levy, and Rabbi Ruth Sohn, who have each made a particularly significant contribution to my formation as a rabbi.

I am grateful to Rabbi Beth Lieberman, Dr. Leah Hochman, Rabbi Ruth Adar, and Dr. Muriel Dance who provided important guidance to this project at various points in its development. I am grateful for the spiritual companionship and direction of Linda Owen. I offer profound thanks to my *morah*, Sally Abrams who patiently taught me Hebrew at her kitchen table and gave me the key to begin unlocking Jewish texts.

None of this would have been possible without my rabbi, mentor, and friend Rabbi Michael Adam Latz, and the members of Congregation Shir Tikvah in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They witnessed and supported my emergence into Jewishness and Judaism, welcomed me with loving, open arms, and changed my life. Wendy Goldberg brought music back into my life after a long

absence. My deepest gratitude goes to Philip Oxman and Harvey Zuckman, who opened the door, allowing all of his to happen.

I am filled with love and gratitude for my mother, Maria Bargeron, who stood with me on the bimah when I received a blessing of welcome to the Jewish people, and has stood with me every day since. I remember my father, Dennis Bargeron (*z"l*), who I am certain would have been standing next to my mother on that bimah. I am grateful to my maternal grandmother, Rosemary Gentle (*z"l*), who expressed surprising curiosity and affirming acceptance as I began my Jewish journey, though she did not entirely imagine, nor live to see its culmination.

I have learned so much from my rabbinic mentors, Rabbi Paul Kipnes, Rabbi Julia Weisz, and Rabbi Jeff Marx; and Cantor Doug Cotler. Each has provided opportunities and contributed their unique gifts to help me grow and become ready for the responsibility and the privilege of being called *Rabbi*.

I am grateful to these holy communities that allowed me to be their student rabbi or rabbinic intern: Congregation Or Ami in Calabasas, California; Congregation B'nai David in Visalia, California; Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, California; and Olympic B'nai Shalom Havurah in Port Angeles, Washington. Each of these communities were my patient and devoted teachers as I learned the skills, the craft and the charism of serving as a rabbi.

Baruch Atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehecheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You God, who is creating me, sustaining me, and who is with me in every moment.

For my beloved Jon, who makes this journey possible.

Table of Contents

Introduction

A Personal Prologue

Late on a Wednesday afternoon in the summer of 2010, in a little house in St. Paul, Minnesota, something wonderful happened that has changed my life forever. It started very simply. I was greeted by Rabbi Michael Latz on the front porch, and invited inside to sit in a simple living room with two other rabbis, a rabbinic intern, and my friend and witness, Phil. This was to be a time of examination and discussion, so that all could understand why I was there that day, what I had learned and experienced, and what I hoped for my life to become. At its essence, this conversation was prescribed by Jewish law and tradition. The fact that the rabbis were friendly and obviously supportive did nothing to stop my heart from racing. The examination seemed to pass in an instant, although I am sure that it lasted at least 15 minutes. At its conclusion, I was invited to wait outside. This time, the moments seemed to drag on forever, but no more than five minutes had passed when Rabbi Latz opened the door and invited me to enter and to take the next step of this ritual. A few minutes later, in a physical and emotional state as unadorned and vulnerable as the day I began life, I stepped into the warm, welcoming waters of the *mikvah*.

I walked into this little house a *ger,*[1] a stranger, and with the pastoral care of my rabbis, the validation of the *beit din*, and the witness of my trusted friend, I joyfully entered into God's covenant with the Jewish people.

[1] See definition on page 10.

The last ten years have marked a period of my life that defies a complete description. And yet, I will attempt to describe how I ended up at the mikvah, and what I have experienced along the way as I asked to join the Jewish people.

I was raised in a Christian, Roman Catholic family in a beautiful small town on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. We were moderately observant, and I completed the typical religious lifecycle milestones of a Catholic family. For the most part, I enjoyed religion and I grew up comfortable with my identity as a Catholic. However, as I grew toward manhood, so much in my life seemed to change. By the age of 18 I came to the full realization that I am a man who loves men. Almost immediately, I understood that in the Church's eyes this makes me "intrinsically disordered."[2] Those are literally the Church's words, not mine.

Yet, I also knew down to the core of my being that I was made in God's image and that this means that being true to my nature is far from disordered, Rather it is the way I have been created to serve God and keep God's commandments. To do otherwise would be to dishonor God and to bring harm to myself and others. In accepting this truth I became estranged from the religious tradition of my birth.

During my 20's and 30's, I engaged in a long journey of spiritual discovery and maturation. I spent many years affiliated with two liberal Christian denominations and – quite significantly

[2] Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. [Catholic Church.] *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.* October 1, 1986. Retrieved January 4, 2020 from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html

– as a self-guided student of Buddhism. Very gradually, in almost imperceptible increments, I realized that many foundational elements of my Christian belief were no longer a fit with my understanding of God, Creation, humanity and myself. I was conscious of having journeyed so far from my Christian roots that I could not imagine ever again practicing Christianity with authenticity. I became, to use a contemporary term of the moment, "spiritual but not religious."

Religious discovery, of course, does not occur in a vacuum. In 2006, while a graduate student working to complete a Master of Social Work degree, I was assigned to an internship at Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis (JFCS). This was a pivotal experience. Over a period of about two years, both as a student and later as a part-time staff psychotherapist, I learned and worked in a distinctly Jewish context. I became familiar with the Jewish community, served Jewish and non-Jewish clients, and developed strong relationships with many Jewish colleagues. I was warmly accepted and quite contentedly made myself at home.

My friends and family expressed curiosity about my work at a Jewish agency. If anyone thought it was an unusual choice for me to make, I never heard about it. Mostly, people were interested in hearing about my experience of working with clients, as well as what I was learning about Jewish holidays, and my attendance at the bat mitzvah of a colleague's daughter.

Eventually, I started a new full-time position at another agency and left JFCS. At first, I viewed this transition as simply leaving a job, something I had done several times in the past. My colleagues and I said our goodbyes, we committed to stay in touch, and I went on my

way. Immediately, I noticed how much I missed the people and environment of JFCS, but I attributed these feelings to leaving a great situation for a good reason. Over the months that followed, this experience of missing JFCS evolved into a realization that there was something missing inside of me; that I had left behind something I hadn't realized that I had found.

It took a while for me to give myself permission to acknowledge what was clearly happening to me. I hadn't merely completed a rich professional development experience with the added benefit of close personal relationships. Rather, I was beginning to see that there was something about Judaism and the Jewish people that I was being called to explore. I wrestled with this for many months, reading just about anything I could get my hands on that might help me understand Judaism. I struggled to discern whether this was merely an intellectual curiosity, rather than a spark of the Divine catching fire within me and leading me to wholeness. I came to understand that Jewish life and practice takes place in community and I knew I could no longer do this alone.

So I asked Phil to lunch and I told him my story. I recall the butterflies I felt in my stomach. In many ways, this was another coming out, no less significant to me than when I came out as a gay man at the age of 19. The butterflies, while a natural reaction, were unwarranted. I remember my friend's kind attention and effortless words of support. And he invited me to come with him to Shir Tikvah Congregation for a Friday evening Shabbat service. How fortunate for me that this synagogue's door was my entry into Jewish community life! I was received with great hospitality, and was quickly able to find my place in the community.

The process of learning and preparation for conversion represented a significant amount of intellectual and emotional effort, yet it felt like one of the most natural endeavors I had ever undertaken. Along this journey I found a religious tradition that permits me to connect with God in a way that I thought I had lost forever.

When I became estranged from the religious community of my birth, I found myself among people whose language and words no longer brought me close to God. The language of my heart and my intellect could not comprehend what I was hearing. The words that I had to express what my soul yearned to say were not understood by my religious community. Among the Jewish people I found a place where I can be my whole self, where I can give and receive and grow to become a better person. In Jewish life, I found a way to integrate my inherent values and capabilities with those of countless other Jews who have come before me and will live after me, to endeavor to repair and perfect the glorious Creation of humanity and all that is. In choosing Judaism, the Jewish people, and Jewish life I found a wholeness, a language of shalom.

Religious Conversion

As the prologue illustrates, I have a personal understanding of what it means to convert from one religion to another. It is also important look to academic sources to develop a basis for understanding religious conversion. Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian write,

> …converting is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic forcefield of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and experiences. It is assumed that converting is always an ongoing process, rather than a single event. Converting cannot be extricated from the fabric of relationships, processes and ideologies which

> provide the matrix of religious change. Dimensions of the converting process are multiple, interactive and cumulative.[3]

Rambo's and Farhadian's placement of religious conversion within a dynamic matrix of factors is particularly helpful for understanding the experience of conversion to Judaism in a modern, diverse, and pluralistic society. As one such society, North Americans typically own multiple identities, including racial, ethnic, gender, professional/vocational, social class, and religious identities. To change any of these identities has an impact on the others, and this change requires a period adjustment. Those who convert to Judaism, or to any other religion, do so while negotiating this adjustment.

Conversion to Judaism as a Change Process

While each person's experience of coming to Jewish life is unique, I have found much in common with others who are in the process of conversion to Judaism, or who have completed it. This sense of personal commonality is reflected in the research literature. Diane Centolella studied the psychosocial[4] factors related to conversion to Judaism. In her doctoral dissertation, Centolella reports the results of a qualitative study of the experiences of ten people who have converted to Judaism. She focused on three research questions: "(1) What is the experience like for people who convert to Judaism? (2) How does conversion to Judaism occur? (3) Is there a pattern of experience of stages that can be identified that takes place

[3] Louis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of religious change." In *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Christopher Lamb and M. Darroll Bryant eds., London and New York: Cassell, 1999. p. 24.

[4] The intersection of psychological and social factors as they relate to human development and functioning.

during the conversion process?"[5] Based on subject interviews and their analyses, Centolella proposes a six-stage change process for conversion to Judaism: (1)Loss of Connection to Childhood Religion, (2) Questioning Beliefs, (3) Exploration and 'Discovery' of Judaism, (4) Commitment, (5)Adjustment to Life as a Jew, and (6) Jewish Identity.[6] Further, Centolella compares conversion to the "coming out" process of identity development related to sexual orientation and gender non-conformity, and finds similarities and differences.[7]

Centolella's six-stage model resonates with the work of other researchers and theoreticians. Mariam Cohen summarizes the work of Martha Bockian, who studied the University of Rhode Island Change Assessment Scale, which is commonly called the "stage of change model," and validated its applicability to the experience of converting to Judaism.[8] The "original model posited five stages of intentional change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance."[9] Validating this model in terms of Jewish conversion is particularly useful because it is widely understood and used by psychotherapists and counselors in helping and supporting people through the change process.

While it is inherently true that conversions from any religion to another religion would share least at least some commonalities in their change process, for the purpose of this project, I am

[5] Diane M. Centolella. "Souls in Transition: The Psychosocial Process of Conversion to Judaism" PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2001, p.184

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p. 174.

[8] Mariam Cohen. "Converts and Controversies – Becoming an American Jew" PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2013, p. 122

[9] Ibid.

particularly interested in the experience of those who convert to Judaism. The work of Centolella, Cohen and Bockian is useful to contextualize choosing Jewish life with other changes that people experience during the lifespan.

Description of Project

The Need

People who embark on the process of conversion to Judaism engage in an identity transformation that is essential to their personhood. To become a Jew is to commit to a people, a way of life, and a way of relating to God and to others. The normative process for conversion in liberal Judaism emphasizes study and learning of a wide range of Judaic topics. The process also emphasizes the development of a pastoral relationship with a rabbi who guides the *ger* along the way, and who ultimately determines that a *ger* is ready to move forward with conversion by bringing them before the *beit din*, the religious court that confers Jewish status and the *mikvah* that effects the conversion.

While the texts and customs of Judaism are a major focus of the *ger,* he or she experiences a concurrent process of psychosocial adjustment to the new reality of being Jewish. The *ger* must let go of beliefs and commitments to their previous religious tradition. This almost inevitably leads to a sense of loss. Simultaneously, the *ger* begins to navigate the rituals and social structures of Jewish communities, much of this happening in Hebrew. The *ger* must adjust to the unfamiliar and may struggle with feelings of inauthenticity. Further, the *ger* often engages in a process of revealing their new identity to family and friends, in a process that is akin to the coming out process of LGBT people. *Gerim* may risk conflict with loved ones, or even estrangement. These experiences will differ from person to person, but in

nearly every case the process of conversion to Judaism results in a re-ordering of identity, spirituality and social connection.

While the *ger* generally has an ongoing relationship with Jewish friends, and often a Jewish romantic partner, as well with a rabbi, conversion to Judaism is largely experienced individually. The *ger* may have a wide range of questions or concerns, many of which they may not feel comfortable discussing with a rabbi or with other Jewish acquaintances. Rabbis have varying interest and skill in providing pastoral counseling that can support the *ger* and assist in the resolution of psychosocial concerns.

There is a small but widely utilized selection of books on the topic of conversion to Judaism that illuminate questions of religious practice, as well outline the conversion process. These resources are practical and tend to emphasize the "what" and the "how" of Jewish conversion. These are important matters, and their mastery is important in the preparation of a *ger* to go to the *mikvah.* Equally important are the emotional and spiritual concerns that the *ger* experiences along the conversion path. For these concerns, the *ger* may find themselves without inadequate support as friends, or even some rabbis, may not be completely helpful.

There is a need for a Jewish spiritual resource that *gerim* may consult to find sustenance and support as they walk the path to becoming Jews. This capstone project will endeavor the following: (1) Contextualize the experience of religious conversion through the telling of a personal conversion story, as well as providing a basic definition of religious conversion; (2) Provide a rudimentary psychosocial context for viewing conversion to Judaism as a stage-based long-term process; (3) Utilize Jewish tradition, biblical texts specifically, as support for those undergoing the process of conversion and as a compliment to the pastoral care they

receive; and (4) Provide educational resources that can be utilized by rabbis, educators and other Jewish professionals in their congregational and community work to support *gerim*.

Terminology and Language.

In this project I am making intentional use of the following terminology and language.

***Ger/Gerim*, Choosing, etc.** Throughout this paper I utilize the following terms and phrases with some degree of interchangeability: *ger/gerim,* the Hebrew word for "foreigner" or "stranger," also used to refer to someone who is in the process of converting to Judaism; *ger tzedek,* a "righteous foreigner," also used to refer to someone who has completed the process of conversion; and proselyte, also a person who has converted to Judaism. Additionally, I make frequent use of the phrases "person who is choosing Judaism (or Jewish Life)," and "person who has completed the process [of conversion]," or similar language. While somewhat awkward, these phrases are descriptive and avoid a term that I prefer to never use: "Jew by Choice" While popular, "Jew by Choice," sets up an unhelpful dichotomy between those who were born Jewish and those who were not. Further, it obscures the reality that in the post-Enlightenment and post-Emancipation (and, devastatingly, post-Holocaust) world, virtually every person who embraces their Jewish identity and engages in some degree of religious observance is in fact a Jew by Choice.

"We" Language. In the commentaries that follow there will be instances of the use of language that include the reader and myself in the same conceptual space, such as "our ancestors," and similar phrases. While rabbis preaching on the bimah can often fall into the trap of overusing "we" and "us," when they really mean "you," the use of "we" language here is intentional. I believe that, particularly when speaking in the frame of Jewish

peoplehood, those who choose Jewish life become such an intrinsic part of the Jewish people that they can now claim "ancestry" despite the absence of any biological lineage to particular Jews."[10] Accepting my place in the Jewish lineage has been a challenging and beautiful aspect of my conversion process, and I wish to offer this support to others who are choosing Judaism.

The Gender-Neutral They. In my efforts to avoid sexism and cisgenderism in my writing, I make occasional use of the gender-neutral "they," as an alternative to using "he" or "she" in situations where gender is not specifically indicated.

Project Limitations and Opportunities for Further Study

The possibilities of a project such as this far exceeded what I am able to execute within the scope of a rabbinic capstone project. The following are project limitations, each of which present an opportunity for further study and future projects.

No Original Research of Conversion Process. In order to set the context for the experience of those who choose Judaism, I am describe two studies of the process of conversion. There are opportunities for future research to uncover greater detail and specificity on the psychosocial and spiritual factors related to conversion to Judaism. Further, there is an opportunity to study the perceptions *geirm* and *geirei tzedek* have regarding Jewish religious texts and to explore how their experiences with these texts can aid and support their conversion process.

[10] Rabbi Dvora Weisberg. Personal communication.

Scope of Texts Studied. This project includes commentaries on seven texts from the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish texts included were limited to this genre in order to provide more cohesion for the reader in a relatively brief document. Future iterations of this project would benefit from and can easily include texts from rabbinic literature, as well as modern and contemporary sources.

God's Call to Avram: Go to Yourself
Genesis 12:1-4

(1) Adonai said to Avram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. (2) I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. (3) I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you." (4) Avram went forth as Adonai had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.[11]	(א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ: (ב) וְאֶעֶשְׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וַאֲבָרֶכְךָ וַאֲגַדְּלָה שְׁמֶךָ וֶהְיֵה בְּרָכָה: (ג) וַאֲבָרְכָה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וּמְקַלֶּלְךָ אָאֹר וְנִבְרְכוּ בְךָ כֹּל מִשְׁפְּחֹת הָאֲדָמָה: (ד) וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלָיו יְהוָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־חָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה בְּצֵאתוֹ מֵחָרָן:
One common narrative in Torah is for a person to make a significant change in their life to follow God's call to take on a new role, go to a new place, or join a new people. Here, God's call to Avram, "*Lech Lecha*, Go Forth," marks not only the beginning of God's relationship with Avram, but also God's enduring and eventually covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. But does God tell Avram merely to "go forth?" Rashi, drawing on *Genesis Rabbah* 39:1, teaches that this verse should be understood to say, "Go for yourself, for your own good…To make your nature known in the world."[12] Avram is called not only to go where God directs him to go, but to do so for his own benefit, his own improvement and in doing this make himself an example to humanity. God will bless Avram, and Avram in turn will be a blessing to all of humanity. As Avraham, he will be first patriarch of the Jewish people.	

[11] Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of the Hebrew Bible texts are by the Jewish Publication Society (1985) and were obtained from Sefaria.org.

[12] Rashi on Genesis 12:1

The 19th century Chassidic rebbe Aharon II of Karlin teaches that Avram's example shows the world that "every Jew must go for himself – to himself – to his roots, because that is a Jew's purpose."[13] Whether Rashi's commentary is translated using the word "roots," or "nature" or even "essence,"[14] the idea that God's call to Avram is as much about an inner journey as it is an outer journey shines through. These verses have much to say to a person who has converted to Judaism, or is considering this journey.

The ability of a people to define its members is an inherent aspect of nationhood. While it is generally true that the majority of the members of a nation are born into it, it is also normative for a nation to accept new members. In a modern context, people immigrate from one nation to another, become permanent residents, and often become citizens. For *Am Israel*, the Jewish people, the process of accepting new members does not convey citizenship (although it can certainly lead to citizenship in the Jewish state). Instead, those who aspire to become Jews must complete a process in which they are converted from one state of being into another. Jewish peoplehood conveys national and religious identity, as well as the obligation to live under the authority of a set of laws. Unlike swearing loyalty to a monarch, or taking an oath to support and defend a constitution, becoming a Jew is equated to entering a covenant with God. Of course, this is precisely the same covenant that results from the relationship that begins with God saying to Avram, "Lech Lecha." And for the person converting to Judaism, the experience of choosing peoplehood is

[13] Aharon Yaakov Greenberg. *Torah Gems [Vol. 1]*. Tel Aviv: Y. Orenstein, Yavne Publishing House, Ltd., 1992. p.97.

[14] R. Hanoch of Alexander. Ibid.

exemplified by Ruth in her entreaty to Naomi: "your people shall be my people, and your God my God," (Ruth 16:1).

Each person who chooses to become a Jew is consciously responding to a call that resonates with the echoes of God's call to Avram. Whether they respond by praying, or reading a book about Judaism, or telling a friend about their feelings, or making an appointment to see a rabbi to talk about the possibility of conversion, each person who seeks Judaism is going for themselves, each is going to themselves. **They are becoming**. And also like Avram, those who choose Jewish life, to quote Debbie Friedman's prayer, are going "to a land they do not know,[15]" which echoes Genesis 12:1. But they aren't traveling to just any land. God is showing them to the historical and spiritual "land" of the Jewish people.

God's call to Avram, and Avram's response to it, at the age of 75, show us that we can be confronted with the possibility of change, of becoming, and that we can open our hearts to it at any time.

Reflection Questions

1. This text marks the beginning of God entering into a covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. What parallels does the text offer to a person who has chosen, or is considering choosing, Jewish life?

2. How might we view Avram as an example to the Jewish people? As an example to people who are converting to Judaism?

[15] Debbie Friedman. "*L'chi Lach*." *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology.* Schaumberg, IL: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2014. p. 174.

Avram Becomes Avraham
Genesis 17:1-9

(1) When Avram was ninety-nine years old, Adonai appeared to Avram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. (2) I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous." (3) Avram threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, (4) "As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. (5) And you shall no longer be called Avram, but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. (6) I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. (7) I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come.	(א) וַיְהִי אַבְרָם בֶּן־תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה וְתֵשַׁע שָׁנִים וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה אֶל־אַבְרָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי־אֵל שַׁדַּי הִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנַי וֶהְיֵה תָמִים: (ב) וְאֶתְּנָה בְרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ וְאַרְבֶּה אוֹתְךָ בִּמְאֹד מְאֹד: (ג) וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָם עַל־פָּנָיו וַיְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר: (ד) אֲנִי הִנֵּה בְרִיתִי אִתָּךְ וְהָיִיתָ לְאַב הֲמוֹן גּוֹיִם: (ה) וְלֹא־יִקָּרֵא עוֹד אֶת־שִׁמְךָ אַבְרָם וְהָיָה שִׁמְךָ אַבְרָהָם כִּי אַב־הֲמוֹן גּוֹיִם נְתַתִּיךָ: (ו) וְהִפְרֵתִי אֹתְךָ בִּמְאֹד מְאֹד וּנְתַתִּיךָ לְגוֹיִם וּמְלָכִים מִמְּךָ יֵצֵאוּ: (ז) וַהֲקִמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ וּבֵין זַרְעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם לִבְרִית עוֹלָם לִהְיוֹת לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים וּלְזַרְעֲךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ:

Twenty-four years after God calls Avram to "Lech lecha," (Go to yourself) (Gen. 12:1), God appears again to Avram and exhorts him to continue to continue his journey. In this encounter, God uses the name *El Shaddai*. *El* is a common name of God in the Hebrew Bible. Jastrow defines the noun *Shaddai* (שדי) as "almighty."[16] Mettinger provides further illumination on this name and the complex history of its usage, and two associations are worth considering in relation to these verses. The first is "the notion of God as protector and refuge."[17] By walking in covenant with God, Avram places himself under God's

[16] Marcus Jastrow. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature; With an Index of Scriptural Quotations*. New York: Choreb, 1926. p. 1524.

[17] Tryggve Mettinger. N. D. *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988. p. 71.

protection and lives a life that is utterly distinct from those of the surrounding nations. The second association is Mettinger's observation that "*El Shaddai* frequently appears in contexts which deal with divine blessing…"[18] Here in this passage, evidence of God's promise of abundant blessing is clear: Avram will be the progenitor of many offspring, multiple nations, and rulers.

God does more than promise blessings to Avram. Rather, God transforms Avram in a fundamental way by changing his name. Avram becomes Avraham, as a marker of the nations that will be his issue. Regarding Avram's name change, the medieval Torah commentator Rabbi Bachya ben Asher notes that "The additional letter ה [*hay*] is from the last letter ה of the Ineffable Name י-ה-ו-ה[*yud-hay-vav-hay*]. This gave Avraham the physical strength to produce offspring."[19] Indeed, God also transforms Avraham's wife from Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17:15), as she will also need great strength to bear a son in her old age. While Bachya connects the name change to Avraham's ability to produce offspring, his explication of the additional *hay* is of particular interest to those who have converted or are converting to Judaism.

God gives strength to Avraham by lending Godself to him through his name. Avraham is marked as being in a special relationship to God by virtue of sharing God's *hay.* When a person converts to Judaism, they choose a Hebrew name by which they are known among Jewish people. Further, the tradition of a *ger tzedek* using the patronymic/matronymic

[18] Ibid. p. 72.

[19] Baḥya ben Asher ben Ḥlava, and Eliyahu Munk. *Midrash Rabbeinu Bachya: Torah Commentary*. 2nd, rev. ed. Jerusalem: Lambda, 2003.

ben/bat Avraham v'Sarah, is not only a connection to the prime patriarch and matriarch of Judaism, but also a connection to God. This is indeed a divine blessing from *El Shaddai*.

Reflection Questions

1. What, if any, influence does the story of Avram/Avraham and Sarai/Sarah on your understanding of your Hebrew name?

2. What is the story of your Hebrew name, or, what is important to you as you consider your Hebrew name?

3. God is known by different names throughout Torah. Do you think about different characteristics of God in different situations, in either Torah or your life?

Jacob Becomes Israel
Genesis 32:25-31

(25) Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. (26) When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. (27) Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (28) Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." (29) Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (30) Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. (31) So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved."	(כה) וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: (כו) וַיַּרְא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַּע בְּכַף־יְרֵכוֹ וַתֵּקַע כַּף־יֶרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֵאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ: (כז) וַיֹּאמֶר שַׁלְּחֵנִי כִּי עָלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלֵּחֲךָ כִּי אִם־בֵּרַכְתָּנִי: (כח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַה־שְּׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: (כט) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל: (ל) וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה־נָּא שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶּה תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם: (לא) וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאֵל כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי:

The transformative moments of life are rarely devoid of complexity, as the experience of the patriarch Jacob demonstrates. In Genesis 32, Jacob is preparing to meet his brother Esau. The brothers are not merely estranged; they have had significant conflict, and Jacob is afraid for his life. After sending his entourage ahead to cross the river to the place where he will meet Esau the following day, Jacob is literally and spiritually alone to face his fear, and perhaps also his regrets about his past actions. Presumably while dreaming, Jacob suddenly finds himself in a physical struggle with what the text describes only as "a man" (*ish*/איש). Who is the man? The text does not provide an answer, but Rabbi Bradley Artson asks a deeper question: "Is this a person or an angel, or is it the embodiment of his own

doubts and failings?"[20] What if Jacob's greatest enemy, the object of his fear, is not Esau but rather himself?

Mussar, a system of applied spiritual ethics to Jewish living, identifies *yirah* (יראה), as the awe that occurs when combining fear *and* love of God.[21] Jacob's struggle with the "*ish"* was a terrible encounter that lasted throughout the night, and resulted in Jacob's hip becoming dislocated, a highly painful injury. Yet, when the *ish* asks Jacob to end the struggle, Jaocb, responds by asking for a blessing – a rather surprising response from one experiencing fear and pain, particularly when caused by one's opponent. The blessing Jacob receives in return determines the future of his descendants, the Jewish people. Jacob receives his new name, *Israel*.

The identity of the *ish* is ambiguous. Verse 31 concludes with Jacob saying "I have seen the divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The Hebrew word translated as "divine being" is (*Elohim*/אלהים), normally translated as "God." Nehama Leibowitz writes, "Who was this man? All the commentators agree that he was no ordinary mortal, nor armed brigand waylaying a harmless traveler."[22] In her analysis, Leibowitz rejects Rashbam's assertion that the *ish* was an angel sent by God to convince Jacob that Esau would cause him no harm. Instead, Leibowitz endorses *Genesis Rabbah's* assertion: "R.

[20] Bradley Artson. *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Visions and Dreams.* (Chicago: McGraw Hill, 2001) p. 53.

[21] Judith Lazarus Siegal. "*Yirah* – Awe: From Fear to Awe" [*Parshat Vatishlach]* in *The Mussar Torah Commentary: A Spiritual Path to Living a Meaningful and Ethical Life,* ed. Barry H. Block (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2020), p. 52.

[22] Nehama Leibowitz. *New Studies in Bereshit Genesis*. Jerusalem: Hemed Press, No Date. p. 366.

Hama Bar Hanina said It was the prince (tutelary angel) of Esau." Leibowitz notes that Rashi also accepts this view. [23]Clearly, Jacob's sense is that he had a divine encounter. Whether or not he thought the *ish* was actually God, he was moved closer to God by the experience.

Through his struggle, Jacob not only faces his own fears but also experiences love of God when he asks for a blessing. In that moment, Jacob exists in *yirah*, in awe of God, and through Jacob we become Israel. Jacob's new name has linguistic significance, as it is made up of two parts. The first, *isra*/ישר, can be translated as "struggles" or "fights." The second, *el*/אל is a name of God. While the divine being gives Jacob this name, it actually refers *to God's struggle* and not Jacob's.[24] Jacob now bears the name that marks God's struggle, a struggle in which they engaged together, beginning in fear and ending in love.

Through his transformation into Israel, Jacob becomes the patriarch from whom the Jewish people descended. This story of Jacob has particular significance for those who are engaged in the process of conversion to Judaism. When *gerim*, people from outside of Israel, begin to dwell among the Jewish people, it is natural for them to experience moments of uncertainty, of hesitation, even of fear. On the night of his struggle with the *ish*, Jacob was uncertain of what was awaiting him on the other side of the river. If he was fearing certain aspects of himself, or of how he would face his destiny upon his reunion with Esau, how natural it is those who are entering a new religious and a new social

[23] Ibid. pp. 367-68.

[24] Elon Gilad. "Why is Israel Called Israel?" *Haaretz*, April 20, 2015. Retrieved January 9, 2020 from https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-why-is-israel-called-israel-1.5353207

culture to experience trepidation, or to wonder at times if they are up to the task! These feelings of discomfort are a counterpoint to the attraction to Jewish life experienced by *gerim*. And with the combination of discomfort and attraction, of fear and love, *gerim* experience the *yirah,* the awe, of Jacob. They become part of Israel.

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you think of a time when you felt both apprehensive and excited about a change in your life? How did these feelings co-exist with each other?
2. When have you faced a struggle in order to obtain or achieve something very important?
3. How might God struggle? How are the Jewish people a partner in God's struggles?

Becoming with God
Exodus 3:1-15

(1) Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (2) An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. (3) Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (4) When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (5) And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. (6) I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.	א וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵבָה: ב וַיֵּרָא מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו בְּלַבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנֶה וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה הַסְּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסְּנֶה אֵינֶנּוּ אֻכָּל: ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אָסֻרָה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מַדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסְּנֶה: ד וַיַּרְא יְהוָה כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסְּנָה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי: ה וַיֹּאמֶר אַל־תִּקְרַב הֲלֹם שַׁל־נְעָלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אַדְמַת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וֵאלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיַּסְתֵּר מֹשֶׁה פָּנָיו כִּי יָרֵא מֵהַבִּיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים:
(7) And the LORD continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. (8) I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (9) Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (10) Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."	ז וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רָאֹה רָאִיתִי אֶת־עֳנִי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרָיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נֹגְשָׂיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־מַכְאֹבָיו: ח וָאֵרֵד לְהַצִּילוֹ ו מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן־ הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וּרְחָבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלָב וּדְבָשׁ אֶל־מְקוֹם הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי: ט וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלָי וְגַם־ רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחַץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: י וְעַתָּה לְכָה וְאֶשְׁלָחֲךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם:
(11) But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" (12) And He said, "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that	יא וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אָנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֵךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: יב וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה־לְּךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אָנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעַבְדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה:

it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” (13) Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (14) And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” (15) And God said further to Moses, “Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, This My appellation for all eternity.	יג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָא אֶל־ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלָחַנִי אֲלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מַה־שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֹמַר אֲלֵהֶם: יד וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלָחַנִי אֲלֵיכֶם: טו וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה־תֹאמַר אֶל־ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וֵאלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלָחַנִי אֲלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְּׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זִכְרִי לְדֹר דֹּר:

One of the primary literary characteristics of Exodus is God’s interaction with Creation through a series of dramatic supernatural events. Moses is at the center of many of these events. In the third chapter Moses’ introduction to God is initiated with a supernatural flourish that sets the tone for the remainder of the book. Moses is, quite literally, minding his own business, tending Yitro’s flock, when he is confronted with a bush that is aflame and yet does not burn. This is far from a subtle call by God to Moses to get his attention, and it is profoundly effective, as Moses marvels at the site of this burning bush, and turns his entire attention to it. Now that God has Moses’ attention, God acts to engage him more deeply.

Throughout Torah, God engages in a holy call-and-response with the Jewish people. At critical moments such as this one, God calls out to Abraham, to Jacob, and now to Moses. God calls them by name and they each respond, “*Hineini*,” which can be translated as “Here I am,” or “I am ready,” or “I am coming.” God speaks to our ancestors in this way

to get their attention, or to call them to take an important action. *Hineini* is a means by which the Jewish people, entered into and affirmed their relationship with God. This declaration of presence and intention, modeled for us by Moses and our ancestors, remains available to each of us today. *Hineini* is a wellspring from which we draw the inspiration to live lives of holiness.

Upon receiving his commission to free the Israelites from bondage, Moses asks "Who am I?" This question is fascinating purely as a literary device, as it sets up his next question, a question about the identity of the deity whose message he is to carry, leading to God's tremendous declaration of God's identity. However, it is important to consider Moses' question on its own merits. Who was Moses? He was the abandoned son of a Hebrew mother, raised as a son of Pharaoh. He became deeply disturbed by the conditions under which the Israelites lived, and killed an Egyptian slave driver, causing him to flee Egypt and to begin a new life in Midian. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes,

> So when Moses asks, "Who am I?" it is not just that he feels himself unworthy. He feels himself uninvolved. He may have been Jewish by birth, but he had not suffered the fate of his people. He had not grown up as a Jew. He had not lived among Jews. He had good reason to doubt that the Israelites would even recognise him as one of them. How, then, could he become their leader? More penetratingly, why should he even think of becoming their leader? Their fate was not his. He was not part of it. He was not responsible for it. He did not suffer from it. He was not implicated in it.[25]

Moses' questioning of his own identity has a dual function in the text. As Sacks suggests, Moses considers himself an outsider from the situation in Egypt. He has become a *ger,* an Egyptian expatriate residing in Midian. Yet, he is also a foreigner in Egypt. And Moses

[25] Jonathan Sacks. "Who Am I? (Shemot 5777)." *Covenant and Conversation*. Retrieved January 13, 2020 from http://rabbisacks.org/i-shemot-5777/

also legitimately questions his suitability for the charge God has given him. In Exodus chapter 4, Moses doubts his leadership qualities and is concerned that his stutter will prevent him from living up to God's expectations.

As Moses begins to consider the role God has commanded him to play, he wants to know more. He is likely curious, and also wants to be confident that his charge comes from a worthy source, so Moses and asks God to identify Godself. The answer, "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh,*" is not translated in the JPS Tanakh, leaving the English reader to ponder its meaning. The King James Bible translate the Hebrew phrase as "I am that I am," and many other English bibles use a similar translation: "I am who I am." However, the grammatical construction of the Hebrew is clearly in the future tense. Yet, God declares God's name in the present tense of Moses, in real time. What do we make of this dilemma of time and being? Rabbi Bradley Artson suggests a possibility.

> The core of reality is not being (which is an intellectual abstraction) but becoming, which is the key characteristic of all, including God. The universe is a welter of endless change, as we and all around us reach the present as the result of the choices we have made, the "choices" creation has made, and the God-infused lure toward innovation, creativity, and righteousness that is always inviting us toward goodness. Process thinker Charles Hartshorne referred to that not as "ontology" but as "Hyathology," from God's dynamic name revealed to Moshe — I am becoming what I am becoming (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*).[26]

Artson's view of God, informed by Process theology, is that God's potential is open and is informed by God's intersection with Creation and humanity. When God defines Godself as a God of becoming, God is calling Moses to become a part of this process of creation – and the correction of the enslavement of the Israelites – *with* God. Covenant is certainly

[26] Bradley Artson. "God Is Becoming: Consolation in the Face of Tragedy." *Tikkun* (*Duke University Press*) 24, no. 3 (May 2009), p. 13.

holy relationship, but in this text God shows Moses that it is also a way of being. Covenant is the joining of human *Hineini* with divine *Ehyeh*.

This passage from Exodus captures a defining moment in the relationship between God and the Jewish people, as well as in the temporal history of Israel. And the text is especially precious to those who are in the process of converting to Judaism. The bush that burns with fire but is not consumed by it is a powerful metaphor for the realization that a person feels called, commanded, to Jewish life. It is awesome and mystical, and cannot be ignored.

The holy response of our ancestors to God's call, *hineini*, is a song of engagement and commitment. *Hineini* marks the first realization, steeped in amazement, that yes, God is calling a person to join the Jewish people; and that yes, it is possible to do so. Moses' question to God, "Who am I," a counterpoint to *hineini,* resonates with the difficulties one may face during the process of conversion, and the doubts one has that they are up to the task.

God's declaration of an existence that is constantly in formation opens the possibility for a human being to also say "*ehyeh asher ehyeh,"* for each of us is made *B'tzelim Elohim*, in God's image. We share this nature of becoming with the Divine. Moses' example shows us that we can be our utterly imperfect and utterly human selves and still be not only worthy of God's partnership, but essential to it. The God of becoming shows us that throughout our finite lifespans we are also becoming. We can pray with joy and with

gratitude, "Blessed are you Eternal One, Creator of the universe, who is making me human, who is calling me to holiness, who is making me a Jew."[27]

Reflection Questions:

1. The burning bush has become an archetype of God's call to humanity as a demonstration of power that cannot be ignored. What have been the powerful events that have caught your attention in your relationship with God, or along your path to Jewish life?

2. Only when he responded to God by saying "*hinenei,*" did Moses begin his prophetic journey. What *hineini* moments have you experienced?

3. Ruth, in her determination to accompany Naomi to Judah and to realize her destiny as the foremother of Jewish sovereignty (Ruth 1:1-18), also expresses the intention of *hineini*. How are Ruth's and Moses' situations similar? How are they different?

4. What moments of discomfort or doubt have you experienced in the process of becoming Jewish?

5. How have you become who you are in this moment? Can you think of a time when you moved in an important new direction in your life?

[27] Adapted from *Nisim B'Chol Yom*, *Mishkan Tefilah for Weekdays, Shabbat and Festivals*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007. p. 40.

Yitro: The Value of an Outside Voice
Exodus 18:5-24

(5) Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. (6) He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." (7) Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.	ה וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר הָאֱלֹהִים: ו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חֹתְנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּהּ: ז וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה לִקְרַאת חֹתְנוֹ וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשַּׁק־לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ־לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ הָאֹהֱלָה:
(8) Moses then recounted to his father-in-law everything that Adonai had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and how Adonai had delivered them. (9) And Yitro rejoiced over all the kindness that Adonai had shown Israel when He delivered them from the Egyptians.	ח וַיְסַפֵּר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹתְנוֹ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְפַרְעֹה וּלְמִצְרַיִם עַל אוֹדֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת כָּל־ הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מְצָאָתַם בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַיַּצִּלֵם יְהוָה: ט וַיִּחַדְּ יִתְרוֹ עַל כָּל־הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הִצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרָיִם:
(10) "Blessed be Adonai," Yitro said, "who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. (11) Now I know that Adonai is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against [the people]." (12) And Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law.	י וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּמִיַּד פַּרְעֹה אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל אֶת־הָעָם מִתַּחַת יַד־מִצְרָיִם: יא עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־גָדוֹל יְהוָה מִכָּל־ הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי בַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר זָדוּ עֲלֵיהֶם: יב וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה עֹלָה וּזְבָחִים לֵאלֹהִים וַיָּבֹא אַהֲרֹן וְכֹל ו זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֶאֱכָל־לֶחֶם עִם־חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים:
(13) Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. (14) But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from	יג וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹשֶׁה לִשְׁפֹּט אֶת־הָעָם וַיַּעֲמֹד הָעָם עַל־מֹשֶׁה מִן־הַבֹּקֶר עַד־הָעָרֶב: יד וַיַּרְא חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה לָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה לָעָם מַדּוּעַ אַתָּה יוֹשֵׁב לְבַדֶּךָ וְכָל־הָעָם נִצָּב עָלֶיךָ מִן־ בֹּקֶר עַד־עָרֶב: טו וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹתְנוֹ כִּי־יָבֹא אֵלַי הָעָם לִדְרֹשׁ אֱלֹהִים:

morning until evening?" (15) Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. (16) When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God."	טז כִּי־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם דָּבָר בָּא אֵלַי וְשָׁפַטְתִּי בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵין רֵעֵהוּ וְהוֹדַעְתִּי אֶת־חֻקֵּי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־תּוֹרֹתָיו:
(17) But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; (18) you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (19) Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, (20) and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. (21) You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, (22) and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. (23) If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied."	יז וַיֹּאמֶר חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵלָיו לֹא־טוֹב הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה: יח נָבֹל תִּבֹּל גַּם־אַתָּה גַּם־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עִמָּךְ כִּי־כָבֵד מִמְּךָ הַדָּבָר לֹא־תוּכַל עֲשֵׂהוּ לְבַדֶּךָּ:יט עַתָּה שְׁמַע בְּקֹלִי אִיעָצְךָ וִיהִי אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ הֱיֵה אַתָּה לָעָם מוּל הָאֱלֹהִים וְהֵבֵאתָ אַתָּה אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים:כ וְהִזְהַרְתָּה אֹתָם אֶת־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַתּוֹרֹת וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם אֶת־הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָהּ וְאֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן: כא וְאַתָּה תֶּחֱזֶה מִכָּל־הָעָם אַנְשֵׁי־חַיִל יִרְאֵי אֱלֹהִים אַנְשֵׁי אֱמֶת שֹׂנְאֵי בָצַע וְשַׂמְתָּ עֲלֹהֶם שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים שָׂרֵי מֵאוֹת שָׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים וְשָׂרֵי עֲשָׂרֹת: כב וְשָׁפְטוּ אֶת־הָעָם בְּכָל־עֵת וְהָיָה כָּל־הַדָּבָר הַגָּדֹל יָבִיאוּ אֵלֶיךָ וְכָל־הַדָּבָר הַקָּטֹן יִשְׁפְּטוּ־הֵם וְהָקֵל מֵעָלֶיךָ וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתָּךְ: כג אִם אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה תַּעֲשֶׂה וְצִוְּךָ אֱלֹהִים וְיָכָלְתָּ עֲמֹד וְגַם כָּל־הָעָם הַזֶּה עַל־מְקֹמוֹ יָבֹא בְשָׁלוֹם:
(24) Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said.	כד וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל חֹתְנוֹ וַיַּעַשׂ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אָמָר:

Yitro (rendered in English as "Jethro"), is a pivotal figure in the life of Moses, and therefore an important person in the history of the Jewish people. However, his trajectory into the Exodus story is unique. Yitro lived in the land of Midian where he owned livestock and was a priest in the Midianite religion. When Moses fled Egypt, his first act

recorded in the second chapter of Exodus, is to save a group of young women who were attempting to draw water from a well while under the threats and harassment of a group of men. Fatefully, these women were Yitro's daughters. In gratitude, Yitro invites Moses to his home, offers hospitality and lodging, and offers his daughter Zipporah to be Moses' wife. Yitro becomes Moses' father-in-law and an important guiding influence to Moses.

Yitro's significance to the Exodus story is best exemplified in Chapter 18 for two reasons. First, is Yitro's arrival in the wilderness to reunite Moses' family and to stay with them. After welcoming Yitro to the encampment, Moses relates to him the series of events in Egypt that resulted in the exodus of the Israelites. Yitro is profoundly moved by this account and exclaims the first recorded blessing of Adonai in Torah[28]: "Blessed be Adonai,' Yitro said, 'who delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians'" (Ex. 18:10).

Yitro's second significant contribution to the Exodus story occurs on the next day as he observes Moses hearing disputes and problems from the Israelites, and meting out justice "from morning until evening" (Ex. 18:11). Yitro sees that Moses is in way over his head, and tells him so, despite Moses' ensuing protestations that he has no choice but to deal with each and every problem that the children of Israel bring to him. Unpersuaded by Moses' declaration of his work ethic, Yitro provides lengthy and detailed guidance on how

[28] Emil G. Hirsch, M. Seligsohn, and Solomon Schechter. "Jethro." *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* 1906. Retrieved January 15, 2020 from http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8620-jethro#1037.

Moses must delegate this responsibility to others within the community, reserving only the major disputes for his personal attention. Yitro's guidance appears to describe a proto-judicial system for the Israelites, and more importantly serves to preserve Moses' focus and energy for the substantial task of leading the Israelites to the promised land. Regarding Yitro's critical contribution, Rabbi Sarah Bassin writes, "A non-Jewish pagan priest saved our community from implosion and gave us a blueprint for how to function."[29]

Yitro, through his blessing of Adonai and through his leadership advice to a beleaguered Moses, significantly shapes the Exodus narrative and nascent Israelite culture. These contributions are substantial in their own right, but are even more remarkable in light of the fact that Yitro is an outsider. While Yitro has a familial bond with Moses, he is not an Israelite and was never a slave in Egypt. Yitro's outsider status while dwelling with Moses may be of interest to those who are in the process of conversion to Judaism or who have already become Jewish.

Yitro's religious and national identity vis-à-vis the Israelites and the Covenant is an unresolved question in Jewish tradition. Did Yitro formally join the children of Israel and enter into covenant with their God, or not? In Exodus Rabbah, there is speculation that Yitro's name was the result of the addition of a letter "ו/vav" to the end of his former name, Yeter, once he converted to Judaism[30], in the same fashion that Avram became

[29] Sarah Bassin. "Encounters That Can Make Us Become Better Jews" [Commentary to Exodus 18:1 – 20:23]. *ReformJudaism.org,* 2018. Retrieved January 5, 2020 from https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/yitro/encounters-can-make-us-become-better-jews

[30] Shemot Rabbah 27:8.

Avraham after entering the Covenant. Yet contemporary rabbis, such as Bassin, will often focus on the plain reading of the biblical text and refer to Yitro as a Midianite (i.e., pagan or idolatrous) priest. *Sefer Ha-aggadah*, a compendium of rabbinic lore, clarifies the disagreement in a footnote: "The rabbis are divided in their judgement of Jethro [Yitro]. Some, as R. Eleazar, regard him as an idolatrous priest of Midian; others as a true proselyte."[31] This is a dispute that reflects the rabbis' projection (or retrojection) of conversion back to the biblical period, and that in fact, conversion would not have been an issue for the early Israelites as it did not exist until the Second Temple period.

The question of whether or not Yitro converted to Judaism should not be a distraction from the important message his story has for those who have chosen Jewish life. The power of Yitro's words and their influence on Moses come from Yitro's wisdom, which is offered from the position of an outsider. For those who are beginning to consider Jewish life and are also beginning to metaphorically dwell with Israel, Yitro is an inspiring example.

Yitro demonstrates proud ownership of his lifetime of experience prior to his relationship with Moses, and by extension, the Israelites. He offers an authentic exclamation of blessing to his experience of learning of the signs and wonders of the Exodus, a blessing that has become revered in Jewish tradition. His fatherly advice to Moses sets right what was likely to become a disastrous distraction to Moses' leadership. Yitro shows that anyone with a sincere commitment is capable of contributing to the well-being of the

[31] Hayim Nahman Bialik, Rawnitzki Yehoshua Ḥana, and William G Braude. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah : Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. New York: Schocken Books, 1992. p. 11, note 5.

Jewish people and to the Jewish enterprise. Yitro is the model of the *ger tzedek*, the righteous outsider.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you experienced moments when you hesitate to make a suggestion regarding an activity or a situation within the Jewish community because you felt like an outsider? If so, why did you hesitate? If not, how is it that you felt confident in offering your contribution?

2. Do you have parents, siblings or other important or influential people in your life who are not Jewish? What, if any, boundaries do you place around conversations about Jewish life with these people? Why do you have these boundaries, or why don't you feel the need for boundaries?

3. What does Moses' familial situation contribute to your understanding about interfaith families?

Entering Jacob's Tents: Mah Tovu

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel. (Numbers 24:5)	מַה טֹּבוּ אׇהָלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל׃
I, through Your abundant love, enter Your house; I bow down in Awe at Your holy temple. (Psalm 5:8)	וַאֲנִי בְּרֹב חַסְדְּךָ אָבֹא בֵיתֶךָ אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶל הֵיכַל קׇדְשְׁךָ בְּיִרְאָתֶךָ׃
Adonai, I love Your temple abode, the dwelling-place of Your glory. (Psalm 26:8)	יְהוָה אָהַבְתִּי מְעוֹן בֵּיתֶךָ וּמְקוֹם מִשְׁכַּן כְּבוֹדֶךָ׃
I will humbly bow down low before Adonai, my Maker. (Psalm 95:6, adapted)	וַאֲנִי אֶשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְאֶכְרָעָה אֶבְרְכָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עֹשִׂי׃
As for me, may my prayer come to You, Adonai, at a favorable time. O God, in Your abundant faithfulness, answer me with Your sure deliverance. (Psalm 69:4)[32]	וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי לְךָ יְהוָה עֵת רָצוֹן אֱלֹהִים בְּרׇב חַסְדֶּךָ עֲנֵנִי בֶּאֱמֶת יִשְׁעֶךָ׃

Much of Jewish prayer consists of lavish praise and blessing, and *Mah Tovu*, the traditional morning prayer that is said when entering a synagogue, exemplifies these qualities. As a unit of liturgy, *Mah Tovu,* was composed of discrete verses from the book of Numbers and from Psalms, and first appeared in *Seder Rav Amram Gaon,* the earliest compilation of the prayer book emerging from ninth-century Babylonia.[33] This prayer is often sung as an opening prayer, centering the focus of those gathered on the prayerful task at hand – and what a rich prayer it is for this purpose.

Mah Tovu opens with description of an outsider seeing, or possibly approaching, the tents of Jacob. The outsider declares them to be "fair," or perhaps a clearer (if somewhat

[32] English translation obtained from *Mishkan Tefilah.*

[33] Yoel H. Kahn. "*Mah Tovu*--From Torah to Prayer." Union for Reform Judaism, 2010. Retrieved January 7, 2020 from https://reformjudaism.org/mah-tovu-torah-prayer

grammatically awkward) translation would be "good." Biblical scholar Marc Brettler describes the verses as "…an introduction to a mosaic of Bible verses taken to refer to the synagogue. In its biblical context, 'tents' and 'abodes' denote the Israelite encampment."[34] The verse is referring to Judaism in its religious aspect, as well as to Jewish peoplehood. The verse is also distinctly observing Israel, the Jewish people, in an earthly, physical frame.

The outsider viewpoint is significant in its biblical source. Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen write in the name of Karen Kushner, "These are the words of the non-Jewish prophet Balaam, while overlooking the encamped tribes of Israel spread out below him. It its biblical context (Num 24:5), Balaam must be speaking what amounts to a poem of praise, as if it say, 'All of the Jews are together, and the scene is wonderful to behold.'"[35] This verse offers additional meaning for those in the process of conversion to Judaism. The experience of discovering the Jewish people and the practice of Judaism, and finding this discovery to be moving and "wonderful to behold," is shared by Balaam and by those are choosing to live a Jewish life.

Referring first to the spatial metaphors of the prayer, Ellen Frankel notes, "We get not only spatial markers to prepare our entry into the place of prayer, but emotional compass points

[34] Mark Brettler. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. p. 50.

[35] Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. p. 51.

as well. Into this special place we are to bring with us *yirah* ('reverence') and *ahavah* ('love'), as well as humility (through bowing) and blessing (in returning to God what we receive)."[36] From the plain meaning of the text, as well as from Frankel's exegesis, the love of God and of the community that gathers in and around Jacob's tent shines through. For those who have discovered Judaism and wish to dwell among the Jewish people, particularly in the early stages of this process, the emotional experience may bear some resemblance to the limerence experienced in romantic attraction.

Mah Tovu's place at the beginning of a day Jewish prayer illustrates the communal and religious nature of Jewish life. We live together in intentional community, devoted to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. The prayer reminds us who we are collectively, and how we relate to one another and to God. For those becoming Jews, *Mah Tovu* is an invitation to enter the tent.

Reflection Questions:

1. How does *Mah Tovu* evoke a sense of peoplehood?
2. What do you imagine to be the qualities of God from the viewpoint of the pray-er of *Mah Tovu?*
3. How does (or might) saying this prayer in community make you feel?

[36] Ellen Frankel. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. p. 53.

“Your People Will Be My People, and Your God My God”
Ruth 1:1-18

(1) In the days when the judges ruled ,there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. (2) The man’s name was Elimelek, his wife’s name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.	א וַיְהִי בִּימֵי שְׁפֹּט הַשֹּׁפְטִים וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה לָגוּר בִּשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו: ב וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נָעֳמִי וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי־בָנָיו ו מַחְלוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרָתִים מִבֵּית לֶחֶם יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי־מוֹאָב וַיִּהְיוּ־שָׁם:
(3) Now Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. (4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, (5) both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. (6) When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (7) With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.	ג וַיָּמָת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נָעֳמִי וַתִּשָּׁאֶר הִיא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ: ד וַיִּשְׂאוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מֹאֲבִיֹּות שֵׁם הָאַחַת עָרְפָּה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית רוּת וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם כְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים: ה וַיָּמוּתוּ גַם־שְׁנֵיהֶם מַחְלוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וַתִּשָּׁאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מִשְּׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִישָׁהּ: ו וַתָּקָם הִיא וְכַלֹּתֶיהָ וַתָּשָׁב מִשְּׂדֵי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בִשְׂדֵה מוֹאָב כִּי־פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ לָתֵת לָהֶם לָחֶם: ז וַתֵּצֵא מִן־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שָּׁמָּה וּשְׁתֵּי כַלֹּתֶיהָ עִמָּהּ וַתֵּלַכְנָה בַּדֶּרֶךְ לָשׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה:
(8) Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. (9) May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud (10) and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”	ח וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֳמִי לִשְׁתֵּי כַלֹּתֶיהָ לֵכְנָה שֹּׁבְנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּהּ יעשה [יַעַשׂ] יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד כַּאֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי: ט יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמְצֶאןָ מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁהּ וַתִּשַּׁק לָהֶן וַתִּשֶּׂאנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכֶּינָה: י וַתֹּאמַרְנָה־לָּהּ כִּי־אִתָּךְ נָשׁוּב לְעַמֵּךְ:
(11) But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? (12) Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have	יא וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֳמִי שֹׁבְנָה בְנֹתַי לָמָּה תֵלַכְנָה עִמִּי הַעוֹד־לִי בָנִים בְּמֵעַי וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לַאֲנָשִׁים: יב שֹׁבְנָה בְנֹתַי לֵכְנָ כִּי זָקַנְתִּי מִהְיוֹת לְאִישׁ כִּי אָמַרְתִּי יֶשׁ־לִי תִקְוָה גַּם הָיִיתִי הַלַּיְלָה לְאִישׁ וְגַם יָלַדְתִּי בָנִים: יג הֲלָהֵן ו תְּשַׂבֵּרְנָה עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדָּלוּ

another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— (13) would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!”	הֲלָהֵ֣ן ׀ תְּשַׂבֵּ֗רְנָה עַ֚ד אֲשֶׁ֣ר יִגְדָּ֔לוּ הֲלָהֵן֙ תֵּֽעָגֵ֔נָה לְבִלְתִּ֖י הֱי֣וֹת לְאִ֑ישׁ אַ֣ל בְּנֹתַ֗י כִּֽי־ מַר־לִ֤י מְאֹד֙ מִכֶּ֔ם כִּֽי־יָצְאָ֥ה בִ֖י יַד־יְהוָֽה׃
(14) At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. (15) “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”	יד וַתִּשֶּׂ֣נָה קוֹלָ֔ן וַתִּבְכֶּ֖ינָה ע֑וֹד וַתִּשַּׁ֤ק עָרְפָּה֙ לַחֲמוֹתָ֔הּ וְר֖וּת דָּ֥בְקָה בָּֽהּ׃ טו וַתֹּ֗אמֶר הִנֵּה֙ שָׁ֣בָה יְבִמְתֵּ֔ךְ אֶל־עַמָּ֖הּ וְאֶל־אֱלֹהֶ֑יהָ שׁ֖וּבִי אַחֲרֵ֥י יְבִמְתֵּֽךְ׃
(16) But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (17) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” (18) When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.	טז וַתֹּ֤אמֶר רוּת֙ אַל־תִּפְגְּעִי־בִ֔י לְעָזְבֵ֖ךְ לָשׁ֣וּב מֵאַחֲרָ֑יִךְ כִּ֞י אֶל־אֲשֶׁ֨ר תֵּלְכִ֜י אֵלֵ֗ךְ וּבַאֲשֶׁ֤ר תָּלִ֙ינִי֙ אָלִ֔ין עַמֵּ֣ךְ עַמִּ֔י וֵאלֹהַ֖יִךְ אֱלֹהָֽי׃ יז בַּאֲשֶׁ֤ר תָּמ֙וּתִי֙ אָמ֔וּת וְשָׁ֖ם אֶקָּבֵ֑ר כֹּה֩ יַעֲשֶׂ֨ה יְהוָ֥ה לִי֙ וְכֹ֣ה יֹסִ֔יף כִּ֣י הַמָּ֔וֶת יַפְרִ֖יד בֵּינִ֥י וּבֵינֵֽךְ׃ יח וַתֵּ֕רֶא כִּֽי־ מִתְאַמֶּ֥צֶת הִ֖יא לָלֶ֣כֶת אִתָּ֑הּ וַתֶּחְדַּ֖ל לְדַבֵּ֥ר אֵלֶֽיהָ׃

Ruth the Moabite is held up as the quintessential example of conversion in the Hebrew Bible. Because of her unique story and the journey that it contains, the Book of Ruth is studied for the insights that it offers about conversion to Judaism. Ruth’s story, however, is contingent upon Naomi, who migrated with her husband from Judah to Moab in order to avoid a famine. As the years pass, Naomi’s husband dies. This leaves Naomi to raise her sons alone, and through their marriages, Orpah and Ruth enter the family. Her sons then die, leaving Naomi, Orpah and Ruth without male protection in a society that is difficult for widowed women. Moab, once Naomi’s land of refuge and opportunity, has become the land of her suffering. Naomi learns that conditions in Judah have improved during her

sojourn in Moab, and she sets off to return to her homeland. She seems to want to go alone, and discourages her daughters-in-law from joining her.

This moment represents a literary triangle between Naomi, Orpah and Ruth. The book begins with the three as the remnants of a family, bound together by their history and their grief. Then, Naomi attempts to change the status quo by urging the younger women to move on from this defunct family system. Each of the women moves closer to her destiny in these verses. Orpah is the first to break away, leaving Ruth and Naomi. Ruth's destiny, it seems, will not be like Orpah's. She stands her ground; she clings to Naomi. Naomi, perhaps sensing that things will not turn out as she hoped or expected, again tries to send her away, but, in her song (Ruth 1:16-17), Ruth makes clear to Naomi that she sees that the two women have a shared destiny. Naomi becomes silent, and the two women go on their way to Judah.

Ruth's surprising decision to leave the land of her birth and to follow Naomi to a land that she does not know, and where she has never been, echoes God's call to Avram "*Lech lecha*," to go to himself (Genesis 12:1, see commentary elsewhere in this paper). These stories have an inverse relationship. In Genesis, God commands Avram to go to the land that God will show him. In Ruth, Naomi urges Ruth *not to follow* her Judah. Through Avram's obedience and Ruth's tenacity, each begin a transformational journey that moves them into covenant with God.

Avram begins his journey, but the text is silent on what, if anything, he said in response to God's commandment. Conversely, Ruth has much to say to Naomi. She asserts her

intention to begin the journey with Naomi. She states commitment to become a part of Naomi's people, *and then* she states that she will follow God, the god of Avram. Ruth's commitment begins with Naomi, broadens to include the Jewish people and the Covenant. Ruth's journey is a journey a devotion and love, and it emphasizes peoplehood.

As a model of conversion to Judaism and Jewish life, Ruth has much to offer. Her passionate determination to dwell among the Jewish people and in covenant with their God, is a recognizable point of identification for many who are somewhere in the process of choosing Judaism. The words from Ruth's song, "Your people will be my people, and your God my God," are frequently said at the *mikveh* or in post-conversion welcoming rituals, because they express the essence of becoming a Jew.

As romantic as these words are in their context, they imply another common experience of those seeking conversion to Judaism: finding a place in community among the Jewish people. Naomi is Ruth's entire Jewish world as they set off on their journey, which parallels a common experience for many who come to conversion through a committed romantic relationship with a Jew. As the book of Ruth illustrates, through concerted effort, converts can expand their circle and become an integral part of their Jewish communities.

Ruth's story indeed has a "Hollywood ending." She marries Boaz, and their son, Obed, is the grandfather of King David. Ruth is not only a convert, but she is a biblical foremother of Jewish sovereignty in Land of Israel (Ruth 4:17-11). Ruth offers inspiration to every person who has ever thought about becoming a Jew.

Reflection Questions:

1. Naomi and her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah are three widows living in a patriarchal system. What do you imagine is significant about this?

2. Why does Naomi urge Ruth and Orpah not accompany her to Judah but rather to return to their mothers' homes?

3. Both Ruth and Orpah initially wish to accompany Naomi, but Orpah agrees to stay in Moab. How might Ruth have felt about Orpah's decision? How might Orpah feel about Ruth's decision?

4. Which portion of this text contains the most significant message for people considering conversion to Judaism?

5. How might Ruth be considered an example for those who have converted to Judaism? Or to Jews in general?

Bibliography

Artson, Bradley. *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Visions and Dreams.* Chicago: McGraw Hill, 2001.

Artson, Bradley. "God Is Becoming: Consolation in the Face of Tragedy." *Tikkun (Duke University Press)* 24, no. 3 (May 2009), pp. 13-14.

Bassin, Sarah. "Encounters That Can Make Us Become Better Jews" [Commentary to Exodus 18:1 – 20:23]. Union for Reform Judaism, 2018. Retrieved January 5, 2020 from https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/yitro/encounters-can-make-us-become-better-jews

Baḥya, ben Asher ben Ḥlava, and Eliyahu Munk. *Midrash Rabbeinu Bachya: Torah Commentary*. 2nd, rev. ed. Jerusalem: Lambda, 2003.

Bialik, Hayim Nahman, Hanah Rawnitzki Yehoshua, and William G Braude. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.

Brettler, Mark. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. pp. 50-52.

Centolella, Diane M. "Souls in Transition: The Psychosocial Process of Conversion to Judaism" PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2001.

Central Conference of American Rabbis. *Mishkan Tefilah for Weekdays, Shabbat and Festivals*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007.

Cohen, Mariam. "Converts and Controversies – Becoming an American Jew" PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2013.

Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. [Catholic Church.] *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.* October 1, 1986. Retrieved January 4, 2020 from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html

Frankel, Ellen. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. pp. 50-53.

Friedman, Debbie. "L'chi Lach." *Sing Unto God: The Debbie Friedman Anthology.* Schaumberg, IL: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2014. p. 174.

Gilad, Elon. "Why is Israel Called Israel?" *Haaretz*, April 20, 2015. Retrieved January 9, 2020 from https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-why-is-israel-called-israel-1.5353207

Greenberg, Aharon Yaakov. *Torah Gems [Vol. 1]*. Tel Aviv: Y. Orenstein, Yavne Publishing House, Ltd., 1992.

Hirsch, Emil G., M. Seligsohn, and Solomon Schechter. "Jethro." *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* 1906. Retrieved January 15, 2020 from http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8620-jethro#1037.

Kahn, Yoel H. "*Mah Tovu*--From Torah to Prayer." Union for Reform Judaism, 2010. Retrieved January 7, 2020 from https://reformjudaism.org/mah-tovu-torah-prayer

Kushner, Lawrence and Nehemia Polen. "Entering the Synagogue: *Mah Tovu."* in *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries. Vol. 5,* Birkhot Hashachar (*Morning Blessings*), ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001. pp. 51-54.

Leibowitz, Nehama. *New Studies in Bereshit Genesis*. Jerusalem: Hemed Press, No Date.

Mettinger, Tryggve N. D. *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

Rambo, Louis R. and Charles E. Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of religious change." In *Religious conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Christopher Lamb and M. Darroll Bryant eds., London and New York: Cassell, 1999. pp. 23-34.

Sacks, Jonathan. "Who Am I? (Shemot 5777)." *Covenant and Conversation*. Retrieved January 13, 2020 from http://rabbisacks.org/i-shemot-5777/

Siegal, Judith Lazarus. "*Yirah* – Awe: From Fear to Awe" [*Parshat Vatishlach*] in *The Mussar Torah Commentary: A Spiritual Path to Living a Meaningful and Ethical Life,* ed. Barry H. Block (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2020), pp. 51-55.