

Pirkei Avot 1:10

Converts and Penitents

Shma'ayah and Avtalyon received from them. Shma'ayah would say: Love work, loath mastery over others, and avoid intimacy with the government. (Pirkei Avot 1:10)

Shma'ayah and Avtalyon were “from the sons of the sons of Sancheriv.”^[1] According to Maimonides and additional commentators^[2] they were literally converts (and not simply the descendants of converts). This is also understood from the words of the holy Ari.^[3] Righteous converts are the greatest penitents. They were non-Jews and became Jews, while a Jew from birth is a tzaddik in his essence.

The Talmud debates:^[4] Rabbi Yochanan says that the level of tzaddikim is greater than the level of penitents, while Rabbi Abahu says “In the place that penitents stand, consummate tzaddikim do not stand.” Generally, we adopt Rabbi Abahu’s opinion.^[5] But “both these and those are the words of the Living God. ^[6]” There are penitents who are greater than tzaddikim and there are tzaddikim greater than penitents. A ‘regular’ tzaddik is on a lower level than the penitent. But there is also a penitent tzaddik, who acquired the lofty level of teshuvah, who is on a higher level than an ‘ordinary’ penitent. This is the meaning of the saying that the Mashiach will cause the tzaddikim to repent. He will add the level of penitent to the tzaddik.

Just as there is a tzaddik who became a penitent, so there is a penitent who became a tzaddik. He started out as a wicked person, completely distant from Torah and mitzvah performance. He converted to Judaism and became a penitent. Ultimately he became a consummate tzaddik, a Torah giant and a giant in the performance of good deeds. He actually becomes part of the chain of people receiving the Torah, like Shma'ayah and Avtalyon. Such a great penitent is greater than an ordinary tzaddik or penitent.

Mashiach turns the tzaddik into a penitent. But in order for the penitent to transform into a consummate tzaddik, he needs the essential power of the penitent who strives to merit the “Crown of Torah,” which is set before everyone. It is God Himself Who helps him to achieve it!

The three statements by Shma'ayah and Avtalyon are guidance for the convert-penitent, until he will ultimately merit the Crown of Torah: First, he must “love work” (for “man was born to work”^[7]). Then he must “loath mastery over others:” Do not prevent yourself from doing work and do not strive to rule over the public (as explained by Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura), for the conduct of a penitent must be very lowly: “and avoid intimacy with the government” (in order to receive control from it...so that it will not make you transgress the doctrine of your Maker: Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura).

Amazingly, המלאכה הרבנות לרשות (work, mastery, government) equals four times Shma'ayah!

[1] [Gittin 57b](#).

[2] Maimonides in his preface to the *Yad Hachazakah* and Rashi Brachot 19b.

[3] *Sefer Halikutim, parashat Vayeirah* and additional places.

[4] Brachot 34b.

[5] Maimonides, Laws of Repentance,7:4.

[6] [Eruvin 13b:10-11](#)

[7] Job 5; Sanhedrin 99b.