

Good Shabbos Everyone. Why was the Torah given in the Midbar - wilderness? To teach us that in order to be able to receive the teachings of the Torah, one must make himself like a empty desert, like a humble person who has no pride. The concept of "Pride" in western society is considered a positive attribute. However, other than "Jewish Pride" all other forms of pride (ga'avah) are generally shunned in Yiddishkeit - Judaism. The verse states: "...אשכון ואת דכא ושפל רוח להחיות רוח שפלים..." (Yeshayahu 57:15) Which is homiletically explained to mean: Hashem says: "I shall dwell within the humble..." The following inspirational account which we read in the Talmud and Midrash, illustrates how one person, who had plenty of pride and honor, chose a spiritually fulfilling path in life. Onkelos was the son of Emperor Hadrian's sister. Being a clever, handsome, well mannered young man, he had grown up to be one of the most promising future leaders of the mighty Roman Empire. His uncle looked forward to the time when Onkelos would be ready to make his formal debut on the stage of public Roman life. By "chance," Onkelos had become acquainted with some of the noble Jewish families who had settled in Rome. Through them, he was introduced to the Jewish religion, and was very much attracted to it. Onkelos had to remember, however, that he was the noble son of the most eminent family of the Roman Empire. It was unwise for him to be observed associating with Jews. Still more dangerous would it have been, had he openly stated his intention of changing to the Jewish religion. It would have been sheer suicide. On the other hand, Onkelos felt increasingly drawn to the Jewish faith.

After long deliberation, he worked out a solution to his problem. He visited his uncle, Emperor Hadrian. During their conversation he casually mentioned that he had become interested in the world of commerce, and that he would like to dedicate some time and effort to becoming fully acquainted with the principles and workings of this most important field of public endeavor. Hadrian, who was very fond of his nephew, was highly pleased at this show of interest in such complicated matters as the theory and practice of economics. He gave Onkelos this advice: "The basic approach to commerce is the discovery of merchandise of a highly marketable product which has yet to come before the public. This type of merchandise is the most profitable kind of business."

This is exactly what Onkelos wanted to hear. Now he was given a free hand to travel about and to associate with merchants, many of whom were Jews, without attracting unwanted attention and giving cause for suspicion. In the course of extensive trips he visited the Holy Land, and remained there to study Torah. Gifted with an extraordinary and keen mind, he easily overcame the difficulties of the Hebrew language, law and lore. After a while he was ready to adopt the Jewish religion and to abide by the commands of the Torah. Secretly, he became a ger, a convert to Judaism. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people in those days. Onkelos visited them and begged them to accept him as their disciple. The Sages saw the deep change that had taken place in the attitude of the young, noble Roman. Instead of haughtiness, he now showed humility and a readiness to study, like all other students of Torah. They finally agreed to the urgent request of the young ger, and spent much time and effort on his Jewish education.

The time came when Onkelos could no longer delay his return to Rome. Confident in Hashem's help, he parted from the Sages who had become his revered teachers, and embarked on his trip home. After his arrival in Rome, he paid his due visit to the Emperor Hadrian, who quickly noticed the deep change that had come over his nephew during his long absence. It was a more humble, yet wiser Onkelos, who now stood before him, than the one who had left to study commerce. "What has happened to you, my dear nephew? Did you meet failure in your business ventures, or did any one dare to harm you?" the emperor asked him. "Who would harm the nephew of the mightiest man in the world?" replied Onkelos with a smile. "Why then do I see such humility in your countenance, my nephew? Onkelos decided to be straightforward. "I cannot but tell you the full truth, my dear uncle. The reason for the change in me is the fact that I spent much time and effort in the study of Torah, the Law of the Jewish people. What is more, I even went so far as to adopt the Jewish religion as my own."

Emperor Hadrian's face grew red with fury over his nephew's confession. This spelled the end of Onkelos's political career and deprived him, his uncle, of the one on whom he had counted heavily in his future political plans. When his fury abated, Hadrian felt that he should give his nephew a fair chance to explain his behavior before doing anything to punish him. "You have thoroughly disappointed my high hopes and expectations of you. Yet I am curious to know what caused such unbelievable foolishness on the part of such a clever young fellow as you. Perhaps there was some young woman who trapped you against your will?"

"My dear uncle and friend, to be frank, I must state that no such reason was at the root of my change of religion. What prompted me to take such a weighty step was none other than your sound advice before I parted from you." Angrily, Hadrian retorted: "I would be the last man to advise you so stupidly." "Yet remember, dear uncle, before I left, you advised me to search for merchandise that had the promise of being a best selling article. On my extensive trips and thorough study of many countries and conditions, I did not discover any merchandise that, at the present time, is considered lowlier or cheaper than the Jewish religion and the Jewish people. Yet, there is also no doubt in my mind that it will become the most valuable merchandise of all in the future. As the Prophet Isaiah said: 'Thus said Hashem, the Redeemer of Israel, the Holy One, to him who is despised by men, to him who is abhorred by nations, to the servants of rulers; kings shall see it and rise up; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves.' I should think no reasonable businessman would miss the chance of such great profit."

The Talmud relates that [When] Onkelos the son of Kalonymus became a proselyte, the Emperor sent a contingent of Roman [soldiers] after him, but he enticed them by [reciting] verses and they converted to Judaism. Thereupon, the Emperor sent another legion of Romans after him, commanding them not to speak with him. As they were about to take him away, he said to them: "Let me tell you just a simple thing: [In a procession] the torch lighter carries the light in front of the torchbearer, the torchbearer in front of the leader, the leader in front of the governor, the governor in front of the chief officer; but does the chief officer carry the light in front of the people [that follow]?" "No!" they replied. So he said, "Yet The Holy One, Blessed is He, carries the light before Israel, as it says, 'The Lord went before them... in a pillar of fire to give them light' (Shemos 3:21)." Then they, too, converted.

Again he sent another legion, this time ordering them not to listen to him. They took hold of him, and as they were walking he saw the mezuzah on the door frame, and he placed his hand on it saying to them, "Now what is this?" and they said: "You tell us." He told them, "According to universal custom, a mortal king dwells within, and his servants guard him from the outside. However, [in the case of] The Holy One, blessed is He, His servants dwell inside while He guards them on the outside, as it says: 'The L-rd will guard your going out and your coming in from this time onward' (Devarim 6:9)." They, too, converted to Judaism, so he sent for him no more. (Avodah Zarah 11a)

Onkelos, who "had it all" chose the spiritual path in life. If he had let his greatness stand in the way, he never would have been able to receive the Torah's teachings. Let us all humble ourselves and "let the learning begin!" **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

לז"נ עטיל ב"ר אליעזר שלמה

לז"נ ישראל יואל ב"ר נתן

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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