



LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

www.huc.edu/libraries

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

**“IN YOU MANY NATIONS WILL TAKE REFUGE”
TORAITIC CONVERSION IN MIDRASH AND AGGADAH**

RACHAEL MAXINE HOUSER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
Rabbinical School, Cincinnati, Ohio
March 2025

Adviser: Rabbi Richard Sarason, Ph.D.

Abstract

This thesis examines three characters from the Torah—Aseneth, Pharaoh’s daughter, and Jethro—through the lens of midrash and aggadah. Various midrashim paint these characters as converts to Judaism. The purpose of this thesis is to compare midrashim about their individual conversion journeys to find what elements these stories share in common. To do this, I will examine a corpus of conversion-related midrash about each character and identify the motivations each character has to convert, the ritual they undergo to complete their transformation, and the aftermath of their status change.

Chapter One concerns Aseneth’s conversion to Judaism, which enables her to marry Joseph in the final chapters of Genesis. Sources used in this chapter are *Joseph and Aseneth*, *Kohelet Rabbah*, the medieval *Kuntras aḥaron mimidrash Yelamdeinu*, and *Midrash Tadshe*.

Chapter Two is about Pharaoh’s daughter, commonly called Batya or Bithiah by the rabbis. Her conversion is referred to in b. *Sotah*, *Shemot Rabbah*, *Midrash Tadshe*, *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayikra Rabbah* and *Derekh Eretz Zuta*.

Chapter Three is about Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law, and his conversion stories found in *Shemot Rabbah*, *Midrash Tanchuma*, b. *Zevachim*, *Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael*, b. *Sanhedrin* and *Pesikta Rabbati*.

The conclusion of this thesis reviews the model of motivation, ritual, and aftermath as it applies not only to these biblical characters, but to modern converts to Judaism. The resource appendix includes resources for clergy to use while mentoring a conversion student and liturgy for converts to use in choosing a Jewish name and in accepting the Torah. This thesis and its resource appendix will contribute a new perspective to the field of *geirut*, offering new ways for

clergy to think about the process of conversion and new paradigms for conversion students who want to see themselves reflected in the tradition they are entering.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the loving stewardship of my mentor and adviser, Rabbi Dr. Richard Sarason. It was in his classes that I first developed a love for midrash, and I consider myself fortunate that in my time at Hebrew Union College, I had the chance to learn at the feet of this true sage. So many thanks to Dr. Sarason, who helped me to craft this thesis with care, and who was there for my cohort no matter what these five years brought us.

Thank you to the faculty and staff at HUC-JIR Cincinnati for giving me the best five years of my life so far. I am so grateful to all my incredible teachers and to every smiling face and encouraging presence at the AJA, Klau, and Skirball. Your wisdom, kindness, and love have made Cincinnati my eternal spiritual home.

I would also like to thank the members of my cohort, Rocki Schy-Brunson and Karen Martin. The memories we made as ‘the inviolate thrimmel’ will long be among my most cherished.

Finally, I must thank my parents, Diane and Mark Houser, for their support and encouragement on this journey. Aseneth herself couldn’t have asked for a better reaction to her conversion and path to leadership than the one I got when I told you I wanted to convert to Judaism!

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Analysis of Aseneth in Midrash and Aggadah	8
Chapter Two: Analysis of Pharaoh's Daughter in Midrash and Aggadah	32
Chapter Three: Analysis of Jethro in Midrash and Aggadah	42
Conclusion	60
Resource Appendix	63
Pastoral Resources	64
Liturgical Resources	70
Bibliography	73

Introduction

How does one convert to Judaism before Judaism exists? The complicated identity that marries monotheistic spirituality and scholarly tradition with an ethnic identity takes centuries to take shape, necessitating centuries of peripheral identity for those just on the fringe of a developing people. As Shaye J.D. Cohen puts it in *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*:

Before the second or first century B.C.E. we can speak not of “Jewishness” but of “Judaeaness”—“Judaeaness” was a function of birth and geography; *Ioudaioi* belonged to the ethnos of Judeans in Judaea. Even when Judeans left their homeland to live in the diaspora, they maintained themselves as ethnic associations.¹

At some level, all Judeans interacted with the dominant culture both in their homeland and in their corners of the diaspora; Judean culture and all its ‘ethnic associations’ were situated on a contextual continuum. On one end of the spectrum, some Judeans intermarried, assimilating in part or whole. Others abided by an anti-assimilation strategy, preferring to remain an in-group and maintain as much separation as they could rather than merge with, and ultimately disappear into, the dominant culture wherever they lived. The social realities on the ground varied across this contextual continuum, but questions remained about peripheral identities and how someone not born into a Judean family, yet connected to the larger community, might cross a socio-ethnic boundary.

Cohen proposes seven behaviors for Gentiles who lived in and among Judean communities hoping to be classified, to some extent, as part Judean. These same behaviors can be observed in midrashim about peripheral Gentile characters in the Torah who hope to be

¹ Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 109.

classified as part Israelite: “(1) admiring some aspect of Judaism; (2) acknowledging the power of the God of the Jews or incorporating him into the pantheon; (3) benefiting the Jews or being conspicuously friendly to the Jews; (4) practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews; (5) venerating the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring all other gods; (6) joining the Jewish state or community; (7) converting to Judaism and ‘becoming a Jew.’”²

It is this final behavior that became possible in the second and first century B.C.E., receiving mentions in the deuterocanonical books of II Maccabees and Judith.³ Once Judaism was no longer solely an ethnic identity but also a religious one, the door opened for those who identified with the latter to enter into the community, provided there was a ritual to bring them into the fold.

While the earliest instructions for facilitating conversion to Judaism are found in Tractate Yevamot in the Babylonian Talmud and in the post-talmudic Tractate Gerim, there were converts to Judaism as both a religious philosophy and semi-permeable ethnic identity in earlier eras. The story of the Shechemites in Genesis 34 indicates that circumcision was a necessary initiation procedure for males to enter the Israelite fold, and the notion of the *mikvah* as a purification ritual for Israelites bends to allow the ritual to be used to essentially “purify” non-Israelites of their foreign backgrounds as they facilitate a transformation into a Jewish identity. Yet our first recorded rabbinic rituals are found in the Babylonian Talmud in the aforementioned tractates. Both begin with the introduction of a conversion candidate who declares their intent and is subsequently warned about the dangers of joining the Jewish community, which faces anti-

² Cohen, 141.

³ Cohen, 129.

Jewish prejudice in every era. Should the candidate persist in their desire to convert, the next step is to educate them in the commandments, so they are liable from that point forward in regulating their own Jewish practice. This combination of questioning intent and educating on the fine print has become the role of the *beit din*, the assembly of three Jewish sages or judges in good standing who see to it that the candidate is prepared to accept all the rules of Jewish life. Once these are completed to the *beit din*'s satisfaction, and with the continued consent of the candidate, circumcision is the next step for a male candidate. Only Yevamot 47b specifies this part of the ritual: "[If] he accepts [the commandments taught to him], they circumcise him at once." This follows the biblical commandment that applies to all male Jewish babies, derived from God's command to Abraham, "The flesh of your foreskins will be circumcised, which will be a sign of the covenant between me and between you" (Genesis 17:11). Applied to the convert, this means that the male candidate has now entered into the physical covenant with the God of the Jews and is now physically indistinguishable from his born-Jewish counterparts.

Once the candidate has healed, the next step is immersion:

[When] he is healed, they immerse him at once, and two students of the sages stand over him and inform him of a few of the easy *mitzvot* and a few of the strict *mitzvot*. He immerses and rises; behold, he is like an Israelite in every respect. (b. Yevamot 47b)

Both Yevamot and Gerim mention the immersion as the paramount step, after which Gerim includes songs of congratulations and blessings for the newest member of the Jewish people.

Gerim also includes specifications for what to do for a female candidate, ensuring that she knows her responsibilities regarding *niddah*, *challah*, and lighting the Shabbat candles, and both tractates require that a woman immerses.

With the possibility of conversion to Judaism comes opportunities for rabbinic creativity in applying a modern ritual to ancient texts. Judith Baskin writes:

As conversion became common in the centuries after the Babylonian Conquest, exegetes turned to Scripture to search out not only prophetic exhortations to universal and uniform worship, but also examples of likely Gentiles who seemed to have recognized the ubiquity and potency of Israel's God. Such figures as the Moabite Ruth, Rahab the harlot, and Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, all biblical Gentiles who acknowledged God's saving powers, were ideal candidates for models to aid contemporary missionary efforts.⁴

This thesis will examine three Gentile characters in the Torah⁵ whose relationships to Israelite characters, through adoption or marriage, created an opportunity for writers of midrash and aggadah to develop stories of conversion to proto-Judaism. On their own, these characters—Aseneth from Genesis, Pharaoh's daughter from Exodus, and Jethro from Exodus and Numbers—present the rabbis with a challenge. Aseneth is the daughter of an Egyptian high priest, brought up in a foreign land in a house of idol worship. To marry her to Joseph, an Israelite exemplar and God's favored one, could suggest that such exogamy is acceptable, if their story is left alone. Equally worrisome is her status as matriarch among the Israelite tribes, giving birth to Manasseh and Ephraim. Pharaoh's daughter, in her adoption of Moses and later marriage to Mered, is another Egyptian outsider with insider access to the lives of Israelite leaders. Jethro's status as a Midianite priest is most troublesome of all. Not only does his daughter Tzipporah's marriage to Moses result in children of mixed heritage, but his pagan priestly status is at odds with the many examples in the Torah of times when Jethro is a helpful guide to his son-in-law. How could Moses countenance any friendly interactions with someone devoted to other gods?

⁴ Judith Reese Baskin, *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), 45.

⁵ While Ruth is considered the most famous of all Biblical converts, she is not included in this thesis, as her book is outside of the Pentateuch.

Conversion solves all these problems. It turns exogamy into endogamy, making the marriages of Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter, and Tzipporah acceptable. It ensures that any descendants are Israelites. Examples of piety and good counsel now come from Israelite characters instead of Gentile ones. Best of all, as these characters are all high-profile relatives to the main characters of the Torah, they serve as examples to all Israelites and those considering conversion. The Israelite God is indeed supreme if idol worshipers like Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter, and Jethro can all be persuaded to abandon their former religions to follow him.

As characters from the Torah, some are represented as predating even the official formation of the Israelite tribes, and all of them predate the rabbinic period wherein circumcision, immersion, and a *beit din* were the official requirements for conversion. Rather than apply these requirements retroactively, the rabbis invented new conversion rituals to align these characters within the tribal-religious ethnos of the Hebrew population. Though each individual midrash does not cover every aspect of the conversion process, through analyzing the midrashim about these characters, a corpus for each one does appear that covers the following:

I. Motivation

A. Pre-Conversion Foundations—Prior to the character's consideration of conversion, some pre-conditions exist that make them a good candidate. Often the character is compared favorably to other role models within the Israelite community or unconsciously behaves like the Israelites do.

B. Catalyst—Something causes the character to cease their idol worship and to want to join the Israelite religion, often a chance encounter with an Israelite or an embarrassing event that cools their attitude toward their current religion.

II. Ritual

A. Conversion—The character embarks on a self-led conversion ritual where they transform themselves from their former status to Israelite status.

B. Name Change—As a result of this transformation, the character receives a new name to reflect their new Israelite identity.

III. Aftermath

A. Reactions—When the news breaks of their transformation, nearby Israelites hear about the new addition to their group and react. In some cases, these reactions to this status change are also Gentile reactions from family or friends.

B. Reward—The character will be granted a divine reward for their good judgment in turning to the Israelite religion and for the zeal they display in adhering to it.

C. Incorporation—The character is brought into the Israelite lineage. This involves an immediate incorporation and acceptance into an Israelite family and long-term incorporation with their descendants mixing with other Israelites or inhabiting a place of honor.

This thesis will examine this three-step model—motivation, ritual, and aftermath—for Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter, and Jethro. Very few sources will offer an example for all three steps; most will offer a narrative for one facet of the model. Put together, there is a story for nearly every step of the model for each character, which demonstrates the rabbis' unique understanding of the process of conversion. While circumcision, immersion, and the *beit din* are the three rabbinic requirements, they are three small moments in a lifetime of choices and consequences. The midrashim covered in this thesis show that the rabbis were conscious of the social aspect of one's journey to Judaism. In this way, the midrashic conversions of these three

characters reflect real-life journeys. Each candidate has their own backstory of exposure to Judaism and nascent stirrings of a desire to convert, each candidate has their own catalyst moment that cements their decision to embark on the journey. The ritual and the name change are only part of the process. Afterward come the complicated reactions from friends and family as the new Jew leaves one religion for another, along with the complicated reactions of the Jewish community in accepting the newcomer. Each new Jew finds the rewards of their chosen faith and ways to weave their way into the tapestry of Jewish history.

The midrashim about these characters do not simply make these characters' marriages and relationships acceptable within the boundaries of Jewish endogamy. They reflect the human journey every convert takes, from beginning to end. From these stories, we learn about the struggles and triumphs of converts in the past, and how to make room for them in the future.

Chapter One: Analysis of Aseneth in Midrash and Aggadah

Aseneth, the wife of Joseph, appears only twice in the Torah. Genesis 41:45 tells us that upon Joseph's release from prison and ascendancy as Pharaoh's counselor, "Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah; and he gave him Aseneth, daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On, as a wife." Only five verses later is Aseneth's exit from the story: "Joseph had two sons before the years of famine came, born to him by Aseneth, daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On." In two short verses, Joseph is married to the Egyptian daughter of a high-status priest and produces two children with her who will become progenitors of tribes in Israel.

The non-rabbinic biblical elaborations and rabbinic midrashim discussed in this chapter—the Hellenistic romance *Joseph and Aseneth*, *Kohelet Rabbah*, the medieval *Kuntras aḥaron mimidrash Yelamdeinu*, and *Midrash Tadshe*—provide explanations for how Joseph's Egyptian wife converts to the Israelite faith, negating the problematic exogamy factor and providing a story of a righteous convert for later generations. Of these four sources, no aggadic work has been more focused on Aseneth's conversion than *Joseph and Aseneth*. A thrilling tale of love at first sight, angelic visitation, and a military coup, the story's provenance has been up for debate for decades. Aspects of Aseneth's encounter with an angel, specifically the mentions of the bread of life and cup of immortality, recall the Christian rite of communion and have led some scholars to believe it is an early Christian work. But Randall D. Chesnutt, in his definitive work on the romance, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*, disagrees:

Many linguistic, formal, and substantive elements in *Joseph and Aseneth* find their closest analogies in the Judaism of the Hellenistic diaspora... Aseneth's soliloquies and prayers in [chapters] 11-13 have especially strong linguistic and thematic affinities with

several Jewish apocryphal prayers, especially those in Judith, the Additions to Esther and the Prayer of Manasseh.¹

Chesnutt concludes:

Greek is the original language; the work is Jewish and evidences no Christian redaction in its earliest attainable form; the provenance is most likely Egypt; the date of composition lies between c. 100 BCE and 115 CE; and the literary genre is the Hellenistic novel or romance.²

Joseph and Aseneth elaborates on the two scant verses Aseneth receives in the Torah, telling the tale of how the beautiful Egyptian virgin falls in love with the handsome Israelite dream-teller, though their separate religious and cultural identities mean there is no future for them. Inspired by Joseph's dedication to the one God, Aseneth locks herself away for a week of transformative contemplation, which results in a visit from an angel who bestows a new name on her and prepares her to be Joseph's equal and bride by ushering her into the community of those who revere God. Converted to the Israelite faith, she and Joseph marry and have sons. She is accepted by most of Joseph's family when they come to Egypt, though she finds herself a target of some jealous brothers' plot to ruin Joseph and overthrow the Pharaoh in favor of the crown prince. God's intervention saves Aseneth, who in turn saves her brothers-in-law from death and pleads for mercy on their behalf.

As fanciful as the romance is, it reflects the very real social issues that Jews faced in the author's time. Chesnutt writes:

The account of Aseneth's conversion is permeated by social and religious conflict which is not merely literary but which mirrors to a significant degree the real milieu in which *Joseph and Aseneth* was written. That milieu was one in which Jews lived in dynamic

¹ Randall D. Chesnutt, *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 73-74.

² Chesnutt, 254.

tension with Gentiles and struggled to maintain a distinctive Jewish identity; one in which table fellowship and intermarriage with Gentiles, including even marriage between a convert to Judaism and a born Jew, were live issues; and one in which there was some discord centering on the perception of the Gentile convert in the Jewish community.³

From the Torah it is understood that Joseph ate separately from the Egyptians, but *Joseph and Aseneth* elaborates that he did not come into physical contact with anyone outside of the Israelite faith. Aseneth cannot touch him as an outsider, and she cannot share a meal with him because Joseph eats the bread of life and drinks from the cup of immortality, while she eats the food of false idols. Their separation mirrors the Hellenistic diaspora and the open questions within it. Who could marry whom? Who could eat with whom? Was there any way to cross the boundaries that separated cultural groups? How should those boundary-crossers be treated by their adoptive families? These are the questions *Joseph and Aseneth*, and the other minor midrashim of this chapter, aim to answer.

I. Motivation

A. Pre-Conversion Foundations

Even before Aseneth entertains notions of conversion to the Israelite faith, she is described in *Joseph and Aseneth* as the ideal candidate based on what she has in common with Israelite matriarchs. The text introduces her thus:

And [Pentephres]⁴ had a daughter, a virgin of eighteen years, (she was) very tall and handsome and beautiful to look at beyond all virgins on the earth. And this (girl) had nothing similar to the virgins of the Egyptians, but she was in every respect similar to the

³ Chesnutt, 254-255.

⁴ The Greek version of 'Poti-phares,' the name of Aseneth's father.

daughters of the Hebrews; and she was tall as Sarah and handsome as Rebecca and beautiful as Rachel.⁵

Aseneth's appearance foretells her transformation. Though she is an outsider to the Israelite community, she is also born at least one degree apart from her Egyptian community, having nothing in common with other young Egyptian women but much in common with Hebrew women. Her beauty is measured by Israelite standards and compared favorably to Joseph's ancestresses, setting her up as a fitting bride for their descendant.

Aseneth also shares an important feature in common with the other Israelite in the tale: her future husband, Joseph. Both Joseph and Aseneth, without ever having met each other, value sexual purity. Despite her famed beauty, Aseneth protects her chastity by guarding herself in a tower on her father's estate and surrounds herself with seven equally chaste maidservants. She refuses to look upon any man who is not her father, whom she regards with incredulity when he proposes a match between her and Joseph. She objects to the match not only based on his lowly background, but on his scandalous past with Potiphar's wife. Joseph similarly rejects any contact with women, who regularly solicit him for sex and send him gifts to entice him. Upon first spotting Aseneth—himself being the second man ever to see her—he asks that she be sent far from his sight, lest she make an unwelcome attempt at seduction. Only when Pentephres reassures him of her inviolable virginity does he agree to see her, calling her “sister.”⁶

⁵ Trans. C. Burchard, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Volume Two* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 1983), 203.

⁶ Burchard, 211.

In the chapter “Aseneth and the Sublime Turn,” in the book *Desiring Conversion*, B. Diane Lipsett writes, “[Aseneth’s] sexual self-restraint gives her a shared identity with Joseph.”⁷ Just as Aseneth has little in common physically with her Egyptian counterparts, she also does not share their approach in sexual overtures. While Egyptian women cannot resist Joseph and badger him for attention, Aseneth disdains the company of men and lives sequestered from them. Her contempt for mingling with the opposite sex matches Joseph’s Israelite approach, where such contact is framed as sinful. They also misidentify each other from a sexual standpoint when first hearing about or seeing each other: Aseneth refuses Joseph in part based on rumors of his sexual immorality, and Joseph refuses to see Aseneth at first because he fears her sexual immorality. Only once it is established that both are on the same page about proper sexual etiquette can they meet.

B. Catalyst

All it takes is one look at Joseph, and Aseneth reevaluates everything—not only her impression of him, but her sense of how the divine world operates. Joseph passes by her father’s estate on a chariot, preparing to enter for a visit, and Aseneth suffers the tremors of love at first sight:

And Aseneth saw Joseph on his chariot and was strongly cut (to the heart), and her soul was crushed, and her knees were paralyzed, and her entire body trembled, and she was filled with great fear. And she sighed and said in her heart:

What shall I now do, wretched (that I am)?
Did I not speak saying that Joseph is coming,
The shepherd’s son from the land of Canaan?
And now, behold, the sun from heaven has come to us on its chariot
And entered our house today,
And shines in it like a light upon the earth.

⁷ B. Diane Lipsett, *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

But I, foolish and daring, have despised him
And spoken wicked words about him,
And did not know that Joseph is (a) son of God...
And now be gracious on me, Lord, God of Joseph,
Because I have spoken wicked words against him in ignorance
And now, let my father give me to Joseph for a maidservant and slave, and I will
serve him for ever (and) ever.⁸

Though she initially scorned the thought of a match with a mere shepherd's son, Aseneth is struck by Joseph's vivid beauty, which to her evidences that he has some sort of divine connection. She does not call upon the Egyptian gods to listen to her inward prayer of adoration but on the God of Joseph; it is as if Joseph's existence alone confirms a monotheistic reality. From this moment onward, the Egyptian gods have no sway over her.

Pentephres makes the introduction between the would-be lovers, but before Aseneth can embrace Joseph, he stops her, claiming that no contact can occur between a God-worshipping man and a woman who worships idols. His refusal brings Aseneth to tears, which softens Joseph's heart. Instead of categorizing Aseneth as yet another Egyptian woman who wants inappropriate contact with him, he places his hand on her head in blessing and prays over her:

Lord God of my father Israel,
The Most High, the Powerful One of Jacob,
Who gave life to all (things)
And called (them) from the darkness to the light,
And from the error to the truth,
And from the death to the life,
You, Lord, bless this virgin,
And renew her by your spirit,
And form her anew by your hidden hand,
And make her alive again by your life,
And let her eat your bread of life,
And drink your cup of blessing,
And number her among your people
That you have chosen before all (things) came into being,

⁸ Burchard, 208.

And let her enter your rest
Which you have prepared for your chosen ones,
And live in your eternal life for ever and ever.⁹

His blessing ignites something within Aseneth, who departs from him at once and shuts herself in the upper room of her tower to contemplate his words. The blessing causes all sorts of emotions—joy, regret, fear, and awe—to coalesce within her. But Joseph’s blessing does not mention marriage. It is entirely for Aseneth’s benefit, asking for his ancestral God to bless and renew her with the bread of life and cup of blessing. These words, with their hope for Aseneth’s redemption rather than marriage, are what she considers as she embarks on the next steps of a self-driven conversion ritual.

Kohelet Rabbah 8:10 is another source in which Joseph influences Aseneth toward conversion, though it post-dates *Joseph and Aseneth* by at least six hundred years. The verse from Ecclesiastes—“And then I saw the wicked buried; they would come and go from the holy place but be forgotten in the city where they did [these things], this too is vanity”—is reinterpreted to refer to converts:

“They would come and go from the holy place”—because [the converts] went to a holy place. These are synagogues and study halls. “But be forgotten”—their evil deeds [were forgotten]. “Where they did [these things]”—their good deeds. “Where they did [these things], this too is vanity.” Rabbi Yitzhak said, “This is not vanity, but it is vanity that they did not come on their own.” Rabbi Bun said, “The righteous went there and they came, like Joseph to Aseneth, Joshua to Rahab, Boaz to Ruth, Moses to Hobab.”¹⁰

Though Ecclesiastes 8:10 refers to the hypocrisy of the wicked who profane holy places with their empty worship, the rabbis reimagine the verse as referring to formerly wicked Gentiles who reform their ways and start on the path of worship and Torah study, which diminishes the sins of

⁹ Burchard, 211.

¹⁰ Reuven Kipperwasser, ed., *Midrishei Kohelet: Kohelet Rabbah 7-12, Kohelet Zuta 7-9*. (Jerusalem: Schechter Institute for Jewish Studies, 2021), 156. Translation my own.

their past. The only vanity that Rabbi Yitzhak identifies is that these converts did not find the path by themselves but rather needed an outside influence to jumpstart the process. These outside influences are righteous Israelites who intervene in their lives and inspire the converts, either leading by example or outright teaching them, to join the tribe.

Though both sources point to Joseph as the catalyst for Aseneth's desire to convert, he is neither her pseudo-rabbi instructing her through the conversion process nor a demanding fiancé expecting her to complete one. Chesnutt points out, "Joseph is absent at the time of Aseneth's conversion, contributes nothing of importance to it, and learns of it only after the fact."¹¹ Aseneth begins her transformation on her own, without expectation that Joseph will be her husband at the end of the process. His presence and blessing prompt her to recognize a more authentic form of worship to a God who feels more powerful and present to her than the gods of her youth.

II. Ritual

A. Conversion

Of all midrashic and aggadic works covered in this thesis, the conversion process in *Joseph and Aseneth* is the most involved, taking up the bulk of the story. The process lacks any parallel with a traditional rabbinical conversion—circumcision, *beit din*, and immersion—and seems to be the invention of the author. However, research has not revealed if the rites Aseneth partakes in have any real-world equivalent. Chesnutt writes:

There is little if any evidence that Aseneth's story preserves a fixed ritual of initiation, though the possibility must be held open that further comparative research could alter this assessment. Since Aseneth's experiences are narrated to address certain concerns relating

¹¹ Chesnutt, 72.

to the sociological dimensions of conversion to Judaism, it should not be assumed that her actions reflect rites of initiation regularly practiced in the author's community.¹²

It must be assumed that the conversion process is not literal, but rather literary.

Aseneth's conversion process involves seven days of preparation and a final transformation on the eighth day, a time period that has several biblical and rabbinic parallels. Matthew Thiessen points out that the seven days reflect the seven days of the creation of the world and the seven days of consecration of the priesthood.¹³ The eighth day is of particular interest to Thiessen, as:

Aseneth's eighth-day transformation evokes another eight-day period which informs the author's portrayal of Aseneth's conversion—the eight-day period culminating in the circumcision of a newborn Israelite male... Given this emphasis upon the timing of the circumcision, it is likely that the author of *Joseph and Aseneth* describes Aseneth's conversion as an eight-day process in order to parallel circumcision, another eight-day process, thereby legitimizing her conversion... Aseneth's transformation on the eighth day signals the divine circumcision of her heart.¹⁴

The process begins with Aseneth essentially sitting *shiva* for her old life. She dedicates seven days to mourning, fasting, and repenting of her former lifestyle. Locking herself in her tower with her seven maidservants, she refuses all food and water and weeps without ceasing. Aseneth signals her deep grief by putting off her rich robes and replacing them with a black mourning tunic and sackcloth, even going so far as to sprinkle ashes on her hair. Ross Shepard Kraemer, in her book *When Aseneth Met Joseph*, calls attention to the biblical parallel of her mourning performance. She writes:

¹² Chesnutt, 255.

¹³ Matthew Thiessen, "Aseneth's Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion." *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 45 (2014): 234, 240.

¹⁴ Thiessen, 237.

Traditional descriptions of the daughters of Zion as a metaphor for Israel feminized in relation to God may contribute to the depiction of Aseneth, particularly the description of her repentance and the initial divine response. Although much of what Aseneth does conforms to a pattern of ritualized death and funerary practices, it is also strikingly consonant with biblical paradigms. Consider in particular Isaiah 3:16-26, a prophecy of the fate of the proud daughters of Zion. These verses assert that because the daughters of Zion are haughty, God will afflict them by taking away all their fine clothing and jewelry. Isaiah 3:18-23 contains a long list of the specific items, among which are bracelets, headdresses, sashes, rings, festal robes, mantles, cloaks, linen garments, and veils... Aseneth's penitence incorporates many of the details here. The text explicitly has her remove her royal robes, her golden girdle, her tiara, her diadem, and her bracelets.¹⁵

In this way, Aseneth prepares for her transformation by mourning like an Israelite gone astray from God. Her screams and breast-beating are an instinctual *al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha*.

The text does not explicitly tell us what Aseneth mourns—is it her failure to connect with Joseph romantically, or her recognition that Joseph's God has replaced the Egyptian gods in her heart? Aseneth's next steps of destroying her idols implies the latter. Like the midrashic Abraham smashing his father's idols, Aseneth follows suit, taking "all her gods that were in her chamber, the ones of gold and silver who were without number, and ground them into pieces, and threw all the idols of the Egyptians through the window looking north from her upper floor to beggars and needy persons."¹⁶ Once the idols are utterly destroyed, she continues to fast throughout the week. There is a sense of hollowing out both her body and her personal space, emptying out everything so there is room to accept something new.

Aseneth's prayers begin internally, with reflections on how her life will change now that she has rejected the Egyptian gods. She fears her family's retribution, seeing as how her father is

¹⁵ Ross Shepard Kraemer, *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

¹⁶ Burchard, 216.

an Egyptian high priest, and believes that her choice has orphaned her. But she does not yet fully trust that Joseph's God will accept someone who has lived in idolatry for so long. Having heard that the Israelite God is compassionate, she bolsters herself to make a confession to him, and she dares to speak aloud:

Lord God of the ages,
Who created all (things) and gave life (to them),
Who gave breath of life to your whole creation,
Who brought the invisible (things) out into the light...
Spare me, Lord,
Because I have sinned much before you,
I have committed lawlessness and irreverence,
And have said wicked and unspeakable (things) before you.
My mouth is defiled from the sacrifices of the idols
And from the tables of the gods of the Egyptians...
With you I take refuge, Lord,
And to you I bring my supplication,
And to you I will shout.
Rescue me before I am caught by my persecutors...
Be mindful, Lord, of my humiliation
And have mercy upon me.
Look at my orphanage
And have compassion on the afflicted.
For behold, I fled from everything
And took refuge in you, Lord, the only friend to men...
For who among men will give birth to such beauty
And such great wisdom and virtue and power
As (owned by) the all-beautiful Joseph?
Lord, I commit him to you,
Because I love him beyond my (own) soul.
Preserve him in the wisdom of your grace.
And you, Lord, commit me to him for a maidservant and slave.
And I will make his bed
And wash his feet
And wait on him
And be a slave for him and serve him for ever (and) ever.¹⁷

¹⁷ Burchard, 220-224.

Aseneth's prayer contains four major pieces: an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty, a confession of sin, a plea for redemption, and a final romantic wish. God is the only true God, the creator of all things, and she attributes all creation and divine mystery to God instead of to the Egyptian pantheon. She admits that she has worshiped false gods and labels the Egyptians her "persecutors" and her idolatry as "humiliation," and God is the "only friend to men" who can understand her change of heart and have mercy on her. Though she finishes the prayer by asking to be with Joseph, Aseneth still believes the divide between them is too wide. She might no longer believe in the Egyptian gods, but her sin of previous worship has not been washed away, making her an unfit partner for him. All she requests is to be made his slave so she can serve the man who so aptly represents her new God.

At this point in the conversion process, Aseneth does not believe she has done enough. Rejection of her idols and mourning her sinful lifestyle were measures she took out of true repentance, but the best she hopes for is mercy and a chance to be near Joseph, though she does not believe she can ever be his equal or a true member of his community. To prove her wrong, a heavenly agent arrives. The man is identified by the Greek *aggelos*, which like the Hebrew equivalent can mean "angel" or "messenger," but he identifies himself more specifically as the chief of God's house and commander of God's heavenly hosts. He appears as a more supernatural version of Joseph, made of lightning and fire, and Aseneth trembles in terror before him. But he reassures her and gives her the first of her heavenly gifts:

And the man said to her, "Courage, Aseneth, chaste virgin. Behold, I have heard all the words of your confession and your prayer. Behold, I have also seen the humiliation and the affliction of the seven days of your want (of food). Behold, from your tears and these ashes, plenty of mud has formed before your face. Courage, Aseneth, chaste virgin. For behold, your name was written in the book of the living in heaven; in the beginning of the

book, as the very first of all, your name was written by my finger, and it will not be erased forever. Behold, from today, you will be renewed and formed anew and made alive again, and you will eat blessed bread of life, and drink a blessed cup of immortality, and anoint yourself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility. Courage, Aseneth, chaste virgin. Behold, I have given you today to Joseph for a bride, and he himself will be your bridegroom for ever (and) ever. And your name shall no longer be called Aseneth, but your name shall be City of Refuge, because in you many nations will take refuge with the Lord God, the Most High, and under your wings many peoples trusting in the Lord God will be sheltered, and behind your walls will be guarded those who attach themselves to the Most High God in the name of Repentance.”¹⁸

The man informs Aseneth that it has long been her destiny to convert, as her name has always been written in the book of the living in heaven. This echoes the later rabbinic notion that the souls of all converts were present at Sinai and the giving of the Torah; though Aseneth could not have known it, she was always on the path to becoming an Israelite. The divine agent has arrived to complete the work that she has started. He confirms that she will be Joseph’s wife, for by the end of this process of partaking in the triad of bread-wine-ointment, she will be his equal. He also bestows a new name and accompanying destiny upon her, which will be discussed more in depth in the next section.

Aseneth follows his instructions to put off her mourning clothes and clean up, trying to show hospitality to the stranger by learning his name and inviting him to relax and partake of food. Typical of an angel, he refuses but instead manifests a honeycomb in Aseneth’s storeroom, which he asks her to fetch for him. As they share the honeycomb, the man explains:

“Happy are you, Aseneth, because the ineffable mysteries of the Most High have been revealed to you, and happy (are) all who attach themselves to the Lord God in repentance, because they will eat from this comb. For this comb is (full of the) spirit of life. And the bees of the paradise of delight have made this from the dew of the roses of life that are in the paradise of God. And all the angels of God eat of it and all the chosen of God and all the sons of the Most High, because this is a comb of life, and everyone who eats of it will not die for ever (and) ever.” And the man stretched out his right hand

¹⁸ Burchard, 226-227.

and broke a small portion off the comb, and he himself ate and what was left he put with his hand into Aseneth's mouth, and said to her, "Eat." And she ate. And the man said to Aseneth, "Behold, you have eaten bread of life, and drunk a cup of immortality, and been anointed with the ointment of incorruptibility."¹⁹

The same bread of life, cup of immortality, and ointment of incorruptibility, in which Joseph claimed all Israelites partake, is revealed to be heavenly food. Aseneth's status has been raised so high as to share honey from heaven with the leader of God's angels. Chesnutt writes of this scene:

By having Aseneth eat from the honeycomb, the author places this convert on a par with the Jew by birth, and indeed with the angels of God, who eat the same immortal food. Aseneth's eating of the honey and her full participation in the blessings of life and immortality symbolized thereby, all at the direct command of God's chief angel, function as proof that this convert is worthy to be received fully into the community of Israel and to be married to the revered patriarch.²⁰

The man then orders bees to rise out of the honeycomb in myriads to build a new honeycomb on Aseneth's lips. The bees, who come from paradise, now use Aseneth as a foundation to create more heavenly food, as though Aseneth's mouth, as a source of divine praise and repentance, is now a source of sustenance for inhabitants of heaven. Through her, the bees make more food and then eat from the comb. The cycle that the angel has started by feeding her heavenly food continues with Aseneth's ability to produce more heavenly food, which the inhabitants of paradise eat to strengthen themselves to continue producing it—a self-contained system of heavenly life. He banishes the bees to heaven, and all bees who thought to hurt Aseneth with even one sting are punished with death, though he resurrects them and allows them to live on earth in Pentephres's orchard. After Aseneth asks for a final blessing for her maidservants—which is discussed later in this chapter—the man departs to inform Joseph of

¹⁹ Burchard, 228-229

²⁰ Chesnutt, 131-132.

Aseneth's conversion, his work done. Only on his departure does Aseneth realize she has been in the presence of a divine being and asks God's forgiveness for any remarks made in ignorance.

When Aseneth's conversion is complete, Joseph's imminent arrival is announced, and she prepares to greet him in bridal attire. When she washes her face, her visage is transformed with divine beauty, completing her transformation not only into an Israelite but into a beautiful bride fit for Joseph.

B. Name Change

Just as converts select a Hebrew name upon their conversion, so too does Aseneth receive a new name, endowed by heaven. The angel gives Aseneth this new name upon his arrival in her tower, calling her "City of Refuge, because in you many nations will take refuge with the Lord God, the Most High, and under your wings many peoples trusting in the Lord God will be sheltered, and behind your walls will be guarded those who attach themselves to the Most High God in the name of Repentance."²¹ The name bestowed upon Aseneth and its accompanying explanation recalls Abraham's name change in Genesis 17:5, when God informs him, "And you will no longer be called Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I am making you a father of many nations." Abraham's name is also a divine destiny; he will be the patriarch of many nations. It harkens back to the promise made to him in Genesis 12:3, when all families of the earth will be blessed through him. Aseneth's name change is also a divine destiny—she will set an example for all converts to come and for all those who repent of their sins and cleave to God. More than leading by example, Aseneth will directly intervene on behalf of both converts and

²¹ Burchard, 226.

repentant Israelites later in the story. Both she and Abraham are foundational to many nations, with Abraham as their progenitor and Aseneth as their protector.

Daniela Scialabba writes in her dissertation on *Joseph and Aseneth*:

The change of name in this verse plays a decisive role in the story of Aseneth. From now on, in fact, her personal identity (she will no longer be called 'Aseneth'), which corresponds to the new dimension she has entered because of her conversion (her name has been written in heaven in the book of the living for ever), takes on a more universal value: she will be 'City of Refuge' for all those who repent. The name refers to an identity which is no longer bound solely to her individual dimension as a woman who has found refuge with the creator God; rather, her conversion gives the maiden an identity which is bound up with a destiny of life which concerns all the nations, all those people who convert to God, the Most High.²²

Aseneth began her conversion unguided and alone, but she has joined a community and now must have a community mindset. Her life is now about what she can give back to the Israelite community and her role within their now-shared society.

III. Aftermath

A. Reactions

As her bridegroom, Joseph's is the most important reaction to the news of Aseneth's conversion. The angel who facilitated the conversion's completion has already visited him with the news that Aseneth is now an eligible bride, and Joseph returns to the estate of Pentephres, where Aseneth greets him with confirmation of her conversion. She does not press the matter of their betrothal; Joseph is the one who blesses her in light of her recent transformation and invites her to close the physical gap between them that he maintained upon their introduction:

²² Daniela Scialabba, *Creation and Salvation: Models of Relationship between the God of Israel and the Nations in the Book of Jonah, in Psalm 33 (Mt and LXX) and in the Novel 'Joseph and Aseneth'* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 285.

And Joseph stretched out his hands and called Aseneth by a wink of his eyes. And Aseneth also stretched out her hands and ran up to Joseph and fell on his breast. And Joseph put his arms around her, and Aseneth (put hers) around Joseph, and they kissed each other for a long time and both came to life in their spirit. And Joseph kissed Aseneth and gave her the spirit of life, and he kissed her the second time and gave her spirit of wisdom, and he kissed her the third time and gave her spirit of truth.²³

Whereas previously they could not touch—much less entertain thoughts of marriage—while they came from separate religions, their shared religious identity removes any obstacle to physical intimacy. This embrace not only seals their betrothal, but it serves as the final ingredient in Aseneth's transformation. The conversion was completed away from Joseph, but his three kisses endowing her with three spirits serve as the finishing touch.

The two other immediate reactions to the news come from Gentile characters: her father Pentephres and the Pharaoh. Pentephres encounters her first, bringing the news that Joseph has returned to the house, and upon seeing her transformed beauty, he declares, "At last the Lord God of heaven has chosen you as a bride for his firstborn son, Joseph."²⁴ When Pharaoh hosts their wedding feast, he blesses Aseneth, saying, "May the Lord, the God of Joseph bless you, child, and let this beauty of yours remain for ever (and) ever, because justly the Lord, the God of Joseph, has chosen you as a bride for Joseph, because he is the firstborn son of God. And you shall be called a daughter of the Most High and a bride of Joseph from now on and for ever."²⁵ The positive reactions from high-status Egyptians mirrors Aseneth's first reaction to seeing Joseph. Presented with such incorruptible, divine beauty, Aseneth was prompted to praise the Most High God instead of the Egyptian pantheon. Presented with Aseneth's transformed beauty,

²³ Burchard, 233.

²⁴ Burchard, 232.

²⁵ Burchard, 235.

Pentephres and Pharaoh cannot help but praise the Most High God. She now sets the same example as her Israelite husband and inspires other idol worshipers to wake up, at least in part, to a monotheistic (or at least monolatrous) reality.

B. Reward

Given that *Joseph and Aseneth* is a romance, Aseneth's most obvious reward is a loving marriage to Joseph and giving birth to Israelite children. One might also argue that the three kisses Joseph gives her with the spirits of life, wisdom, and truth also qualify as rewards for her conversion. But outside of the romance, Aseneth's name change indicates another reward—her ability to convert and protect others by virtue of being the 'City of Refuge.'

Aseneth's first act as an Israelite is not to marry Joseph, but to ask her heavenly visitor to bless the seven maidservants who live with her in the tower. She wants to share the experience with her companions and bestow the same protection she has received upon them:

And Aseneth said to the man, "Lord, with me are seven virgins ministering to me, fostered with me from my childhood, born with me in one night, and I love them as my sisters. I will call them, and you will bless them as you have blessed me, too." And the man said, "Call them." And Aseneth called the seven virgins and stood them before the man. And the man blessed them and said, "May the Lord God the Most High bless you. And you shall be seven pillars of the City of Refuge, and all the fellow inhabitants of the chosen of that city will rest upon you for ever (and) ever."²⁶

Aseneth's instinct to incorporate others in a divine experience proves that she is already thinking with an Israelite community mindset. She shows a talent for bringing people together under the banner of the Israelite God. The angel does more than bless the companions; he brings them into the same promise made to Aseneth, making them part of the City of Refuge analogy. They will be her partners in bringing people into safety and belief in God. A mere minute after her

²⁶ Burchard, 230-231.

conversion process, Aseneth deputizes more women in the effort to bring others into a sacred covenant with God.

Aseneth continues in her role as the City of Refuge later in the story. When Jacob and his sons arrive in Egypt, the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah grow envious of Joseph and Aseneth. They ally themselves with Pharaoh's son, who once hoped to marry Aseneth and is increasingly fearful of the power of the newcomer tribes, and they plan a coup to kill Pharaoh and kidnap Aseneth. The coup fails, and though the sons try to kill Aseneth in revenge, Aseneth cries out to God for deliverance, who at once disintegrates their swords. This is the final proof that Aseneth's conversion has been completely accepted at the divine level. As Chesnutt writes, "God's protection of Aseneth from her persecutors in the final chapters provides further proof of his regard for this proselyte and his disfavor toward any who would challenge her rightful place in the community of Israel."²⁷

Having just witnessed miraculous proof of God's favor of Aseneth, the brothers fear for their lives and beg Aseneth to show them mercy. She promises to protect her treacherous brothers-in-law from the punishment they deserve. Simeon and Levi, the same brothers who slaughtered the town of Shechem in vengeance for the sexual assault perpetrated against their sister Dinah, are once again agents of justice for female members of their family who have been wronged. When Simeon and Levi arrive, determined to murder their brothers for their attempted crime, Aseneth stops them:

And Aseneth stretched out her right hand and touched Simeon's beard and kissed him and said, "By no means, brother, will you do evil for evil to your neighbor. To the Lord will you give (the right) to punish the insult (done) by them. And they are your brothers and

²⁷ Chesnutt, 113.

your father's, Israel's line, and they fled far from your presence. Anyway, grant them pardon."²⁸

Aseneth's intervention saves the lives of Dan, Gad, Naphtali, and Asher, thus preserving a third of the tribes of Israel. She has become a City of Refuge not just for nations of future converts, but for current members of the tribe who go astray, protecting them from harm. In this episode, Aseneth also mirrors the story of her husband and his forgiveness of the wrong done to him. Joseph was also plotted against by these same brothers, but after the tests he puts them through in their early days in Egypt, he favors forgiveness and brings his family to settle permanently in Egypt to wait out the famine. Both Aseneth and Joseph favor mercy, especially when it results in the continuity of the tribe.

Lipsett notes the importance of physical touch in this interaction, given that Joseph prevented physical contact with Aseneth until she was a member of his own community. Now that Aseneth is a true sister to the sons of Jacob, she is permitted to touch them. Lipsett writes:

In the climax of this episode, Aseneth fulfills her role as city or source of refuge, as she intercedes for the treacherous brothers and preaches nonretaliation within Joseph's family. As she counters Simeon's insistence on executing those who plotted against Israel and Joseph, kissing and touching now convey not just membership in family but conciliatory intimacy.²⁹

Aseneth's entrance into the community gives her access to physical contact with the Israelites—not only sexual union with her Israelite husband, but platonic comfort to her family that sways them toward peace. Aseneth's new designation as City of Refuge is fully incarnate, and her greatest power, as befits a romance, is her ability to love and bring people together, be it her maidservants or her brothers-in-law.

²⁸ Burchard, 246.

²⁹ Lipsett, 119.

C. Incorporation

Aseneth's bloodline is incorporated into the Israelite community through the birth of her two sons in Genesis 41:51-52, Manasseh and Ephraim. The convert has become a mother in Israel and a progenitor of two tribes. But beyond mere procreation, Aseneth is portrayed in multiple midrashim as a loving and valued member of Jacob's family. In *Joseph and Aseneth*, when Jacob and his sons settle in Egypt, Jacob blesses Aseneth upon their introduction:

And Jacob said to Joseph, "Is this my daughter-in-law, your wife? Blessed she will be by the Most High God." And Jacob called her to himself and blessed her and kissed her. And Aseneth stretched out her hands and grasped Jacob's neck and hung herself on her father's neck just like someone hangs on to his father's neck when he returns from fighting into his house, and she kissed him.³⁰

Jacob's immediate acceptance of his daughter-in-law is yet another stamp of approval on Aseneth's status. Lipsett once again draws attention to the repeated mentions of kissing and touching between the new family members, concluding, "Given the tale's sustained emphasis on whom one may and may not touch or kiss, Aseneth's intimacy with Jacob confirms that she has been transformed from the liminality of virginity to the safety of a married woman, from stranger to kin, from idolater to God-venerator."³¹

Aseneth's close relationship to Jacob is also mentioned in *Kuntras aḥaron mimidrash Yelamdeinu*, a 14th century compilation of minor Genesis midrashim. Genesis 48 opens with Joseph passively informed of his father's illness and his subsequent decision to bring his sons to their grandfather's deathbed for a final goodbye. The medieval Ashkenazic *Kuntras aḥaron*

³⁰ Burchard, 238.

³¹ Lipsett, 118.

mimidrash Yelamdeinu, attributed to R. Shimon HaDarshan, elaborates on Joseph's thought process and provides the answer for who told Joseph about the urgency of his father's illness:

"Some time later... (Genesis 48:1)" Joseph pondered and thought, "Jacob made me firstborn and pushed Reuben out from the firstborn position, and he commands that my mother Rachel is buried with him in the cave." He took his two sons with him, like the parable of the priest who went to the threshing floor and took his two sons with him to inform [them] that there was a portion for them, like him. Who told him [that his father was sick]? Aseneth his wife, who cared for [his father] when his father came down to Egypt and was a caretaker for him, and when she saw that he was sick, she immediately sent word and told Joseph.³²

Aseneth is identified not only as the person who informs Joseph that time is running out, but she is specified as the caretaker of Jacob in his old age. Of all Jacob's daughters-in-law, it is the outsider Aseneth who is granted intimate access to the tribal patriarch. The midrash claims her term as his personal nurse began upon his entrance into Egypt, implying that she had spent seventeen years by his side as his companion and caretaker prior to his death. Aseneth's acceptance as Joseph's wife and a member of the family is so complete that she has preferential access to Israel himself for almost two decades, and no mention is made of such an arrangement being inappropriate given her Egyptian background. Aseneth has not only a front-row seat to the death of the great patriarch, but she has control over the information of his imminent demise; she dispatches the news to her husband first, ensuring that he and their sons will be there for any blessings Jacob might be inclined to make before the end.³³

³² J.D. Eisenstein, ed., *Otzar Midrashim* (New York: 1915), 224. Translation my own.

³³ Aseneth's actions are comparable to that of Bathsheba in I Kings 1, whose direct appeal to the elderly King David ensures that her son Solomon is named heir to the throne.

Joseph and Aseneth goes on to highlight another familial relationship, this time between Aseneth and her brother-in-law Levi, the progenitor of the Levite tribe and leaders like Moses and Aaron:

And Aseneth loved Levi exceedingly beyond all of Joseph's brethren, because he was one who attached himself to the Lord, and he was a prudent man and a prophet of the Most High and sharp-sighted with his eyes, and he used to see letters written in heaven by the finger of God and he knew the unspeakable (mysteries) of the Most High God and revealed them to Aseneth in secret, because he himself, Levi, loved Aseneth very much.³⁴

In Joseph, Aseneth has a perfect spouse, and in Jacob, she has a doting father-in-law. In Levi, she finds a friend and a kindred spirit who recognizes her piety. Since Levi is the ancestor to the priestly and levitical castes, his approval in matters of piety is paramount, so his ability to share sacred mysteries with his sister-in-law proves that she is worthy enough to receive and safeguard holy information.

Finally, in Midrash Tadshe (also known as the Baraita of R. Pinḥas ben Yair), Aseneth finds her place as a confirmed and kosher convert in the line of the great matriarchs of Israel:

There were twenty-three upright women great in righteousness in Israel, and these are they: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, Yocheved, Miriam, the five daughters of Zelophehad, Deborah, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, Abigail, the Tekoite woman who was wise, the widow of Elijah, the Shunamite, Yehosheva, Huldah, Naomi, and the one woman from among the wives of the prophets (II Kings 4:1), and Queen Esther. And there are prophets from among them, and these are they: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, and Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Huldah. And additionally, there are pious and kosher converts from among the nations, and these are they: Aseneth, Tzipporah, Shifra, Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, Rahab, Ruth, and Yael.³⁵

³⁴ Burchard, 239

³⁵ Eisenstein, 486. Translation my own.

While Aseneth does not have pride of place in the list of upright mothers in Israel, Pinhas ben Yair lists her as the first of the ‘pious and kosher’ converts, grouped with women of similar significance to the history and development of Israel.

Chapter Two: Analysis of Pharaoh's Daughter in Midrash and Aggadah

Unlike Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter has a more extensive scriptural narrative, appearing in both Exodus and potentially in I Chronicles. She is introduced in Exodus 2:5, after Moses's mother Yocheved sets him adrift on the Nile in a reed basket while his sister Miriam guards him from afar. Pharaoh's daughter spies the basket as she comes to the river to bathe, and she recognizes that the baby within is a Hebrew child, sentenced to die by her father's decree. She flouts her father's sentence and works in league with Miriam, who approaches her with the suggestion to fetch a Hebrew nurse for the child. Birth mother meets adoptive mother as Yocheved is brought before Pharaoh's daughter and given payment—an employee rather than a slave—to nurse and wean the child. Yocheved reunites with her son, bringing him to Pharaoh's palace when he is weaned to deliver him to his adoptive mother, who raises him in the palace of the very man who ordered his death. Pharaoh's daughter, though never named herself in Exodus, gives Moses his name, a pun on the Hebrew *'m'shitihu,*' or 'I drew him' from the water.

While there is no pesky exogamy factor the rabbis must correct within Exodus—Pharaoh's daughter is not Moses's birth mother, so his lineage is still purely Israelite—she draws attention with her rebellious nature. She, like Aseneth, is an Egyptian outsider. Yet her sympathies are with the Israelites. She adopts Moses knowing he is a Hebrew and disregards her father's ruling that he should die. She pays his enslaved Hebrew mother to nurse him. She raises him as a prince of Egypt. All honor in her story is directed toward the Hebrews, not to her father.

Couple this unique character with the later mention in I Chronicles 4:18 of a "Pharaoh's daughter" in the Judahite genealogies, and a midrashic explanation is required to make the leap:

The sons of Ezra: Jether, Mered, Ephraim, and Jalon. She [NJPS note: “apparently Bithiah; cf. v. 18] conceived and bore Miriam, Shammai, and Ishbah father of Eshtemoa. His Judahite wife gave birth to Jered, father of Gedor; Heber, father of Soco; and Jekuthiel, father of Zanoah. These were the sons of Bithiah, Pharaoh’s daughter, whom Mered married.

On its own, the text does not clarify which Pharaoh’s daughter Mered marries. This particular verse is fraught with genealogical discontinuity. Ezra’s lineage is not clarified, and the “she” who gives birth to Miriam, Shammai, and Ishbah not only has no name, but no connection to the genealogy—to whom is she married, and who is the father of these children? How is this unnamed woman, which the NJPS identifies as Bithiah from the following verse, related genealogically or thematically to Ezra? The identity of the husband of the “Judahite wife” is equally unclear, for though the following sentence says, “These were the sons of Bithiah, Pharaoh’s daughter, whom Mered married,” the verses are confusing enough that it does not necessarily stand to reason that the Judahite wife must be Pharaoh’s daughter.

To make some sense of these verses, the rabbis make them continuous with the Exodus narrative and cast Pharaoh’s daughter—Moses’s adoptive mother—as the unidentified Pharaoh’s daughter of verse 18. They make Pharaoh’s daughter and the Judahite wife one and the same, making her the mother of Jered, Heber, and Jekuthiel. The NJPS even grants her additional children through the previous verse.

If one reads this reference, as the rabbis intended, as continuous with the Exodus narrative, then Pharaoh’s unnamed daughter has completely transformed. She is named—Bithiah—and married to a Judahite man, the mother of three sons and grandmother to three grandsons. Somewhere between the gates of Pharaoh’s palace where Yocheved dropped off her toddler Moses and the Promised Land, Pharaoh’s daughter has become part of the Israelite nation. To be

eligible for marriage to Mered, and to be qualified as a Judahite woman, some massive transformation had to have taken place. The midrashim cited in this chapter attempt to fill in the gaps.

Not every midrashic source in this chapter is explicitly linked to conversion. While Bavli Tractate Sotah, Shemot Rabbah, Midrash Tadshe, and Midrash Tanchuma label Pharaoh's daughter as a convert to the Israelite faith, other sources do not. Vayikra Rabbah and Derekh Eretz Zuta laud and even reward her for her willingness to stand up to idolatry and save Moses from the Nile, but they do not make the claim that her actions were born out of a desire for conversion. However, since these sources tend at least to put her on a par with Israelites, either through marriage or comparison, they are included in this chapter.

I. Motivation

A. Catalyst

Three nearly identical midrashim about the conversion of Pharaoh's daughter exist, in b. Sotah 12b, Shemot Rabbah 1:23, and Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 7. These accounts concern her introduction in Exodus 2:5, when she comes to the Nile River to bathe. The midrash covers, in brief, both her motivation to convert and the method by which she converts:

Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the river. R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon ben Yochai: This teaches that she went down to bathe [herself clean] from her father's idols. And thus it states, "When Adonai has bathed away the filth of the daughters of Zion... (Isaiah 4:4)"

Pharaoh's daughter's mere bath is transformed in the midrash into a self-driven ritual to purge herself from the sins of worshipping her father's idols, a proto-*mikvah* immersion. Pharaoh's daughter has taken umbrage with her father's style of worship, though the midrash does not tell us what aspect troubles her. Is it that the gods of her father are not worthy of worship, having

failed to steer him from his evil path of commanding the murder of the Hebrew boys? Or has she recognized their falseness? The midrashim of this era do not elaborate.¹

II. Ritual

A. Conversion

The three midrashim about Pharaoh's daughter's conversion all agree that her bathing in the Nile functions as a *mikvah* immersion, using the cleansing powers of the river to represent a new birth and separation from the worship of her past. This conversion is linked to Isaiah 4:4, "When Adonai has bathed away the filth of the daughters of Zion," implying both that God has a hand in the transformative power of her immersion in washing away her previous sins of idol worship and that Pharaoh's daughter has always been, like Aseneth, a daughter of Zion. The verse is telling; it does not talk about God turning the hearts of other nations away from idol worship, but about the daughters of Zion being renewed by the power of their own God. Aseneth's name was written in the book of the living from the beginning of time, and Pharaoh's daughter is a daughter of Zion, capable of being cleansed through immersion because of this identity. If it were not her destiny to join the Israelites, such a purification would not have been possible.

¹ However, 19th century commentator Moshe Sofer later wrote her motivations in his commentary on Exodus. The patriarch Jacob had blessed the Nile to always rise high after his meeting with the Pharaoh at the end of Genesis, and common lore attributed the Nile's continued high level over the centuries to Jacob's blessing and the beneficial presence of his descendants in Egypt. However, the Pharaoh at the beginning of Exodus, without the memory of Joseph's aid to humble him, declares himself the source of the Nile's blessing and goes so far as to proclaim himself a Nile god. When his daughter goes to bathe in the Nile, it is a political act: "She came to bathe in the Nile to cleanse [herself] from that same idol worship of which her father had spoken—that he [ruled] over the Nile, for she believed that the Nile was blessed by Jacob. And from there, she saved a child of the Hebrews from the Nile, for it appeared to her an injustice to sentence the children of Jacob to the waters of the Nile."

The immersion in the Nile is unique. Compared to other midrashic accounts of conversions in the Torah, Pharaoh's daughter intuitively follows the later rabbinic process. As a woman, she cannot be circumcised, but she can immerse herself in a *halachically* approved source of *mikvah* water, making her conversion to the Israelite faith as close to rabbinically valid as possible.

In the book *Moses' Women*, Shera Tuchman and Sandra Rapoport elucidate that this moment of conversion, and the adoption of an Israelite child that immediately follows it, speak to the soul of Pharaoh's daughter and where her loyalties lie. They write, "The Talmud (Sotah 12b) teaches us that so evolved was the princess's soul, that her immersion that morning served as her symbolic conversion, her transformation from pagan to believer... It wounds her sense of justice that the Hebrew babies, sons of the sons of the patriarch Jacob, source of the Nile's blessings, should be relegated to the river's depths.² For all these reasons, the princess's intellectual and moral imperative does not allow her to turn away from what is surely a Hebrew baby floating on the Nile. Her soul is cleaving to the baby's plight."³ Her conversion would not have been possible or complete if her heart had not already been called to identify with the Hebrew cause. She identifies too strongly with the Israelites, even as an outsider, to believe anything her father says. When Moses enters her life in his basket, she recognizes that they are on the same side.

B. Name Change

² Tuchman and Rapoport seem to be drawing from the Sofer commentary mentioned in the previous footnote for their analysis.

³ Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport, *Moses' Women* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2008), 62.

The rabbis make the midrashic link that I Chronicles 4:18 is the second major mention of Pharaoh's daughter in Scripture, and this verse is the origin of midrashim about her name change. Though she goes unnamed in Exodus, I Chronicles gives her the name Bithiah, which the rabbis clarify is not her Egyptian birth name. Like Aseneth, the name change Pharaoh's daughter receives is initiated in the divine realm. God is the one to personally bestow a new name upon her in Vayikra Rabbah 1:3:

These were the sons of Bithiah, Pharaoh's daughter. R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of R. Levi [said], "The Holy One Blessed Be God said to Bithiah daughter of Pharaoh, 'Moses was not your son, yet you called him your son. So though you are not my daughter, I will call you my daughter [biti],' as it is said, 'these are the descendants of Bithiah'—bat Yah [daughter of God]".⁴

Aseneth's name change was indicative of a divine destiny; this name change is indicative of divine parentage. God's adoption of Pharaoh's daughter is more than divine recompense for her good deed in saving Moses; it is an affirmation of her place among God's people. In a culture that identifies children as the sons or daughters of their father, Pharaoh's daughter is no longer attributed to her evil father on earth, but the most supreme father of all. Her presence among the Israelites cannot be disputed, for there can be no greater lineage. Nothing beats being the daughter of God.

III. Aftermath

A. Reward

While Pharaoh's daughter is not explicitly rewarded for her conversion anywhere in midrash, she is rewarded more broadly in Tractate Derekh Eretz Zuta, which concerns proper etiquette and behavior. The first chapter of the tractate, which offers proverbs about how to

⁴ Ed. Mirkin, Moshe Aryeh. *Midrash Rabbah: Vayikra Rabbah, Volume 1*. (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1961) 12.

behave in an upright manner, ends with three lists of biblical characters awarded special honors for their piety and devotion to God. Seven patriarchs are listed as members of covenants with God, seven leaders are singled out as being incorruptible in death (i.e. not susceptible to decay), and nine people receive the tremendous honor of entering paradise without death as an entry requirement:

Nine entered the Garden of Eden still alive, and these are they: Enoch, Elijah, the Messiah, Eliezer the servant of Abraham, Ebed-melech the Cushite, Hiram king of Tyre, Yabetz son of Rabbi Judah haNasi, Asher's daughter Serach, and Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah. And there are some who say, take out Hiram king of Tyre and put in his place Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi.⁵

While it is more likely that this honor is granted to Pharaoh's daughter for her rescue of Moses rather than due to her conversion, the honor puts her on the same level as some of Judaism's all-stars. Pharaoh's daughter is granted the same admission to Eden as the Messiah and the prophet Elijah. She joins many of the listed characters as rescuers of the Jewish people, parallel to Eliezer who arranges the match between Isaac and Rebekah and Ebed-melech who saves the prophet Jeremiah from the pit. Compared to leaders like Abraham, Jacob, and her own adopted son Moses—who die natural deaths and are rewarded with inviolate corpses—Pharaoh's daughter is elevated. She will never have to experience death.

In addition to her eternal reward, some interpretations of I Chronicles 4:18 offer marriage as another reward to Pharaoh's daughter. Like Aseneth's marriage to a model Israelite, Pharaoh's daughter is wed to the Judahite Mered, sometimes identified as Caleb. Of this marriage,

Tuchman and Rapoport write:

In the manner of a reward to [Pharaoh's daughter] for her bravery in rescuing and mothering the baby Moses, the Scriptures in the First Book of Chronicles (4:15, 18) states

⁵ Daniel Sperber, ed., *Masekhet Derekh Eretz Zuta* (Jerusalem: Tzur-Ot, 1982) 68. Translation my own.

that she is wed to Caleb, the son of Yephuneh⁶... Caleb is one of the true heroic figures of the post-Exodus generation. By linking [her] to Caleb in this most honorable fashion, the Scripture is bringing the lapsed Egyptian princess into the fold of the nascent Israelite nation in a definitive way.⁷

B. Incorporation

The rabbis see Scripture as explicitly incorporating Pharaoh's daughter into the Israelite community in I Chronicles 4:18, identifying her as the "Judahite wife" of the Israelite Mered. As the rabbis interpret it, that Pharaoh's daughter is called a "Judahite wife" before "daughter of Pharaoh" is significant; their reading of the text recognizes that a cultural transformation has taken place. Pharaoh's daughter has assimilated completely into the culture of the tribe of Judah. It is almost as if Scripture forestalls any arguments about her status as an Israelite by prioritizing her tribal affiliation before her family of birth. Pharaoh's daughter gives birth to three sons, affirming her place and theirs in the tribal genealogy.

Vayikra Rabbah elaborates on the match made between Mered and Pharaoh's daughter. This is not a marriage that merely secures her place in the Israelite community, but a marriage based on similar deeds and values. The midrash explains:

Whom Mered married—This is Caleb. R. Abba bar Kahana and R. Yehudah bar Simon—one said, "He rebelled (*marad*) against the counsel of the scouts, and she rebelled (*mardah*) against the counsel of her father; let the rebel come to take the rebel [as a wife]." One said, "He rescued the flock, and she rescued the shepherd."⁸

The rabbis identify Mered as Caleb, the leader of the scouts who survey the Promised Land who unsuccessfully tries to rally the hopes of the Israelites so they can begin their conquest in

⁶ Tuchman and Rapoport mistakenly read I Chronicles 4 through the lens of Vayikra Rabbah, to be discussed in the following section, that identifies Mered as Caleb.

⁷ Tuchman and Rapoport, 65.

⁸ Also found in b. Megillah 13a.

Numbers 13. According to them, the name “Mered” is a title or nickname derived from the Hebrew root meaning “to rebel,” as he rebelled against the other scouts in his party who claimed that the task of conquering the Promised Land was impossible. These rabbis envision the adoption of Moses as Pharaoh’s daughter’s rebellion against her father’s edict to murder all the Hebrew male children. Both rebels flaunt their disagreement publicly; Caleb silences the entire crowd with his declaration that the Promised Land can be taken, and Pharaoh’s daughter raises a Hebrew baby right under her father’s nose. This is a marriage of true minds. It is only fitting that God’s favorite rebels marry each other, and that two people so instrumental in the survival of the Hebrews are matched together.

Geula Twersky comments on this *shidduch* in her article, “In Search of Bithiah Bat Pharaoh and the Meaning of I Chronicles 4:18.” She writes:

The marriage of Caleb/Mered to Bithiah infuses the genealogy of Judah with the message of what it means to be a true leader. Bithiah’s rejection of her father’s genocidal edicts facilitated the emergence of the unparalleled leadership of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the Exodus from Egypt, and the ultimate establishment of the Nation of Israel. Similarly, Caleb/Mered’s defiant stand against popular opinion paved the way for Israel’s entry into the Land.⁹

The marriage between Caleb/Mered and Pharaoh’s daughter is not just a means to bring her into the Israelite fold. They serve as a model couple to the Israelite population, representing the various ways men and women can contribute to the future of the people. In this way, Pharaoh’s daughter is not just brought into Israelite peoplehood, but raised as an exemplar within it.

⁹ Geula Twersky, “In Search of Bithiah Bat Pharaoh and the Meaning of I Chronicles 4:18,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 50 (2022): 94–104.

Her exemplar status is upheld in Midrash Tadshe, the Baraita of R. Pinḥas ben Yair mentioned in the previous chapter:

There were twenty-three upright women great in righteousness in Israel, and these are they: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, Yocheved, Miriam, the five daughters of Zelophehad, Deborah, the wife of Manoah, Hannah, Abigail, the Tekoite woman who was wise, the widow of Elijah, the Shunamite, Yehosheva, Huldah, Naomi, and the one woman from among the wives of the prophets (II Kings 4:1), and Queen Esther. And there are prophets from among them, and these are they: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah, and Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Huldah. And additionally, there are pious and kosher converts from among the nations, and these are they: Aseneth, Tzipporah, Shifra, Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, Rahab, Ruth, and Yael.¹⁰

Like Aseneth, the place of Pharaoh's daughter is secured among the pious and kosher converts whose transformations into Israelite culture and religion were so complete as to be irrefutable.

¹⁰ Eisenstein, 486. Translation my own.

Chapter Three: Analysis of Jethro in Midrash and Aggadah

As daughters of high-profile Egyptians, Aseneth and Pharaoh's daughter are enough of a challenge for the rabbis to rehabilitate into pious converts. Jethro, as an idol-worshipping priest, presents an even more difficult challenge—and that much more of a coup when transformed into a convert, given where he started. Of the three characters discussed in this thesis, Jethro has the most scriptural mentions by far. He is introduced in Exodus 2:18 as the priest of Midian—albeit identified by a different name (Reuel), which is a recurring theme with Jethro.¹ His daughters, having been rescued by a fugitive Moses at the well, bring Moses to his camp, where he is invited to stay among the Midianites while he avoids facing murder charges in Egypt. Jethro gives his daughter Tzipporah to Moses as a wife in verse 22, incorporating Moses into the Midianite tribe by marriage.

Hardly any midrashic ink is spent on a conversion story for Tzipporah; the rabbis, some associating her with the Cushite woman whom Moses is said to have married in Numbers 12:1, leave her status unchanged. Though some eyebrows might raise at the notion of Moses's marriage to an unconverted outsider, Tzipporah lacks something that Aseneth and Pharaoh's daughter, her outsider counterparts, have: sons integrated into the tribes of Israel. Aseneth's conversion to the Israelite faith is more urgent, given that her two children become progenitors of the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim. Pharaoh's daughter gives birth, by midrashic link, to three recorded Judahite sons. But Tzipporah's sons, Gershom and Eliezer, disappear from the narrative. They are not mentioned as cornerstones of their father's legacy and the Levite clan, so their mixed heritage is less of a rabbinic headache.

¹ This reflects the multiple identifications of Moses's father-in-law in the Torah, reconciled in midrash.

However, the person who can retroactively make Tzipporah an appropriate wife for Moses, and a far more enticing conversion candidate by far with scriptural evidence for a spiritual change, is her father Jethro. To convert Jethro, who worshiped so many idols, shows the indisputable power of the Israelite God.

Moses is a shepherd in the Midianite lands when he encounters the burning bush and receives his sacred mission. It is Jethro's permission he seeks—once again, by another name (Jether)—to return to Egypt, bringing his wife and sons. Tzipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer are missing from the tale of the Exodus once Tzipporah completes the bizarre bridegroom-of-blood ritual on their journey to Egypt, and at some point, they are sent back to Midian by Moses. They return only briefly as side characters in an episode that features Jethro front and center. Exodus 18:1, the verse that sparks much rabbinic imagination about Jethro's conversion, reads, "Jethro, the priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how Adonai brought Israel out of Egypt." What exactly Jethro hears and how he hears it remains a mystery, but it is the impetus for his journey to greet Moses, with his daughter and grandsons in tow. Exodus 18:7 shows the close relationship between Moses and Jethro upon the latter's arrival, how "Moses went out to greet his father-in-law, bowing low and kissing him. They asked each other about their welfare and went into the tent." Moses goes over the details of the events since the Exodus, which causes Jethro to rejoice:

Jethro said, "Blessed be Adonai, who saved you all from the hand of the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, who saved the people from under the hand of the Egyptians! Now I know how great Adonai is compared to all the gods, because of how insolently they acted against [the Israelites]." Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, took a burnt-offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the Israelite elders to eat of the meal with Moses' father-in-law before God. (Exod 18:10-12)

After his declaration and sacrifice, Jethro remains to observe Moses in action as a leader and suggests that he form a delegation to assist him in teaching the people and judging cases. He departs at the end of Exodus 18, but he makes another appearance in the Torah—this time by the name of Hobab—in an unresolved episode in Numbers 10. Marching orders for the tribes are given, and Moses asks Jethro, who has inexplicably shown back up in the narrative, to accompany the tribes in the wilderness. Jethro refuses the offer in favor of returning to his native land, and Moses argues with him, promising that God’s bounty will be granted to him if he acts as their guide in the wilderness. As there is no conclusion to the conversation, it appears that Jethro is not swayed by his son-in-law’s plea and that they part ways.

Jethro makes two final appearances in Scripture in Judges, under yet another designation:

The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the City of the Date-Palms with the Judahites into the wilderness of Judah, which is south of Arad. They went and dwelt among the people. (Judges 1:16)

This final detail cements the place of Jethro among the Israelite tribes, making his descendants neighbors to the Judahites. The rabbis will make much of this verse and what it means for Jethro’s conversion. Jethro is also mentioned as an ancestor to Heber, the husband of the tent peg-wielding Yael, in Judges 4:12.

There is no urgency to make Jethro a convert to the Israelite faith. While it lends legitimacy to Moses’s marriage to Tzipporah, all the favors that Jethro does for Moses could simply be those of a good father-in-law and a righteous Gentile. Yet Jethro’s praise of the Israelite God in Exodus 18:10-11, with his subsequent sacrifices in the following verse, provide a puzzle the rabbis must solve. On the one hand, his words could be interpreted as a spontaneous disavowal of other gods and conversion to monolatry or even monotheism. On the other, what

does it say about the Israelite God if a priest from another culture can make sacrifices to said God? Does the Israelite God have any exclusivity? How can an idol worshiper also be permitted to hedge his bets and worship the Israelite God?

These verses are the basis for many of the midrashim in this chapter. Jethro's motivations to convert are covered in Shemot Rabbah, Midrash Tanchuma, and b. Zevachim. Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael explores the more social aspects of Jethro's conversion, including reactions to his conversion and the subsequent reorientation of his life goals, while b. Sanhedrin and Pesikta Rabbati provide explanations for the Judges verse and how Jethro's descendants have a place of honor in Israelite lineage.

I. Motivation

A. Pre-Conversion Foundations

At first glance, Jethro seems one of the least likely characters in the Torah to convert to the Israelite faith, given that he is already pledged as a priest to the Midianite gods. In Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael, Jethro actually demands that Moses, upon the birth of his first child, must dedicate his son to the Midianite gods, whereas his later children can be dedicated to the Israelite God.² It is this dedication to foreign gods that Tziporah then reverses through the bridegroom-of-blood ceremony. Yet, like Aseneth, Jethro is said to have much in common with the Israelite patriarchs and matriarchs of yore. Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael compares Jethro to Abraham and Sarah:

In the beginning, they did not call him [Jethro], rather Jether, as it is said, "Moses went and returned to Jether, his father-in-law" (Exodus 4:18). And when he did good deeds, they added one letter to his [name] and he was called Jethro. And indeed you will find

² Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael, Amalek, 3; ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, A Critical Edition: Volume 2*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933) 168-69; 2004 edition, 2:275.

this with Abraham, who in the beginning was not called this, but rather Abram, and when he did good deeds, they added one letter to his [name] and he was called Abraham. And indeed, you will find this with Sarah, who in the beginning was not called this, but rather Sarai, and when she did good deeds, they added one more letter to her [name], and she was called Sarah.³

Jethro is first called Reuel when he meets Moses and is then called Jether when Moses seeks his permission to return to Egypt. The Hebrew name Jether, made up of three letters (*y-t-r*), is transformed into a four-letter name (*y-t-r-o*) when Jethro hears about the wonders God has done for the Israelites and decides to travel to meet Moses. Adding a letter to Jethro's name recalls adding a *heh* to Abram and Sarai's names, indicative of their transformations into leaders of God's people. So too is Jethro on his journey to becoming a leader and model for the Israelites.

One such way in which he stands apart as a model for the Israelites comes from another example in Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael:

*Jethro said, 'Blessed be G-d...' Rabbi Pappias said, "The verse speaks to the disgrace of Israel, for indeed, there were six hundred thousand people, and not a single one from among them stood and blessed God until Jethro came and blessed God."*⁴

Moshe Reiss, in his article "Jethro the Convert," writes of this midrash,

Jethro celebrates God's liberation of Israel from Egypt, in marked contrast to the Israelites who wish to return to Egypt, as noted in Exodus 16:3 and 17:3. Jethro sees clearly what Israel can only glimpse in fleeting moments punctuated by hunger, thirst, and complaint. The contrast between his praise and their grumbling amounts to a withering critique of their behavior.⁵

While many converts are compared favorably to other Israelites to show their inherent similarities and readiness to join the people of Israel, this is the first example of a conversion candidate one-upping the people of Israel. Jethro succeeds where the Israelites fail. With his

³ Mekhilta, Amalek 3; ed. Lauterbach, 2: 164-65; 2004 edition, 2: 272-273. Translation my own.

⁴ Mekhilta, Amalek 3; ed. Lauterbach, 2: 175; 2004 edition, 2: 279. Translation my own.

⁵ Moshe Reiss, "Jethro the Convert." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41. 2 (2013): 91.

outsider's perspective, he can see and appreciate the miracles God has performed for the Israelites. They themselves, having lived through both the miracles and the doubts, cannot produce adequate awe, and their ingratitude is attributed to them as disgrace and shame.

B. Catalyst

Three different midrashic explanations are offered for Jethro's motivation to convert, and Shemot Rabbah attributes the motivation entirely to himself. Prior to Moses' arrival in Midian and marriage to Tziporah, Jethro had already been reevaluating his life's work as a Midianite priest:

Our Rabbis said, "Jethro was a priest of idolatry, but he saw that there was nothing to it, so he slighted it and planned on doing *teshuvah* before Moses came. He called the citizens of his city and said to them, 'Up until now I have attended to you, but now I am old—choose another priest for yourselves.' And he brought out the implements of idol worship and gave them everything..."⁶

The revelation of the emptiness of his old gods is unprompted. Jethro has already come to the conclusion that his gods are false, yet he does not reveal this to his followers. Instead, he claims his old age is the reason for his retirement, gives up all his priestly tools, and orders the Midianites to find a successor. He plans to atone for his sinful idol worship, presumably in private, until his godly son-in-law arrives.

An early tradition in Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael, Amalek 3, cited and expanded later in b. Zevachim 116a and Midrash Shmuel, pinpoints the catalyst as the phrase that begins Exodus 18, "Jethro heard..." Different rabbis offer different explanations for what exactly Jethro heard, other than the numerous miracles God performed for the Israelites, but all come to the same

⁶ Shemot Rabbah 1:32 (2); ed. Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: Dvir Publishing House, 1984). 94. Translation my own.

conclusion: whatever he heard, it was worth converting to the Israelite faith as a result. The Bavli version reads:

What news did he hear that he came and converted?⁷ Rabbi Yehoshua says, “He heard about the war with Amalek, as it is written next to it, ‘Joshua weakened Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Exodus 17:13).’” Rabbi Elazar the Modai says, “He heard the giving of the Torah and came, for when the Torah was given to the Israelites, God’s voice went from one end of the world to the other, and all the kings of the Gentiles were seized with shaking in their palaces, and they uttered a song, as it is said, ‘And in His palace, all say, “Glory!” (Psalm 29:9)’” ...Rabbi Eliezer says, “He heard the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and came, as it is said, ‘When all the Amorite kings heard (Joshua 5:10),’ and also Rahab the Prostitute said to Joshua’s messengers, ‘For we heard how Adonai dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds (Joshua 2:10).’”

The rabbis of this midrash play with the chronology of the Torah. Rabbi Yehoshua’s suggestion, that Jethro heard about the war against the Amalekites, carries weight because the prior chapter to Jethro’s arrival concerns this war. It stands to reason that Jethro hears about the war in the region and the Israelite victory, and in believing God to be the ultimate deciding factor in victory and knowing his son-in-law Moses to be among the Israelites, he comes to see for himself how the tribes fare. Rabbi Eliezer’s suggestion is that Jethro heard about the great Exodus from Egypt and God’s rescue of the Israelites from bondage, pointing to two later scriptural examples about how word of God’s water-related miracles travels fast, even among the Gentile nations. Though the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai occurs after Jethro leaves, Rabbi Elazar the Modai uses a verse from Psalm 29 to demonstrate how the sound of *matan torah* echoed across the world, alerting the Gentile nations. In any of these three examples, it is news of God’s miraculous intervention for the Israelites that catches Jethro’s interest from afar and inspires him to meet with Moses.

⁷ The Mekhilta version does not include the word “and converted.”

Midrash Tanchuma leans toward the news of Amalek's defeat as Jethro's motivation. Playing with Song of Songs 1:3—"Your name is oil poured out, therefore maidens love you"—the rabbis determine that God, or more specifically God's Torah, is the oil, while Jethro is part of the 'maiden' nations who come to love God:

Rabbi Berechiah said that just as oil makes bright, so too the Torah makes bright... Another matter: *maidens love you*—these are the nations of the world that convert. Who was this? Jethro. When he heard what miracles had been done for Israel, he came and converted, as it is said, "Jethro heard..." (Exodus 18:1). This is said [elsewhere] in Scripture—"Smite the scorner and the simple will become shrewd" (Proverbs 19:25). "Smite the scorner"—this is Amalek; "the simple will become shrewd"—this is Jethro.⁸

Jethro is the leading example for the maidens/nations who come to love God, referenced back to the beginning of Exodus 18. Following this reference, another is made to Proverbs 19:25, connecting the adage "smite the scorner and the simple will become shrewd" to the end of Exodus 17 into the beginning of Exodus 18. Joshua and his army defeat the Amalekites in Exodus 17:13 and a victory altar is built as a monument to the battle at the end of the chapter, after which Jethro hears about what God has done for the Israelites and begins his journey to meet with Moses. The Amalekites are the scorners of the Israelites; having been smitten, the simple—Jethro in his previous life as an idol-worshipping priest—becomes shrewd, wisely seeking the true God and God's emissary on earth, Moses.

The influence of Moses is a third explanation for how Jethro comes to the Israelite faith, appearing in the same midrash in Kohelet Rabbah that describes Joseph's influence on Aseneth:

They would come and go from the holy place—because [the converts] went to a holy place. These are synagogues and study halls. *But be forgotten*—their evil deeds [were forgotten]. *Where they did [these things]*—their good deeds. *Where they did [these things], this too is vanity*.—Rabbi Yitzhak said, "This is not vanity, for [it is vanity that]

⁸ Midrash Tanchuma, ed. Shlomo Buber, Yitro 2 (Vilna, 1885) 35a. Translation my own.

they did not come on their own.” Rabbi Bon said, “The righteous went there and they came, like Joseph to Aseneth, Joshua to Rahab, Boaz to Ruth, Moses to Hobab.”⁹

Like Joseph, Moses is the positive Israelite influence on Jethro’s life, either during his time in Midian or when they meet again in the wilderness in Exodus 18. Unlike the story in Shemot Rabbah, Kohelet Rabbah points out that Jethro did not come to a monotheistic revelation by himself, but through the intervention of another person.

II. Ritual

A. Conversion

Jethro offers praise of the Israelite God along with an admission of God’s supremacy, though in the Torah, it is more likely that Jethro recognizes God as a superior deity than as the singular deity:

Jethro said, “Blessed be Adonai, who saved you all from the hand of the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, who saved the people from under the hand of the Egyptians! Now I know how great Adonai is compared to all the gods, because of how insolently they acted against [the Israelites].” Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, took a burnt-offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the Israelite elders to eat of the meal with Moses’ father-in-law before God. (Exodus 18:10-12)

The rabbis interpret his declaration as a renunciation of his former Midianite gods and a dedication to worshiping the Israelite God, which is confirmed by his multiple sacrifices. In *Jethro and the Jews*, Beatrice Lawrence explains that, in the rabbinic mind, repudiation of idols is equivalent to accepting the Torah. She writes,

It is possible that there was a belief circulating among the writers of [Greco-Roman and late antique] Palestine that renouncing idolatry was an act which linked the renouncer to an important symbol of Jewish identity: the Torah. Belief in the Torah...was apparently one means by which a non-Jew could access the Jewish community to an extent.¹⁰

⁹ Kipperwasser, 156.

¹⁰ Beatrice J.W. Lawrence, *Jethro and the Jews: Jewish Biblical Interpretation and the Question of Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 69.

Since Rabbi Elazar the Modai believes that the news “Jethro heard” was the giving of the Torah, his renunciation of the Midianite gods could be interpreted as acceptance of the Torah.

Not only does Jethro sacrifice to God before the existence of a Temple, but he does so before the existence of a Tabernacle or even a priesthood. Aaron has not yet been appointed high priest, and sacrifices are not yet a concretized system of worship to the Israelite God. Lawrence points out this discrepancy, noting, “The text expresses no surprise that the priest of a foreign religion is the officiant at this sacrifice, nor at the fact that Aaron and the elders participate with him... [This is] as a matter of necessity, as Aaron has not yet been consecrated.”¹¹ It is almost as if Jethro, as an experienced priest, is laying the foundations for Aaron, allowing him to watch and learn in anticipation of his future role.

B. Zevachim 116a also notes the strangeness of Jethro’s sacrifice, but finds textual support for his actions:

But it is written, “Jethro, Moses’s father-in-law, took a burnt-offering and sacrifices” (Exodus 18:12). This [verse] was written after the giving of the Torah. This goes along well according to the one who said that Jethro came after the giving of the Torah. But according to the one who said Jethro came before the giving of the Torah, what is there to say? As it was said, the disciples of Rabbi Chiyya and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi [discussed the issue]. One said, “Jethro came before the giving of the Torah,” and another said, “Jethro came after the giving of the Torah.” [The Gemara states,] according to the one who said Jethro came before the giving of the Torah, it is logical since Noah’s descendants offered peace-offerings. This is in agreement with the Tannaim, [as it was taught in a *baraita*,] “Jethro, the priest of Midian, heard” (Exodus 18:1).

There are two justifications for Jethro’s sacrifice in b. Zevachim 116, which are also found in Vayikra Rabbah 9:6. In line with Rabbi Elazar the Modai’s interpretation that Jethro came after the giving of the Torah, one explanation is that though the episodes are out of order, Jethro arrived after the laws of sacrifice had already been given, though perhaps not put into practice.

¹¹ Lawrence, 50.

This would make his sacrifice his first action as a convert to follow God's sacrificial commands, making him a *mitzvot*-abiding Israelite. If Jethro arrived before the giving of the Torah, then his sacrifices correspond to the sacrifices offered by Noah and his family after they disembarked from the ark, still bringing him within the God-honoring tradition. Regardless of the sacrificial precedent, that Jethro shares the sacrifice with Aaron and the Israelite elders is significant. For a community that will place prohibitions on eating with people from different cultures, the Israelites show that they consider Jethro part of their in-group, and thus sharing a sacred meal with him is proper etiquette.

As the only male identified in this thesis, Jethro is the only conversion candidate who can undertake a circumcision. Various interpretations of Exodus 18:9 reveal that the phrase 'Jethro rejoiced,' which uses the verb with the root *ch-d-h*, could be explained in a different way. Judith Baskin writes about these interpretations in her book *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*: "One finds, for example, 'And [Jethro] became a Jew,' (וייהוד, reading the verb as וייהד); and 'he declared the unity of God' (from אחד, 'one'); Rab (fl. 220-250 CE) says he passed a sharp (דח) knife over his flesh, that is, he fulfilled the requirements of a proselyte by becoming circumcised..."¹² By interpreting the verb not as 'rejoiced' but 'used something sharp,' Jethro responds to the news of God's wonders by immediate self-circumcision, declaration of faith, and sacrifice.

Other Jewish writers upheld this belief. Eleazar beRabbi Qilar, a Byzantine *payyetan*, wrote a *piyyut* about Jethro inserted into the *Yotzer Or* benediction in the morning liturgy: "His father-in-law skipped to circumcise himself with haste/And Jethro, father-in-law of Moses, took

¹² Baskin, 54.

Tzipporah.”¹³ Eleazar beRabbi Qilar places the timing of Jethro’s circumcision much earlier, in contrast with the midrash that he demanded that Moses, upon his marriage to Tzipporah, offer their first son to idol worship. In this *piyyut*, Jethro makes haste, literally skipping to circumcise himself on Moses’ arrival in Midian and then offering his daughter as a bride for the righteous Hebrew. Regardless of the timing, Jethro hastens to circumcise himself once in Moses’s midst as proof of his dedication to the Israelite God.

B. Name Change

Though diverse scriptural traditions refer to Moses’s father-in-law by many different names, there is no specific name change—either in Torah or in the midrash—that represents his transformation from a Midianite priest into an Israelite believer. However, Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael does provide ex post facto explanations for all of his names that relate to him as a believer in the Israelite God:

He was called by seven names: Jether, Jethro, Heber, Hobab, ben Reuel, Putiel, [and] Keni. Jether, for he added a *parsha* to the Torah, [playing on the Hebrew root *y-t-r*, to add]. Jethro, for he did many good deeds [playing on the Hebrew root *y-t-r*, which also means to do much]. Heber, for he made friends with G-d, [playing with the Hebrew word for friend, *chaver*]. Hobab, for he was beloved to G-d, [playing with the Hebrew word for beloved, *chaviv*]. Ben, for he was like a son to G-d, [playing with the Hebrew word for son, *ben*]. Reuel, for he was like a friend to G-d, [playing with another Hebrew word for friend, *re’ah*]. Putiel, for he was weaned himself from idol worship, [playing with the Hebrew root for wean, *p-t-r*]. Keni, for he was zealous for heaven [playing with the Hebrew word for zeal, *kina*] and he acquired for himself the Torah, [playing with the Hebrew root for acquire, *k-n-h*].¹⁴

Of the seven names attributed to Jethro, he is called only five explicitly in the text: Jether in Exodus 4:18, Jethro throughout Exodus 18, Hobab in Numbers 10:29 and Judges 4:11, Reuel or

¹³ Shulamit Elizur, *Piyyutei Rabbi Eleazer beirabbi Qilar* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 208.

¹⁴ Mekhilta, Amalek, 3; ed. Lauterbach, 2: 164; 2004 edition, 2: 272. Translation my own. The explanation for the name ‘Reuel’ also can be found in Shemot Rabbah 1:32.

Ben Reuel in Exodus 2:18 and Numbers 10:29, and Keni or ‘the Kenite’ in Judges 1:16. In these cases, the character is identified as the father-in-law of Moses. How Jethro relates to the names Heber and Putiel is less clear. Heber is the name of one of his Kenite descendants, married to Yael in Judges 4, and Putiel is the name of the priest Eleazar’s father-in-law. A midrash in b. Sanhedrin 82b describes Putiel as Jethro in his former life as an idol-worshipping priest.

Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael does not describe a heavenly moment of bestowing a new name upon Jethro as a reward and acknowledgement of his conversion and inclusion into the Israelite fold. Instead, it connects the dots between these disparate names as titles for a transformed man. These names all become post-conversion names as they describe different aspects of Jethro’s relationship with God.

III. Aftermath

A. Reactions

The most important midrashic reaction to Jethro’s desire to convert comes not from a human character, but from God, and it serves as the basis for how converts are to be treated when they enter the Jewish community. Once again, Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael offers a social treatment of Jethro’s conversion journey. When Jethro approaches Moses’ camp in Exodus 18, any negative reaction Moses might have is cut short by God’s decree:

I, I who spoke and the world came into being, I am the One Who Draws Close and not the One Who Distances, as it is said, “I am a God of drawing close and not a God of distancing” (Jeremiah 23:23). I am the one who brought Jethro close and did not keep him distant. So you, when someone comes to you to convert, if he comes for nothing other than the sake of heaven, then you must draw him close and not keep him at a distance.¹⁵

¹⁵ Lauterbach, 277-278. Translation my own.

Like Aseneth and Pharaoh's daughter, Jethro is on a path of divine destiny of which God is not only aware, but entirely approves. God is responsible for Jethro's approach to the camp that precedes his declaration of faith and sacrifice, just as God is responsible for the inspiration and call to any convert. The verse from Jeremiah 23—which, in context, is framed more as a question than its declarative form in this midrash—identifies God's status as the one in control of who enters from the periphery of the community and who is driven away. Jethro's destiny has always been to draw near to the Israelites, and God is happy that his destiny has been facilitated properly. God's positive reaction and encouragement is a lesson for Moses and for all Jews thereafter: if converts come to the Jewish people for the right reasons, like Jethro, then they are to be welcomed and not turned away.

Judith Baskin writes of this midrash and its powerful statement of acceptance, "In Jethro, the rabbis found a perfect homiletical model of the sincere convert. As a powerful foreign priest who became a humble worshiper of Israel's God, he could be used to remind Israel of its obligations to the proselyte, and of God's love for the convert. As a former idolater of great scope, his acceptance by Judaism showed that all sincere converts, regardless of their pasts, were welcome... He proved to the nations that Israel held the convert high in honor."¹⁶

B. Reward

While the progeny of both Aseneth and Pharaoh's daughter serve the important function of integrating them into the Israelite community, Jethro is the first convert character whose progeny—and their high position in the Israelite community—serves as his primary reward for

¹⁶ Baskin, 61.

his dedication to God. Pesikta Rabbati tells a tale of God as a final judge over all the nations of the world, questioning why the various peoples did not turn to God instead of idol worship:

[God] says to the peoples of the earth, “Why did you not draw close to Me?” And when someone answers, “I was absolutely wicked, so I was ashamed,” then God says to them, “Were you worse than Rahab, whose house was in the side of the wall so she could receive robbers and have sex with them inside? Yet when she drew close to Me, didn’t I receive her and raise up prophets and righteous ones from her? Or Jethro, who was a priest of idol worship—when he came to Me, didn’t I receive him and raise up prophets and righteous ones from him? Or Ruth the Moabite, when she came to Me, didn’t I receive her and raise up kings from her?”¹⁷

Jethro is the male example that God upholds against excuses from Gentiles who did not convert.

When they protest that they did not draw near to God out of shame, God uses Jethro’s example—an idol-worshipping man who had much to be ashamed of, yet acknowledged God’s supremacy and worshiped him anyway—to shut down their protests. Not only was Jethro accepted and forgiven, but he was established as the patriarch to a line of prophets and righteous people as a reward for his conversion.

The identities of these prophets and righteous people are clarified in b. Sanhedrin 104a and 106a, though each source claims a different reason for Jethro’s reward:

As Rabbi Yochanan said, “As a reward [for Jethro telling his daughters], ‘Call [Moses], that he might eat bread’ (Exodus 2:20), his descendants merited sitting in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [in the Temple complex], as it is said, ‘And the scribes’ families, who dwell in Jabetz, the Tirathites, the Shimathites, the Sucatites—they are the Kenites who come from Hammath, father of the House of Rechab’ (I Chronicles 2:55).” And it is written there, “The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the City of the Date-Palms with the Judahites into the wilderness of Judah, which is south of Arad. They went and dwelt among the people” (Judges 1:16).

Jethro’s reward, in this instance, is derived from his hospitality. When his daughters tell him about Moses’ actions at the well, he encourages them to invite him in for a meal. His kindness is

¹⁷ Pesikta Rabbati, 40 (Bahodesh Hashvi’i): 3; ed. Meir Friedmann (Vienna, 1880) 177b. Translation my own.

repaid with illustrious descendants, born of the rabbinic imagination that ties I Chronicles 2:55 and Judges 4:16 together. Judges 4:16 identifies Jethro as Keni/the Kenite, whose descendants dwell alongside the Judahites. I Chronicles 2:55 furthers the lineage of the Kenites, splitting them into three distinct tribal groups, all of which are part of a scribal culture in Jabetz. Jethro's descendants, who begin as Kenites in the wilderness of Judah and become scribal families in Jabetz, become the honored members who sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, which was the meeting-place for the Sanhedrin during the Second Temple period. The Sanhedrin functioned as the Supreme Court of the Jews in this era, arbitrating disputes at the highest level and operating within a sacred precinct. That Jethro's descendants were part of the Sanhedrin meant that they understood the laws of the Torah at the highest level and wielded the greatest judicial power. Reiss calls this "an appropriate reward for the offspring of Jethro, who told Moses how to organize the judicial system."¹⁸

Sanhedrin 106a tells the story slightly differently:

Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Simai said, "There were three in that council [of Pharaoh], and they were Balaam, Job, and Jethro. Balaam, who advised [Pharaoh to drown the Hebrew babies], was murdered. Job, who was silent, was punished with afflictions. And Jethro, who fled, his descendants merited sitting in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [in the Temple complex], as it is said, 'And the scribes' families, who dwell in Jabetz, the Tirathites, the Shimathites, the Sucatites—they are the Kenites who come from Hammath, father of the House of Rechab' (I Chronicles 2:55)." And it is written there, "The descendants of the Kenite, the father-in-law of Moses, went up from the City of the Date-Palms with the Judahites into the wilderness of Judah, which is south of Arad. They went and dwelt among the people" (Judges 1:16).

The prooftexts are exactly the same, but the source of Jethro's reward is different. Instead, Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba and Rabbi Simai refer to the famous aggadah that Jethro was among the three Gentile counselors of Pharaoh, who asked them for suggestions on how to curb the threat of the

¹⁸ Reiss, 92.

Hebrew population. Jethro, the only one among the three who flees the Egyptian court rather than be complicit in Pharaoh's murderous scheme, is rewarded with illustrious descendants. In either case, Jethro's meritorious actions bring his progeny not only into the fold of Israel, but into its upper echelons. Such a destiny matches the reward mentioned by God in *Pesikta Rabbati*, when God points to Jethro's line of prophets and *tzaddikim* as a reward for his repudiation of idol worship and acceptance of God.

C. Incorporation

As discussed in the prior section, Jethro's descendants are incorporated into the Israelite tribes, first as neighboring Kenites to the Judahites and later as members of the Sanhedrin during the Second Temple era. The intermarriage and assimilation of Jethro's people into the Jewish people allows for the descendants of the pious convert to have a place of honor and wisdom among the Jewish community. But during his lifetime, Jethro found another way not only to incorporate himself as a necessary member of the Israelites, but like Aseneth, to bring converts into the community. *Mekhilta deRabbi Yishmael* resolves the episode of Numbers 10, when Moses begs Jethro to remain with the Israelites but receives no reply, inventing a reply for him:

[Jethro] said, "Is a candle of any benefit unless it is in a place of darkness? And what is a candle's benefit compared to the sun and the moon? You, Moses, are the sun, and Aaron the moon. What can a candle do between the sun and the moon? Instead, I am going to my country and telling everyone, and converting all my countrymen so I might bring them to the study of Torah and I might draw them under the wings of the *Shechinah*."¹⁹

Now that Jethro has "seen the light," he sees it as his responsibility to bring that light to those who have not yet been exposed to it. What good is his revelation when it pales in comparison to

¹⁹ *Mekhilta, Amalek 4*, ed. Lauterbach, 2:185-86; 2004 ed., 2: 285. Translation my own.

the other luminaries of the Israelite people? Just as Jethro “heard” about what God had done for the Israelites, he sees it as his duty to spread the word so others might hear and convert.

Jethro’s self-identified mission is unique; Aseneth is declared a “city of refuge” for converts and brings her seven handmaidens into the fold, but she does not start a proselytizing mission. Jethro takes it upon himself, without a direct command from God or Moses, to bring the Israelite faith to others. He wants to convert others based on his own experiences. He makes himself a traveling Israelite, a satellite who will be part of the community from afar as he creates more community around him.

Even from afar, Jethro’s change of status and familial relationship takes precedence. Reiss notes that Exodus 18 marks the change in Jethro’s identity from priest of Midian to Moses’s close kin through marriage. He writes,

Whether the term *kohen* (priest) here denotes a religious or political leader, it is clear that Jethro had an important role in his Midianite community. However, everywhere else in Exodus 18 the text refers to Jethro not as “the priest of Midian” but as “the father-in-law of Moses.” This latter description is particularly emphasized in chapter 18, where it occurs no less than 13 times. That connection makes Jethro an insider. It should be noted that after Jethro proclaims the greatness of God and offers sacrifices (18:11-12), he is referred to only as the father-in-law of Moses, not as a Midianite and not even by his own name. Jethro’s role as an important counselor to Moses can only be assumed after their familial connection is fully established. This incident and the change in terminology used to describe Jethro symbolize the “conversion” process through which Jethro becomes an Israelite.²⁰

²⁰ Reiss, 90.

Conclusion

The midrashim analyzed in this thesis largely look backwards; they smooth out wrinkles brought up by the Torah in presenting outsider characters given insider access. These stories bring Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter, and Jethro into the fold: validating seemingly exogamous marriages by turning them into endogamous ones and eliminating mixed heritage status for important lineages. In addition to retroactively "fixing" otherwise troubling connections in the Torah, they provide models of conversion into the Jewish community. Stories of all three characters go to great lengths to show the piety and zeal they display after their conversions and the acceptance they gain within the community. They are models of Jewish leadership within the convert community; any convert who feels disconnected from the lineage of the patriarchs and matriarchs can look to Aseneth, Pharaoh's daughter, or Jethro and see themselves reflected.

But analysis of these midrashim and other biblical interpretations shows that more than fixing Torah plot holes or giving converts Toraitic role models, the Judeo-Hellenistic and rabbinic authors were witnesses to the social aspects of conversion. If all that truly mattered was securing a plausible conversion story for each character, why go to the trouble of writing *Joseph and Aseneth*, with all its details of the human heart and its extensive descriptions of romantic and familial relationships? Why confirm, in *Pesikta Rabbati*, that Jethro was not only accepted into the Israelite community but the progenitor of prophets and righteous ones? Why bestow not only a name on Pharaoh's daughter in *Vayikra Rabbah*, but give a backstory for how God adopted her as his own? These midrashim speak to the questions all converts have. How will my family react to my news? Will I ever truly be accepted by God, by my new community? Once I step out of the *mikvah*, is the journey over—or has it just begun?

The three-step model covered in this thesis reflects these questions and the real-life journeys of converts. No one converts in a vacuum. Every candidate has that catalyst moment—whether falling in love, like Aseneth, or growing disillusioned with their former faith, like Pharaoh’s daughter—that sets them on their path. Many, like Jethro and Aseneth, have Jewish friends or mentors whose good examples set the favorable pre-conditions for the journey. Each undergoes a thoughtful name change that reflects their new intentions within the Jewish community, each must break the news to their families with various results, and each works on becoming not just a member of the Jewish community, but someone with something new to offer their chosen family. Perhaps they do not become cities of refuge like Aseneth or candles in darkness like Jethro, but they determine how best to help their communities, volunteering for synagogue honors and committees.

Jewish clergy, especially those who have never gone through conversion themselves, can learn a great deal from these midrashim, which have more in common with modern conversion stories than it might seem at first glance. How can we take these stories forward and use them as tools in modern conversion as sources of comfort and insight? Even in a best-case scenario, the conversion journey can be lonely and frustrating, as the candidate feels they have a lifetime of learning to catch up on. By highlighting the humanity of the stories of Aseneth, Pharaoh’s daughter, and Jethro, these candidates do not merely have Toraitic models to look up to; these characters are comrades-in-arms, experiencing the same doubts and triumphs behind the scenes of the Torah as modern candidates do.

The conclusion of this thesis is accompanied by an appendix full of educational and liturgical resources, inspired by these midrashim, for Jewish clergy to use while working with conversion candidates on the process of *geirut*.

Resource Appendix

Pastoral:

Reflection Questions on Family Dynamics

Reflection Questions for Romantic Partners

Jethro's Candle Club: Creating Convert Community

Liturgical:

Sweet as Honey: A Convert's Acceptance of Torah

A Convert's Prayer for a Name Change

Vayishma Yitro: A Convert's Prayer of Affirmation

Reflection Questions on Family Dynamics

Participants:

This resource is meant to be used between a rabbi or cantor and their conversion student during one of their one-on-one meetings.

Overview:

One of the scariest parts of the conversion process is informing family of your decision. Sometimes these reactions can be incredibly damaging and even cause a permanent rift between family members, especially if certain members are devout in a different religion and see the candidate's decision as a rejection of how they were raised. Misunderstandings are common and rife with tension.

Use this resource to start a conversation with your student about how these conversations have been going at home.

Goals:

- Facilitate discussion about changing family dynamics
- Familiarize the candidate with the tale "Joseph and Aseneth"
- Draw connections between the candidate and Aseneth

.....

Begin the discussion with some background on Aseneth as a character: the wife of Joseph in the book of Genesis, the daughter of the Egyptian high priest, the mother of Manasseh and Ephraim. Talk about how the Jewish tale "Joseph and Aseneth" frames Aseneth as a convert to the Israelite faith. Read Aseneth's prayer together:

What shall I do, miserable (that I am),
or where shall I go;
with whom shall I take refuge,
or what shall I speak,
I the virgin and an orphan and desolate and abandoned and hated?
All people have come to hate me,
and on top of those my father and mother,
because I, too, have come to hate their gods and have destroyed them,
and caused them to be trampled underfoot by men.
And therefore my father and my mother and my whole family
have come to hate me and said, "Aseneth is not our daughter
because she destroyed our gods."¹

¹ Trans. C. Burchard, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume Two*. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 1983) 217-218.

- 1.) Does anything Aseneth says in her prayer resonate with you? Why or why not?
- 2.) Aseneth describes being estranged from her parents once she decides to convert out of the Egyptian faith. Have there been any family relationships in your life that have suffered similar results?
- 3.) How have you been coping with the change in relationship?
- 4.) Do you see any chance for future understanding or reconciliation?

The next piece of text comes after Aseneth has completed her conversion and sees her father, and a few lines later once she and Joseph have decided to marry.

And when [her father] saw her he was alarmed and stood speechless for a long (time), and was filled with great fear and fell at her feet and said, "...At last the Lord God of heaven has chosen you as a bride for his firstborn son, Joseph." ...And her father and mother and his whole family came from the field which was their inheritance. And they saw Aseneth like (the) appearance of light, and her beauty was like heavenly beauty. And they saw her sitting with Joseph and dressed in a wedding garment. And they were amazed at her beauty and rejoiced and gave glory to God who gives life to the dead. And after this they ate and drank and celebrated.²

- 1.) By the end of the story, is Aseneth truly an orphan, abandoned? How does her family react to her conversion and marriage to an Israelite?
- 2.) Who in your family has been supportive of your journey?
- 3.) Have there been any reactions to your news that surprised you?
- 4.) On your conversion day, which members of your support system will be there to celebrate with you?

² Burchard, 232-234.

Reflection Questions for Romantic Partners

Participants:

This resource is meant to be facilitated by a rabbi or cantor for a couple where one partner is in the midst of converting to Judaism and the other is born Jewish.

Overview:

There are many reasons why a partner would choose to convert to Judaism. Perhaps in advance of a Jewish wedding, both partners want to be part of the Jewish community. Perhaps prior to starting a family, both partners want to be on the same page for how the children will be raised and what rituals will take place in the house. Or perhaps one partner feels drawn to the other's religion and wants to join them on a spiritual level. Any combination of these reasons and more could start a person's path to conversion!

But conversion itself is a challenging and intensive process. It can make the Jew-in-process feel they have too much to catch up on, or make the Jewish partner feel self-conscious about what they do or do not already know. These questions, facilitated by a Jewish clergyperson, help the couple to come up with common goals and have an open dialogue about the process.

Goals:

- Create an open space to discuss feelings about the conversion process from both perspectives
- Foster a team mindset for the couple
- Set preliminary goals for how the couple will go about their shared Jewish life

.....

To ask each of the partners individually:

- 1.) How did you feel when this process first began?
- 2.) What has been the hardest part of the conversion process?
- 3.) What has been the biggest surprise?
- 4.) What are you most excited to celebrate or observe with your partner in the future?

Read for the couple:

The Talmud teaches that Pharaoh's daughter, the princess of Egypt, happened to be at the Nile River to find Moses in his basket because she had come there to convert to the Israelite religion, using the Nile as a *mikvah*. She adopted Moses and raised him as her own son, and later in life, a midrash tells us that she married Caleb, one of Moses's trusted scouts. This midrash, from *Vayikra Rabbah*, talks about how Caleb and Pharaoh's daughter were a perfect match. They both had a rebellious streak, and they both prioritized the wellbeing of the people of Israel. They made a good team.

To ask the couple:

- 1.) How do you two, like Caleb and Pharaoh's daughter, make a good team on this journey together? What do you have in common in your spiritual lives?
- 2.) How can you work to become a better team? What support can you offer each other during this transition?
- 3.) What is one thing you want to help your partner learn, or one thing you want to ask your partner about?
- 4.) What is one Jewish subject or practice that neither of you know much about, but would like to explore together?
- 5.) (*If the couple plans to have or already has children*) A midrash on I Chronicles tells us that this couple had three children together. How do you intend, as a new Jewish team, to raise your children? Are there holidays you want to prioritize at home? Will your children attend religious school, or have a b'nei mitzvah?

Jethro's Candle Club: Creating Convert Community

Participants:

This idea should be proposed by a clergyperson early on in a Judaism 101 course at a synagogue or community center, with the intent that the class participants will take the idea and run with it.

Overview:

It is incredibly important throughout the conversion process that the rabbi or cantor of a synagogue finds helpful mentors within the community to help the conversion candidates acclimate to the synagogue environment: sitting with them during services to help them follow along in the *siddur*, inviting them over for Shabbat dinner, and showing them around the synagogue. While these mentors are invaluable, often the candidate will feel like they are being burdensome to their mentor by asking too many questions or taking up too much of their time. Sometimes, it is nice for the candidate to not feel such a huge power and knowledge differential.

To that end, after the introductory weeks of Judaism 101, the rabbi should read the sign-up sheet below and encourage the class participants to sign up or start a group chat, in pairs or groups, to become a support system for each other. In addition to having Jewish mentors at the synagogue, it is important for candidates to have other people in the process with them to socialize with, someone who understands the unique challenges of conversion.

Goals:

- Inspire conversion class participants to forge outside-of-class connections with each other
- Encourage class participants to try new Jewish things together and learn in pairs or a group instead of on their own
- Allow for a safety valve so students do not feel they are overly burdening their in-synagogue mentors

.....

Jethro's Candle Club

After Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, converts to the Israelite faith, Moses invites him to remain with the Israelites to help lead them through the wilderness. But in a midrashic interpretation attributed to Rabbi Yishmael, Jethro replies:

“Is a candle of any benefit unless it is in a place of darkness? And what is a candle's benefit compared to the sun and the moon? You, Moses, are the sun, and Aaron the moon. What can a candle do between the sun and the moon? Instead, I am going to my country and telling everyone, and converting all my countrymen so I might bring them to the study of Torah and I might draw them under the wings of the *Shechinah*.”

Jethro's choice means that he will be separated from the Jewish community for the rest of his life. His community will be forged out of the connections he makes with others who convert to the Israelite faith. They will be bound by their shared beliefs and experiences.

Converting to Judaism means joining the Jewish community, but sometimes—especially at first—it can be like drinking from a firehose. There is a lifetime of learning to catch up on, and sometimes it's tough being the person in the room who knows the least. That's where Jethro's Candle Club comes in!

We begin today's class by making a groupchat—on iMessage or WhatsApp—for anyone willing to join. Take advantage of this chat when you are about to try something new in Judaism for the first time and you want a friend to join you. Is Shabbat coming up but you haven't managed to get an invitation to someone's dinner? Is a holiday coming up and you'd like to attend services, but you don't want to sit alone—and you don't want to sit with someone you'd be afraid to mess up around? Text the groupchat and find a buddy or two to go with you. You can learn together, make mistakes together, and ask questions together. You can also just grab coffee and talk about how things are going.

Jethro had to go it alone, building community where he went. Your class has the best of both worlds. You get to learn about Jewish practices from clergy and laypeople who have studied for years, and you get to bond with new Jews who are just starting out on this path, like you are.

Sweet as Honey: A Convert's Acceptance of Torah

If a newly converted Jew chooses to be called to the bimah on the Shabbat following their immersion, this can be used by the officiating clergyperson at some point in the service where the Torah is used or has just been put away—when the person has just held the Torah and recited the Sh'ma, or concluded their first aliyah, or given a d'var Torah.

King David called the laws of God
“sweeter than honey
and drippings of the comb.”³
His son Solomon called Torah
“the sweet light.”⁴
So when our children begin their learning,
starting with sacred letters,
we drizzle them with honey so those letters,
the building blocks of Torah,
are sweet as honey on the tongue.

Your learning did not begin as a child,
but you came to us with the wonder of one,
and your Torah is all the sweeter for it.
For you are like Aseneth, Joseph's wife,
who turned her heart to God.
God sent an angel to Aseneth,
who fed her from a sacred honeycomb.

The angel's words are now your blessing:
“Happy are you, because the mysteries of the Most High
have been revealed to you,
and happy are all who attach themselves to the Lord God,
for they will eat of the honeycomb that is full
of the spirit of life.”⁵

The clergyperson can give congratulatory, personalized remarks, and will give them a gift of local honey in commemoration of the day.

³ Psalm 19:11

⁴ Ecclesiastes 11:7

⁵ Adapted from Burchard, 228-229.

A Convert's Prayer for a Name Change

May the God who made Israel out of Jacob
and transformed Pharaoh's daughter into a daughter of God
give blessing to the name I have chosen for myself.

May it be God's will
that I live up to this name—
its meaning, its history, its forebears—
and make my mark upon it.
Ken y'hi ratzon.

May those who know me
and those who come after me
affirm that I brought honor to my name.
Ken y'hi ratzon.

May this name be the gift I give myself
and the promise I make to the Jewish people.
Ken y'hi ratzon.

Vayishma Yitro: **A Convert's Prayer of Affirmation**

Vayishma Yitro—

The Torah tells us that Jethro heard
all that God had done for Moses and for Israel
and so he came to join the people.
What did Jethro hear?
The brutal battle-cries against Amalek,
the roar of the splitting sea,
the thunder from Sinai?
The rabbis can't decide,
yet Jethro heard, and he came, and he praised God.

Vayishma Yitro—

Maybe Jethro heard it all,
or maybe even Jethro can't remember
what it was that first turned his heart to God.
Neither can I remember
what it was that first turned mine.
Was it the first Hebrew word I heard,
sonorous and ancient,
a bell rung in my heart?
The smile of my neighbor
as she blessed the candles
or my friend's, as her brother
ascended the *bimah* to read words of Torah?

Vayishma Yitro—

Jethro heard something he could not ignore.
He came to join Israel,
and his words of praise have become mine
as I stand here today, ready to join the Jewish people:
Baruch Adonai, blessed be God!
Atah yadati ki gadol Adonai mikol ha-elohim,
Now I know that Adonai is greater than all the gods.
Jethro offered sacrifices; I offer my heart and mind
in dedication to our history, our community, and future.
Baruch atah Adonai, she'asani Yisrael.
Blessed be Adonai, who has made me a Jew.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Masekhet Derekh Eretz Zuta. Edited by Daniel Sperber. Jerusalem: Tzur-Ot, 1982.

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, A Critical Edition: Volume 2. Edited by Jacob Z. Lauterbach. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933.

Midrash Rabbah: Vayikra Rabbah, Volume 1. Edited by Moshe Aryeh Mirkin. Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1961.

Midrash Tanchuma. Edited by Solomon Buber. Vilna, 1885.

Midrishei Kohelet: Kohelet Rabbah 7-12, Kohelet Zuta 7-9. Edited by Reuven Kipperwasser. Jerusalem: Schechter Institute for Jewish Studies, 2021.

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Volume Two. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 1983.

Otzar Midrashim. Edited by Judah David Eisenstein. New York, 1915.

Pesikta Rabbati. Edited by Meir Friedmann. Vienna, 1880.

Shemot Rabbah. Edited by Avigdor Shinan. Jerusalem: Dvir Publishing House, 1984.

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Sanhedrin, Volume II. Edited by Yisroel Simcha Schorr and Chaim Malinowitz. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2000.

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Sotah, Volume I. Edited by Yisroel Simcha Schorr and Chaim Malinowitz. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2000.

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Yevamot, Volume II. Edited by Yisroel Simcha Schorr and Chaim Malinowitz. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2000.

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Zevachim, Volume II. Edited by Yisroel Simcha Schorr and Chaim Malinowitz. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2000.

Secondary Literature:

Baskin, Judith Reese. *Pharaoh's Counsellors: Job, Jethro, and Balaam in Rabbinic and Patristic Tradition*. Brown Judaic Studies, No. 47. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983.

- Chesnutt, Randall D. *From Death to Life: Conversion in Joseph and Aseneth*. Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha. Supplement Series, 16. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Cohen, Shaye J.D. *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999.
- Elizur, Shulamit. *Piyyutei Rabbi Eleazer beirabbi Qilar*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1988.
- Kraemer, Ross Shepard. *When Aseneth Met Joseph: A Late Antique Tale of the Biblical Patriarch and His Egyptian Wife, Reconsidered*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Lawrence, Beatrice J. W. *Jethro and the Jews: Jewish Biblical Interpretation and the Question of Identity*. The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 56. Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- Lipsett, B. Diane. *Desiring Conversion: Hermas, Thecla, Aseneth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Reiss, Moshe. "Jethro the Convert." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2013): 89–94.
- Scialabba, Daniela. "Creation and Salvation: Models of Relationship between the God of Israel and the Nations in the Book of Jonah, in Psalm 33 (Mt and LXX) and in the Novel 'Joseph and Aseneth.'" Ph.D. Dissertation, Mohr Siebeck, 2019.
- Sofer, Moshe. *Sefer Torat Moshe*. Pressburg: David Levy and Abraham Alkalai Press, 1878.
- Thiessen, Matthew. "'Aseneth's Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion.'" *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, no. 45 (2014).
- Tuchman, Shera Aranoff, and Sandra E. Rapoport. *Moses' Women*. Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2008.
- Twersky, Geula. "In Search of Bithiah Bat Pharaoh and the Meaning of I Chronicles 4:18." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (2022): 94–104.