

## ***Celebrating our national wedding***

My wife, Marsha, shared with me some highlights of a lecture she attended this week. The speaker devoted the evening to reviewing the lives of three little-known Jews. One of the three was Avraham ben Avraham, known as the “*ger tzedek* of Vilna” (the righteous convert of Vilna). Vilna is the capital of Lithuania. Prior to World War II, Vilna was home to about 40,000 Jews. Many great rabbis lived there over the centuries, and, the greatest scholar among them was “The Vilna Gaon- The Genius of Vilna”, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797). His fame spread throughout the Jewish world, and endures today through his writings. Vilna became one of the European powerhouses of Jewish learning.

A certain nobleman, Count Valentin Potocki, lived in Lithuania during the 1700’s. His family had long been respected Roman Catholic leaders there. At some point, the young Count decided he would travel with a friend to a Catholic seminary to study Bible. During their studies, they met a Jewish vintner, who was studying a large book- perhaps a volume of Talmud. Intrigued, they asked him to teach them Hebrew. This he did, in addition to interpretations of Torah which they had never heard. As seminary students, their interest in Hebrew and Jewish Biblical teachings continued to grow, as did their discontent with Roman Catholicism. Potocki travelled to Rome, ostensibly to grapple with this personal religious dilemma, and, during this trip confirmed that he was dissatisfied with his current religion. He then traveled to Amsterdam, which was, at the time, one of the few places in Europe where a Christian could study Judaism without persecution. It was there, after studying further, that he was accepted for conversion to Judaism. He chose the Hebrew name Avraham ben Avraham, signifying his intent to be both a son of the founder of the Jewish people, and to live his life as Abraham did.

Sadly, his life was now in danger. Through some unfortunate events, it appears, he risked capture and jail for his defection to Judaism, and he returned to Vilna dressed as a pious Jew, with a beard and *paves*. He was discovered, and, indeed, jailed. His mother begged him to renounce Judaism and save himself. The Vilna Gaon heard about him and offered to save him through kabbalistic means. Avraham ben Avraham denied both offers, preferring to be executed as a martyr. He is reputed to have told his mother, “I love you. But, I love the truth even more”. The Polish tribunal sentenced him to burning at the stake for the crime of converting Judaism. Avraham went to his terrible death reciting the blessing for martyrdom, “...Who sanctifies His

name in public”. Avraham ben Avraham - the righteous convert who decided to give up life rather than abandon Torah - was executed on the second day of Shavuot 1749.

Friends, when I hear and read about people like this, I am in awe. I pray I never face the wrenching choice presented to this great man. Thankfully, no one demands I renounce my Judaism or face courtroom condemnation. No government official, in this blessed land of America, will persecute me for living as a proud Jew. The holiday of Shavuot is coming up, and I look forward to the opportunity to celebrate this important holiday. Shavuot marks the “wedding anniversary” between Hashem and the Jewish people 3300 years ago. Torah is the “ring” that God (“the groom”) presented to our ancestors (“the bride”).

We will mark Shavuot on Sunday, June 1st. After dinner at shul, I plan to lead three sessions highlighting the gift of Torah and its meaning for us today. I invite you to join me. Who knows? Maybe the souls of Avraham ben Avraham and the Vilna Gaon will visit our shul and join us in marking Hashem’s and our national wedding anniversary.