

*Parshat Bemidbar* 2010  
Associate Rabbi Susan Leider  
Temple Beth Am

MOT (Member of the Tribe) is a popular acronym or colloquial expression found in American Jewish culture. Urban Dictionary.com describes this expression as follows: “Light-hearted, slightly tongue-in-cheek reference to Jews, usually by Jews.”

While we may smile and chuckle at this definition, we are not surprised at the emphasis on tribal motifs that fill the book of *Bemidbar*, the book of Numbers. Within the first two verses of the book, we find the words, “*l’vet avotam* – the house of their ancestors,” and two verses later the Hebrew word “*mateh*,” meaning tribe. And, these words repeat throughout the book.

In purely Biblical terms, we would probably all agree that Israelites or Jews were MOT. But are we necessarily considered MOT in our own times? What does the acronym say about us as a community? Are we a bloodline? Are we a tribe? If we are counted, “*l’vet avotam*,” according to ancestral houses, then how does Judaism reconcile the tribal and ancestral nature of our tradition with the idea of non-blood line affiliation with “the tribe?”

In *midrash (Bemidbar Rabbah 8:2)*, the rabbis reinterpret the meaning of the word “*ger*,” or stranger. Consider the following Torah verses, re-interpreted:

You shall not oppress a stranger (convert). (Exodus 23:9)

If a stranger (convert) sojourns with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. (Leviticus 19:33)

Love the stranger (convert). (Deuteronomy 10:19)

How were the rabbis invested in moving us from a tribal religion to what theologian Mordechai Kaplan called a religious civilization? The rabbis knew that the democratization of Judaism would make it possible for Judaism to develop, thrive and live on into the future. When the concentration of power and roles moved from the priestly realm into the rabbinic realm, then the enterprise of Judaism was on the path to being democratized. No longer dependent upon bloodline for defined roles of temple service, Rabbinic Judaism claims that those who learn become the leaders. And anyone can achieve that role through pious living, Torah study and devotion to the tradition.

To many of us, it is self-evident that Judaism is not a blood-line and that that tradition clearly accepts converts into our community. It may surprise some of us to realize that there are Jewish communities in the world who do not accept converts. For example, in the Syrian Jewish community, rabbis have repeatedly ruled in the form of *takkanot* (rabbinic decrees) that conversion is not acceptable within their community. Perhaps this trend is influenced by the Syrian Jewish community's development and struggle within a majority Muslim culture, but nonetheless, it is still surprising given the weight that Rabbinic tradition places on accepting converts throughout the ages.

I have personally witnessed the pain of a couple standing under the *huppah* on their wedding day. On the day of the wedding, the bride and groom were still under the impression that his parents would not attend. When they did at the last minute, they would not stand near the *huppah* nor stay after the ceremony for the *se'udah mitzvah*, the meal following the ceremony that is required by Jewish law for a joyous occasion such as a wedding. I wish I could say that this is the only such couple I have counseled, but unfortunately they are not alone.

Despite the fact that the bride has undergone the three major components required for conversion under Jewish law, appearance before a bet din, (rabbinic court of three rabbis) immersion in the *mikveh*, and the acceptance of *ol malkhut shamayim* (the obligation of the commandments, accompanied by rigorous study), the groom's family would not accept her as a Jew. Her conversion was authentic under the domain of Jewish law, but if Judaism is viewed as a blood-line, it inherently negates the idea of conversion.

We are not a race, but rather a religious civilization. It is possible to become a *ben/bat brit* (member of the covenant), but the tradition places considerable demands on the convert. As advocates for this position, we must be familiar with the requirements for *halakhic*. We should not accept arguments based on ideology or turn a blind eye to the bigotry that is sometimes expressed with regard to converts. For example, in our synagogue, when we encounter a person who has converted in the Reform movement, her conversion is embraced based upon the presence of the three elements described above. In the case of all male converts, circumcision is required and *hatafat dam brit* is required of those males who were circumcised prior to conversion.

We should appreciate our tribal roots expressed in the book of *Bemidbar*. We may even continue to use the acronym MOT, we should use it in the spirit of Mordechai Kaplan who held that we are all members of a religious civilization. Granted the less catchy acronym MORC (Member of Religious Civilization) is not likely to take hold and become a household expression, but if we use the expression MOT, let's do it with Mordechai Kaplan in mind.