

IN MEMORIAM
Robert Potts
August 28, 1930 - October 11, 2014



The following was Robert's Bar Mitzvah speech at age 83

Parshat: Deuteronomy 24:14 through 25:19

My Conversion

I am not a good enough reason to dress up and go to a synagogue. But I am glad you did come here this morning, because I have been hard at work digging in my mind for wisdom.

Perhaps you are thinking: he's going to give us the sort of thing he saves up for dinner-party conversations.

That might be true, if it were not for the Torah, which insists on direct, honest speech. No fooling around. Nor is there any false sentimentality.

But before I address what I've learned from studying Torah, I should tell you how I come to be standing here.

There was no formal religion in my home growing up. I did have a Scots-Presbyterian Grandmother, Mary Potts, who took me to her church every chance she got and was the best cook I've ever known. This was in England where I lived until I was nine.

When we moved to New York I was enrolled in a progressive school in the Village entirely for educational reasons. It was inhabited by a group of pupils who knew lots of Christmas songs, but were thoroughly Jewish. Except that most of them didn't go to synagogues. They were steeped in art, and sports, and arguments. And in this they were perfect New Yorkers, because New York is a Jewish town.

So my life, from about age 12 on, was immersed in Jewish secular culture - my friends, my interests were at home there.

The music, the literature, the art and the passion for arguing -

And you are certainly aware of the presence of Jewish girls in a city such as New York. I met one of them, called Marjory, who came from a small Catholic Connecticut town and who was ready for Jewish New York.

When it came to marrying, I was the one that wanted a Rabbi to do the job. Out of deference to Marjory's parents, Susan and Maurice. And no, I wouldn't convert. We found Rabbi Bogage of Central Synagogue in Manhattan who said I needn't. Just raise the children Jewish. That's the deal he made, and it was okay with us.

Papa Maurice went straight to the local liquor store for whiskey to drink our health in. He wasn't a drinker. But he knew I liked mine neat. He got a black label Johnny Walker and asked me if it was ok. This was a big deal for him, another instance of Jewish welcome.

That promise, to raise our children Jewish, meant we joined a temple, something we might not have done otherwise, and I found myself caught up in Torah when we attended services. Listening to the Mix of Yiddish and American on WEVD, I heard something about the Torah Schedule. Apparently, Jews read the Torah together over and over again.

And in recent years, discussing Torah with my friend, Allen Janger, who is erudite in so many things, including Judaism.

Having been allowed to be part of this as an outsider for seventy plus years, you feel the time has come to set yourself down in this community, and not as an outsider.

So here I am, a once full-time atheist with a Jewish Bible, looking for my portion of Deuteronomy that matches this service. But in the course of preparation for today, I read all of Deuteronomy and got fascinated by all of it.

For instance, this is Moses talking in Deuteronomy [P. 986]: and he says,

22 Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow so I selected twelve of your men. 24 They made for the hill country came to the wadi Eshcol and spied it out. 25 And they gave us this report: "it is a good land that the Lord our God is giving to us."

26 Yet you refused to go up and flouted the command of the Lord Your God. 27 You sulked in your tents and said, "It is because the Lord hates us that he brought us out of the land of Egypt, to hand us over to the Ammorites to wipe us out."

P. 988 34 When the Lord heard your loud complaint, he was angry. He vowed: 35 Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers. No one except Caleb, son of Jephunneh; he shall see it, and to him and his descendants will I give the land on which he set foot, because he remained loyal to the Lord.

[Moses has been through the Lord's catalog of punishments.]

28:27 The Lord will strike you with the Egyptian inflammation, with hemorrhoids, boil-scars and itch, from which you shall never recover.

But, no. Deuteronomy is not all like that. Here, from today's Torah portion is an early labor law and examples of commandments for a just society.

24:14 You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow countryman or a stranger in one of the communities of your land. You must pay him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets, for he is needy and urgently depends on it; else he will cry to the Lord against you and you will incur guilt.

Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children put to death for parents; a person shall be put to death only for his own crime.

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless and the widow—in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick them over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.
Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

Our guide in Deuteronomy is Moses himself. We get to know this man as he reaches the end of his extended life in the service of the Lord.

What follows is the work of a writer, assigned to the task; neither Moses nor the Lord.

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34:10 Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out face to face, for the various signs and portents that the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel.

Moses died in Moab after a tour of the land the Lord gave to the Israelites. He was 120 years old and sharp as a tack. The Israelites mourned his passing for thirty days.

It is a great honor to be connected to Moses by this religion, which allows for many interpretations and for argument, even by a former outsider.