

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(7)

**The Stag That Joined the Flock**  
Numbers Rabbah 8:2



**Background to the Fable “The Stag That Joined the Flock”**

**The Goatherd and the Wild Goats, By Aesop**

A goatherd brought his goats to pasture. When he saw some wild goats mixed in with his own, in the evening he put all of them in his cave. The next day when he got up, there was a big storm, so he could not bring his goats to pasture as usual. He kept them inside, feeding his own just enough so they would not be hungry, while he gave the wild ones a big pile so they would stay with him.

After the storm passed, when he took them all to pasture, the wild goats ran away. The goatherd accused them of ingratitude for leaving him after they had received better treatment. They replied,

“That is why we are so careful; if you honor us, who came yesterday, more than those who have been with you a long time, it’s clear that when still others come after us, you will similarly prefer them to us.” This fable shows that one should not congratulate oneself on the friendship of those who prefer new acquaintances to old ones, because when these “new friends” befriend others, they will in turn prefer their newer friends to us.

**?** Do you agree with Aesop’s moral?

**?** Can you think on another moral to apply to the same fable?

**Converts in Halachah and Agadah: the Special Status of the Convert**

- Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 431: The Precept of Love for Converts to Judaism

- Stories of Converts in the Book of Legends
- The Conversion of Onkelos the son of Kelonimus (in Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 11a)

**?** Who is a righteous convert (*Ger Tzedek*)?

Marcelo Ferder's drawing

**?** How does the goatherd look in Marcelo Ferder's drawing?

### The Stag That Joined the Flock Numbers Rabbah 8:2

מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה ח סימן ב

הרבה הקב"ה אוהב את הגרים למה הדבר דומה למלך שהיתה לו צאן והיתה יוצאת בשדה ונכנסת בערב כן בכל יום פעם אחד נכנס צבי אחד עם הצאן הלך לו אצל העוזים היה רועה עמהם נכנסה הצאן לדיר נכנס עמהם יצאת לרעות יצא עמהם אמרו למלך הצבי הזה נלוה עם הצאן והוא רועה עמהם כל יום ויום יוצא עמהם ונכנס עמהם היה המלך אוהבו בזמן שהוא יוצא לשדה היה מפקיד רועה יפה לרצונו לא יכה אדם אותו הזהירו בו ואף כשהוא נכנס עם הצאן היה אומר להם תנו לו וישתה והיה אוהבו הרבה אמרו לו מרי כמה תישים יש לך כמה כבשים יש לך כמה גדיים יש לך ואין את מזהירנו ועל הצבי הזה בכל יום ויום את מצוינו אמר להם המלך הצאן רוצה ולא רוצה כך היא דרכה לרעות בשדה כל היום ולערב לבא לישן בתוך הדיר הצביים במדבר הם ישנים אין דרכם ליכנס לישוב בני אדם לא נחזיק טובה לזה שהניח כל המדבר הרחב הגדול במקום כל החיות ובא ועמד בחצר, כך אין אנו צריכין להחזיק טובה לגר שהניח משפחתו ובית אביו והניח אומתו וכל או"ה אומות העולם ובא לו אצלנו לכן הרבה עליו שמירה שהזהיר את ישראל שישמרו עצמם מהם שלא יזיקו להם

A king had a flock of goats that went to the field every day and returned at dusk.

One day a stag joined the flock and grazed with the goats. When the flock returned to its pen, the stag would go with it, and when the flock went out to graze again, the stag would go with it.

People said to the king, "This stag joined the flock and grazes with it. Every day he goes out with the flock and returns with it." The king loved the stag and put it in the care of a good goatherd, who did not let anyone mistreat it; when he returned (home from his daily affairs), he told the goatherd to give the stag something to drink. He loved it very much.

The goatherd said (to the king), "My lord, you have so many goats, you have so many lambs, and you have so many kids, yet you do not order me to take special care of them. But you do order me to take special care of the stag."

The king replied, "The flock, as you might expect, will graze in the field, go out in the morning and return at night, but stags sleep in the desert and are not in the habit of living with people. Shouldn't I be grateful to this stag, who left the wide desert and the other animals and came to live in my house?"

## Numbers Rabbah 8:2

This fable is used by the author of Numbers Rabbah to illustrate the love that the Holy One—blessed be He—feels for proselytes (those who convert to Judaism). The goats, the kids, and the lambs come to represent those Jews born into the bosom of the Jewish people (the great majority) who, although they are proud of their Judaism, practice it because they were brought up and educated to do so, and have no other choice. The stag, on the other hand, represents the proselyte who, abandoning his family, his deeply rooted customs and his past beliefs, decides to share the destiny of the Jewish people. The author of Numbers Rabbah, interpreting the stag's attitude in a positive manner, praises and encourages the approach of the proselyte to the people of Israel.

As we saw, the Aesopic tradition gives us a story very similar to that of Numbers Rabbah, but with a diametrically opposed message: the favor that the goatherd showed to the goats that approached his flock is interpreted here as an act of betrayal. The goatherd is presented as manipulative and untrustworthy.

## Wrapping Up

**?** Is the convert a traitor to his own people (Aesop's moral) or a "true lover of Israel" (The midrash's moral)?

**?** Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Conversions: Let's talk about a difficult subject

## Bibliography

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## Discussion Idea from Rabbi Dorit Edut

### K-3rd GRADES:

1)

What was the stag doing there with the goats?

2)

Why do you think the stag joined the goats?

3)

Why was the king especially nice to the stag?

4)

Even though we shouldn't play favorites with people, when might it happen that we should do special things to help someone that we might not do for everyone else?

#### **4-6th GRADES:**

1)

Why do you think the king loved the stag?

2)

Do you think the king was being fair to the rest of the herd by treating the stag with special care? Why or why not?

3)

Describe a situation where someone tried to join a group of people you were with, especially if they were different than the others in some way. What do you think about what happened? What if

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you were the person trying to join some group—say in a new school or new sports team—what would make it easier for you to do this?

#### **7th-12 GRADES:**

1)

How does this story give us more of an explanation of how we are to treat people who convert to Judaism? If you have any experience with this, please share whether you think that converts are treated well—with special kindness—by other Jews or not? Why do you think this is important?

2)

There is another Midrash about Rabbi Hillel and the non-Jew who asked him if he could tell him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel replied with what has become known as "The Golden Rule"—"V'ahavta l'ereyecha kamocho: You shall love your fellow human being as yourself" (Ex.19:18)—saying that this is the essence of our Torah, and the rest is commentary. Then he told the non-Jew to go and study the rest—and the man later became a convert. How do you see the relationship between these two midrashic tales, and what do we learn from them?

3)

If this story is a parable of acceptance of differences, what can we learn from it about living in a pluralistic world? Do you agree that we need to give special attention to certain people who are different from us?

4)

What do you think has become of the idea of the United States as a "melting pot"? What about Israel as a pluralistic society—has it become one or not?

### **Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh**

#### **Pre-Reading Vocabulary Exercise**

It is important to make certain that students understand the meanings of words crucial to the meaning of the text. One way to do this is to sort the words according to some category. Some words get sorted together because they are all nouns or verbs; some because they are from the same family; some because they are synonyms; some because they are antonyms. By sorting and grouping, students are working with the words, and this increases understanding.

Use the following words from "The Stag that Joined the Flock" and emphasize the differences among the words. Do some of these words belong together? Do any stand apart?

*goats, goatherd, kids, stag, flock, graze, and dusk*