

Converts and Controversies –  
Becoming an American Jew

by

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## ABSTRACT

Conversion to Judaism has a long history, and changes in Jewish law for converts over the centuries have reflected changes in the relationship between the Jewish community and the larger societies within which Jews have lived. As American Jews now live in the most open society they have encountered, a split is developing between Orthodox and liberal Jewish rabbinic authorities in how they deal with potential converts. This split is evident in books written to advise potential converts and in conversion narratives by people who have converted to Judaism. For this project over 30 people who were in the process of converting to Judaism were interviewed. Their stories reflect the ways in which liberal Judaism has been affected by American ideals and values, including feminism and an emphasis on spiritual individuality.

For Barry, with love.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

A topic for research should always be something that is of significant interest to the researcher and something that might be informative and interesting to an audience, as well as something that might make a difference in some way. The research for this dissertation was prompted initially by my personal interest in conversion to Judaism. I became curious about what would motivate others to convert to Judaism, how that decision to become Jewish is put into action, and how the converts change as they go through the process. I have lived as a Jew for most of my life, but I have had to deal with the reality that while some Jewish congregations would recognize me as Jewish some would not and that any children I might have might find their own Jewishness questioned. This division between Orthodox and liberal Jewish authorities over the validity of conversions and who is and who is not Jewish seemed to me to be an important aspect of the Jewish community in America.

The issues now facing converts to Judaism have a long history and are also the result of the new interaction between Jews and American society. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Judaism has been a minority religion within a variety of majority cultures, but Judaism has never before dealt with as religiously open society as it does now. Through most of its history, in most settings, Jews have been able to create their own cultures within boundaries allowed and imposed by the majority cultures, boundaries that were usually well defined and acknowledged by both the Jews and the surrounding culture. Those boundaries are now much more permeable than ever before.

Over the centuries, some individuals did cross the boundaries, seeking to become Jews; to do so in the past they had to leave the larger society and live in the Jewish community. However, with the European emancipation in the nineteenth century the boundaries began to change. Jews were able to mix increasingly freely with citizens of their nation states. With social mixing came intermarriage and questions about the religious status of these marriages. Jewish law, *halakha*, confronted questions about non-Jewish spouses who wanted to become Jewish and the status of the children of these marriages. However, converts to Judaism, many of them motivated largely by their wish to marry a Jewish spouse, no longer had to completely leave their original society and live in an observant Jewish community. With the rise of Reform Judaism in Europe, a split developed within Judaism which involved differences over the status of converts; in general Reform rabbis took a more lenient approach to allowing Jews to marry non-Jews and to allowing non-Jews to become Jews.

Contemporary American society is probably the most open and tolerant religious society that Judaism has encountered. The division within Judaism that began in the nineteenth century has continued between what is now called Orthodox Judaism and the more liberal Jewish movements, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Marriages between Jews and non-Jews became more common, and as the rate of intermarriage reached almost half of marriages contracted by Jews, some of the liberal Jewish authorities (led by the Reform movement) have urged rabbis to encourage non-Jewish spouses to convert. In many ways, they also lowered requirements for conversion. However, Orthodox Jewish authorities do not recognize the competence of liberal rabbis to legitimize

conversions so that many converted Jews are now not Jews in the minds of some other Jews. At the same time, in reaction to fear that the values of American Christian and secular society would change fundamental aspects of Jewish religious life, most Orthodox authorities have raised requirements for conversion, asking potential converts to become strictly observant.

As a result of this split, converts to Judaism in America have found themselves often in situations where their Jewishness is questioned. A Reform convert may be welcomed in a Conservative synagogue but will find that he or she cannot be counted as a Jew in an Orthodox congregation without being required to convert again. Even the children of such converts may encounter difficulties if the family of a potential spouse is more observant than their converted parents were. In addition, in the state of Israel, created in the middle of the twentieth century, Orthodox rabbinic authorities control matters of personal status, including marriage and conversion, and may or may not recognize American converts as Jews for those purposes. The legitimacy of conversions under the auspices of liberal American rabbis – even lenient Orthodox rabbis – is often questioned, so that many American converts to Judaism find that they may or may not be able to immigrate to Israel and that they may not be able to marry or be buried in Israel, often depending on the judgment of rabbinical courts that are dominated by ultra-Orthodox rabbis.

There is now some suggestion that recently marriage has been less of a motivation as Jewish families have more often tolerated their children's marrying non-Jews. Many Reform and Reconstructionist congregations allow non-Jewish spouses to participate in

some aspects of the congregation's worship services, and Reform rabbis accept the children of non-Jewish women married to Jewish men as Jews by patrilineal descent. These children then find their Jewishness questioned if they want to join Conservative or Orthodox congregations. In addition, some rabbis anecdotally report that more often than before single individuals are asking to become Jewish even when there is no marriage planned.

There is a considerable conversion narrative literature by contemporary converts to conversion to Judaism in America. Although this literature can tell us a good deal about converts, their motivations, and the ways in which they go about becoming Jewish, these works are all written after the fact and suffer from being retrospective accounts. In addition, since the authors of many of the conversion narratives are self-selected, it is not clear that this literature represents a representative sample of contemporary converts to Judaism. Thus, as I planned this research, I decided that I wanted to find as large a sample as possible and to do a longitudinal study, trying to engage with converts as early as possible in the process and follow them through the formalities of conversion. This plan encountered some practical problems, but the results of my interviews with more than thirty individual converts are interesting. The participants in my research have presented a variety of stories. Some were converting after having married a Jewish spouse; several were converting even though they were unmarried. A few older participants were converting, even in their fifties. At least one convert had some evidence that his family came from Portuguese *conversos*, and others speculated that they may have some Jewish ancestry. For some conversion was a primarily spiritual experience, but for most being Jewish

was also a matter of coming to belong to a Jewish community. In general, the converts I interviewed clearly regarded being Jewish as one of the choices in an American spiritual marketplace, and each of them regarded determining what it means to be Jewish as something that could be decided individually, based on their own sense of Jewish community and spirituality.

### **Organization of topics**

The first two chapters of this dissertation present the background to my research. The first chapter reviews the history of conversion to Judaism beginning when Jews lived in a Greco-Roman social environment, through the interaction with Christianity in medieval Europe, and into the European emancipation and the problems that have developed with the foundation of the state of Israel. The application of *halakha* to conversions had to adapt to changing social circumstances, most notably in the nineteenth century. As the position of Jews in the larger society has changed, halakhic authorities have adapted their rules for conversions in response to the permeability of the boundary between Jew and non-Jew. Controversies about the validity of conversions and the possibility of annulling a conversion if the convert is not observant enough are recent developments in both America and Israel.

The second background chapter reviews the conversion narrative literature and some of the books written to advise potential converts. There is a diverse literature of advice for potential converts, with contributions from rabbis ranging from the most strictly Orthodox to the most liberal Reform. In addition, converts have also written accounts of their journeys to Judaism. These range from the most personal book-length accounts

to shorter chapters in collections of conversion narratives. It is interesting to speculate why converts seem to want so much to write about their conversions; some of them are sharing their stories as a way of providing advice to other potential converts, and some of them seem to be written to fulfill the convert's desire to share a spiritual journey in a literary form. Because conversion narratives are written retrospectively, there are inherent biases in these accounts.

The next three chapters describe my research. I attempted a longitudinal study of potential converts, with the hope that I could learn about their motivations as early as possible in the process and then follow them through to the formality of conversion, whether by "affirmation of Judaism" or by circumcision and immersion in a *mikvah*. I was able to interview over thirty participants. There were practical problems, of course, in finding potential converts at very early stages of making the decision to become Jewish, and time limitations meant that not all of the participants I interviewed had completed their formal conversions within the year between interviews.

The third chapter describes the methodology of my research in detail. I recruited participants in a variety of ways to fill out an online survey and asked those who did so if they would also allow me to interview them. For those who volunteered to be interviewed, I wrote a list of questions that covered their religious history, how they came into contact with Judaism and decided on converting, and their expectations regarding the formalities of conversion and religious observance. I used a telephone conference line in order to record the interviews, which were then transcribed and summarized. With about two thirds of the interview participants I was able to do follow-up interviews ten to



twelve months later, asking them then about their progress (or lack of it) to formal conversion and their decisions regarding observance of such matters as keeping kosher, Shabbat observance, etc. The fourth chapter consists of narrative summaries of these interviews. I randomly assigned names to each of the participants to make it easier to refer to them and to personalize their accounts. I treated these accounts as qualitative data to be analyzed using a grounded theory methodology, and in the fifth chapter, I describe the themes and patterns revealed by the participants' accounts, using a framework for understanding the process of religious conversion from both psychological and sociological perspectives.

In the concluding chapter I attempt to place the results of the research into the context of Judaism in the open American society. The boundaries between Jew and non-Jew in America are more permeable than ever before, and American individualism has had an effect on the ways Jews conceive of their identity as Jews. Liberal and Orthodox Judaism have been responding differently to the mixing of Jewish values and views with American values and views. Converts represent one aspect of that mixing, and the differences between Orthodox and liberal responses to converts reflect anxieties about or acceptance of that mixing.

#### **A note about terminology**

There have been a number of terms for people who have become Jews, including in Hebrew, *ger*, and from the Greek, proselyte. Throughout this dissertation I have simply referred to them as converts. *Ger*, which biblically can also mean "sojourner, in the past simply referred to someone who lived among Jews in their land. *Ger tzedek*, or

“righteous sojourner,” may refer to contemporary converts but suggests the idea that a convert must be more strictly Jewish than others. Proselyte, which comes from Greek roots that also referred to a resident alien, carries the connotation of someone who has been the object of proselytizing, of being induced to change religion. I also reject the phrase “Jew by choice.” For some converts being Jewish is not perceived as a choice but as the result of a search for what is felt to be a religious home. In addition, that label suggests that one is always a “Jew by choice,” that one never really becomes simply a Jew. Convert, the word I use, simply means someone who has changed from one religious orientation to another and has the advantage of being plain English with simple Latin roots suggesting that the convert is someone who has turned (rather than has been turned), a connotation consistent with the Jewish concept of *teshuvah*, turning in repentance.

It is impossible to discuss conversion to Judaism without using some Hebrew terminology. I have tried to be consistent in transliterating these terms rather than trying to translate them. A *beit din* is not simply a “court” that consists of judges, and a *mikvah* is not just a cleansing bath but also a significant ritual. *Halakha*, which comes from Hebrew roots meaning “walk” or “the way,” is not simply “Jewish law.” Halakhic is the closest to an English adjective when I have needed to refer to nouns such as those decisions by those rabbis who were expert in *halakha* and whose decisions have both affected and reflected changing responses to converts. Circumcision is the simple and well-understood term for the surgical procedure that is termed in Hebrew, *brit milah*, and which signifies the male infant’s entry into the Jewish covenant. When an adult male

convert has already been circumcised, the ritual of conversion requires *hatafat dam brit*, a small bloodletting from the penis since the original surgical procedure was not done as a ritual admitting the child to the covenant with Israel's God. In general, I have also allowed other authors whom I quote to transliterate these and other terms in their own ways and to italicize them or not as they prefer.

## Chapter 2

### HISTORY AND HALAKHA OF CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

Conversion to Judaism has always involved both a change in religion – beliefs and practices – and a process of somehow becoming a member of the Jewish people. Converts become Jews and take on a Jewish identity. However, Jewish identity, always complex and involving both religious and ethnic aspects, has carried different implications over the centuries in the context of different social environments. Thus, what it means to convert to Judaism – for the converts as well as the people they are joining – has been entwined with changing views of the relationship between Jews and other peoples and other religions. As these relationships have changed, Jewish law, *halakha*, regarding conversion has also changed. In addition, Jewish attitudes toward converts have fluctuated, ranging from full acceptance<sup>1</sup> to a degree of suspicion<sup>2</sup>. Shaye Cohen (1992) defined five attitudes toward conversions, ranging from active encouragement through openness with minimal encouragement to discouragement and refusal to accept converts. At various times each of these attitudes toward converts has dominated as the relationship between Judaism and the surrounding Gentile world has changed.

Initially being Jewish involved belonging to a tribal, primarily land-based ethnic group, and becoming Jewish meant joining those people. With the split between Judaism and Christianity and the ascendancy of Christianity in Europe, Judaism became the reli-

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<sup>1</sup>For example: Leviticus Rabbah 2:9 – “When a would-be proselyte comes to accept Judaism, a hand should be stretched out towards him to bring him under the wings of the *Shechinah*.”

<sup>2</sup>For example: Yehvamot 47B -- Converts as are burdensome to Israel as leprosy.”

gion that Jews professed – in error according to the surrounding society – and which condemned them to being a marginalized people with no homeland, a situation that lasted through the Middle Ages and into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Medieval converts risked their lives for their convictions and faced rabbinic discouragement. With the European enlightenment, Jews became citizens of nation states, citizens “of the Hebrew persuasion,” and the increasing possibility of intermarriage that developed along with social assimilation changed Jewish authorities’ attitudes toward converts and highlighted questions about the validity of motivation for conversion. These changes required new rulings about the *halakha* of conversion. In the open spiritual marketplace of contemporary America, being Jewish has become one of many religious, spiritually oriented identities (Cohen and Eisen, 2000) that are regarded as freely and individually chosen. At the same time, the possibility of being a Jewish citizen of Israel, a Jewish state, has opened new questions about what it means to be a Jew and what becoming a Jew involves. In response to these new societies, a growing split has developed between Orthodox Jewish authorities and more liberal rabbis over these questions. This split is most evident in differences regarding the requirements for converts and in the possibility that the conversions of those who do not live up to Orthodox requirements may be annulled.

### **Biblical and Second Temple era converts**

Biblical accounts of individuals who are often taken to be converts include Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, who offers sacrifices to Moses’ God and then returns to his home (*Exodus* 18:12). Ruth, the prototypical convert, a Moabitess, declares her adherence to Naomi, Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God, marries into the family, and becomes Naomi’s

surrogate daughter with no ceremony. At the conclusion of the events in Esther with the defeat of Haman and his family, many people fearing for their lives decide to join the Jewish people; the text does not mention anything about the process of such conversion nor is there any question about the motivation of these converts (although later rabbinic authorities asserted that such fear would not be a valid motive for conversion).

Shaye Cohen (2001) makes a compelling argument that until the second century BCE, being Jewish meant being Judean, a member of an ethnic and/or geographically defined people within a henotheistic world. It seems to have been expected that non-Jews would live among the Israelites both before and after their settling in the land, and the term *ger* does not seem to have had the meaning of “convert” that it is now given. Leviticus and Exodus include rules for dealing with the *ger* who would live among the Jews after they conquer Canaan. Jews are to love the *ger* because they were *gerim* in Egypt (*Exodus* 22:20 for instance). There should be one law for Jew and for the “stranger among you” (*Leviticus* 15:14), and the *ger* who wants to be included in the Passover offerings may do so with no rite of conversion except circumcision (*Exodus* 12:48). *Gerim*, “strangers among you,” were to offer sacrifices from any animal they slaughtered (*Leviticus* 17:8, 17:13, 15:14) and were forbidden to offer their children to Moloch (*Leviticus* 20:2). If a *ger* sinned unwittingly, he should offer the same sacrifice for expiation as the Israelite (*Lev.* 15:27). The *ger* lived in the land of Israel, may have respected the God of Israel, and even may have offered sacrifices to that God, but was not quite a member of the people of Israel (Cohen, 1983).

Matthew Theissen (2011) contends that pre-Second Temple Jews would have found the notion of “conversion” an “unknown and incomprehensible phenomenon” (p. 11) because in that era Judaism was a genealogical identity. Thiessen and Shaye Cohen (2001) both point out that Second Temple Judaism was a period when “conceptions of Jewishness during this period were variegated, and in fact, were in competition with one another” (Thiessen, p. 4). Theissen notes that the Greek word, *prosylutos*, seems to have been used in the Septuagint to describe the possibility of conversion as Gentiles began to adopt Jewish practices and as becoming Jewish began to mean a change in religious identity (p.4).

Evidence of conversions in the Hellenic and Roman empires can be found in the Talmud, in the works of Josephus, Philo, and other Second Temple sources, and in a small number of inscriptions on ossuaries identifying the deceased as converts to Judaism (Bird, 2010). Shaye Cohen counts twenty-six Talmudic records of conversion (1983). That there were converts to Judaism in that era is undisputed, but there are disagreements as to their number and the overall attitude toward converts among Jews then. For instance although Josephus describes the forced conversions of the Idumeaeans and the Atureans by the Hasmoneans, Michael Bird (2010) disputes the nature of such “military proselytism” (p. 57-61).

A hotly debated question about conversion in that era centers on the issue of whether Jews in Israel or in the Diaspora actively engaged in seeking converts. Did Jews under Roman rule actively seek converts so that Judaism could be considered a “missionary religion?” A passage in the New Testament (“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,

hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the proselyte twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. *Matthew 23:15*) suggests that the Pharisees (possibly the forerunners of rabbinic Judaism) went to some considerable effort to make converts. However, Michael Bird points out that this passage could be interpreted as a polemic against the Pharisees “converting” Jews to their sectarian Judaism (2010, p. 68).

The consensus regarding the extent of Jewish missionizing in the Second Temple era has fluctuated. Scot McKnight describes “the customary polemical assertion of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German scholarship on Judaism, that [post-Bar Kokhba, Talmudic] Judaism was largely unconcerned with proselytes and was, in fact, often hostile to them” (1991, p. 2). Louis Feldman adds that this position “often was based on a hidden agenda, namely to prove that Christianity, which eagerly sought proselytes, was therefore superior to Judaism” (1992, p. 24). It would seem, then, that 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholarship read the Second Temple era as though it reflected their own notions of what it meant to be Jewish. German Jewish scholars, working in an antisemitic cultural milieu, treated Judaism as a relic that was destined to be an object of scholarly study that “would link Jews to their past, show them a way out of the ghetto, and help them arrive at the point ‘that the rest of Europe has already reached’” (Elon, 2002). Many of these scholars eventually converted to Christianity at least formally in order fully to join the secular society they lived and worked in. Their goal regarding Jewish scholarship was not to persuade Christians that Judaism was a superior religion but to portray it as on a par with Christianity as a worthwhile and sep-



arate object of study in a secular society. It would have been difficult for them to reconcile their enlightenment worldview with a notion of an earlier Judaism as actively seeking converts. Therefore, I suggest that they read Second Temple Judaism as religiously standing on its own, separate from the surrounding cultures, and therefore uninterested in bringing Gentiles into the fold (as they were toward their contemporary European culture).

However, beginning in the mid-1930's the consensus shifted. In the mid-20th century Reform Judaism, especially in America, emphasized the universality of Jewish values and began to call for active outreach both to the non-Jewish spouses in intermarriages and to the Gentile world in general. In parallel, Reform scholars interpreted the Second Temple era as promoting the universality of Judaism just as they did. McKnight (1991) cites Bernard Bamberger (1939), William Braude (1940), and Joseph Rosenbloom (1978) as contributing to a picture of Second Temple Judaism as “an aggressive missionary movement” that “sought out converts with religious zeal” (p. 3). Thus, they read Second Temple Judaism under Roman rule as parallel to Judaism in America and as appealing to the dominant culture because of its high morality and universal values. Joseph Rosenbloom, a Reform rabbi, asserts that

The general goal of the rabbis was to bring “all men under the wings of the *Shechinah*.” The conviction of the Jews that theirs was the one true religion, from which it could follow that all should eventually come to it, was a unique development (1978, p. 41)

Most recently, however, Bird has re-examined the same documents as Bamberger, Braude, and Rosenbloom, concluding that

The evidence . . . seems to vindicate the growing consensus that the Judaism of the [Second Temple] period was not by and large a missionary religion. What evidence does exist for it is either ambiguous (like what happened to trigger the expulsion of Jews from Rome), spasmodic (like the activity of Jewish Christian proselytizers), or exceptional (like Ananias and Eleazar in Adiabene). There is no evidence for an organized campaign or a widely held ethos that endeavored to recruit Gentiles to Judaism via the process of proselytizing. (2010, p. 149-150)

The scholarly tide, perhaps, has turned. However, those who debate whether Second Temple Judaism could be characterized as missionizing or not do not seem to take into account the variety of Judaisms in that era. Shaye Cohen (2006) questions whether one could even speak of a unified “Judaism” of that era rather than a variety of “Judaisms.” Pharisees, Sadducees, the Qumran sectarians, and others differed on major points, including the role of converts. The increasing Jewish population in the diaspora and contact there with the surrounding Hellenistic and Roman world may allowed for varying attitudes toward conversion as well. There was certainly some degree of ambivalence toward converts among these divisions of Judaism. Bird notes that the Qumran community viewed gentiles as a source of impurity and emphasized “exhaustive” separation from non-Jews (2010, p. 63). Even within rabbinic Judaism, differing attitudes toward converts are demonstrated in the stories about Hillel and Shammai. Hillel accepts as

converts Gentiles who were rejected by Shammai – for demanding to learn all there was to know immediately (“on one foot”), for wanting to convert in order to wear the garments of the High Priest, and for denying the validity of the oral Torah (Hoenig, 1965, p. 40-42).

A phenomenon attributed to the Second Temple era is that of the “god fearers.” These were Gentiles who in some way affiliated themselves with diaspora synagogues but did not formally convert to Judaism. God fearers are referred to in the New Testament *Acts of the Apostles* and in a number of Second Temple inscriptions. Bird, describing the controversies over questions about the exact relationship of such non-Jews to the Jewish community, cites A. T. Krabel’s argument that the author of *Acts* may have used the fiction of such adherents to legitimize Christianity’s status as a gentile religion (Bird, 2010, p. 45). Nevertheless, Bird reviews the evidence and concludes that these pagan non-Jews were a social phenomenon of the time. Braude (1940) notes that these “sympathizers” are spoken of favorably in the Talmud (1940, p. 138), and Schiffman, while accepting that these “half-Jews” “were found throughout the Hellenistic world in substantial numbers” makes it clear that they were not accepted as Jewish “regardless of the extent of their loyalty” (1985, p. 37).

Why some people adopted this peripheral status is not clear; we do not have evidence of their motivations. Under Roman rule, Jews were given a special status as an ancient people who were exempt from the expectation that all citizens would support the *polis* by participating in pagan rites that guaranteed the favor of the gods. Jews were exempt from offering sacrifices to the emperor; it was sufficient that they offered sacrifices

in his honor in their own Temple. Thus, joining the Jewish people was not simply a religious act but most importantly the act of becoming one of these special people who lived with a different set of rules. Such a change of what we might now characterize as ethnicity may have been more than these god fearers wanted to make. They would not want to be Judeans but Greeks or Romans, citizens of their homes. In addition, conversion to Judaism entailed adopting Jewish observances – eating kosher food, not eating with gentiles, and – for men – circumcision. Those requirements may have stood in the way of fully becoming Jewish. Bird, a New Testament scholar, notes that pagan openness to recognition of various divinities meant that there would be little conflict between a gentile’s status as a Roman citizen and his or her worshipping with Jews with no motivation to fully convert and to become a member of the Jewish *ethnos*. It may be that persons with that sort of peripheral status in diaspora synagogues may have been attracted to Christianity when it was a new Jewish sect that accepted gentiles without requiring circumcision or other rigorous observances and without demanding a change of ethnic allegiance.

The relationship between Judaism under Roman rule and Christianity as a Jewish sect that separated itself from Judaism over the next few centuries affected the developing attitude of rabbinic Judaism toward converts for the next several centuries. A full discussion of the “parting of the ways” is beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to note that the separation also involved the development of the idea of Judaism as a religion in contrast to Christianity (and paganism). After the failure of the Bar Kokhba rebellion and the destruction of the Temple, the center of Jewish worship and ethnicity, Christians sought to be seen as separate from the rebellious Jews. Schiffman

(1985) and Novak (1987) note that rabbinic literature includes evidence that the rabbis were equally interested in clearly drawing the line between Jews and Christians. For instance, Daniel Boyarin (2004) examines the language of fourth and fifth century Christian and Jewish texts for the “epistemic shift” from identity based on kinship and land to one based in religious belief. As Christianity defined itself as a religion, the Christian authorities defined Judaism as an alternative religion. Boyarin contends that the rabbinic authorities resisted this epistemic shift.

The Rabbis, in the end, reject and refuse the Christian definition of a religion, understood as a system of beliefs and practices to which one adheres voluntarily and defalcation from which results in one’s becoming a heretic. At this moment, then, we first find the principle that has been ever since the touchstone of Jewish ecclesiology: “an Israelite, even though he sin, remains an Israelite,” which we find only once in all of classical rabbinic literature, in the Babylonian Talmud and then in the name of a late *amora* (Sanhedrin 44a). This same watchword becomes nearly ubiquitous and foundational for later forms of rabbinic Judaism. (2004, p. 47)

Boyarin contends that Jews did not really think of Judaism as a religion in the same sense that Christians considered Christianity (and Judaism) as “religions” until well into the nineteenth century (2004, p. 21).

### **Rabbinic *Halakha***

Eventually, conversion to Judaism came to be defined by rabbinic authorities. Talmudic descriptions of how conversions should occur are fairly straightforward. Shaye

Cohen (1990) has outlined the rabbinic conversion ceremony described in the Talmudic tractates of Yevamot and Gerim, which Cohen dates to the second or early third century CE. Cohen's primary concern is to describe the development of this literature and to compare the two documents, but he also depicts the formulation of a ceremony as an attempt to bring order to a chaotic situation in which private conversions and conversions without knowledge of what it meant to be Jewish could occur.

The Tosephta<sup>1</sup> even considers the (theoretical) possibility that a gentile might convert himself, continue to live among gentiles, and not even know that work is prohibited on the Sabbath. Christian and pagan literature of late antiquity refers occasionally to converts and conversion to Judaism, but betrays no knowledge of pre-conversion instruction. From the rabbis' perspective, chaos reigned "out there" and the creation of a formal conversion ceremony was one of their responses. (p. 196)

The rabbinic prescriptions for conversion that Cohen reviews included four parts: presentation and examination of the prospective convert; instruction; circumcision (for men); and immersion and further instruction. In the first part, a person who comes to be converted is asked about his awareness that he is asking to join a persecuted people and to join in their suffering. Instruction is to include "a few of the light commandments and a few of the severe" and the reward in the world to come for keeping the commandments. After circumcision, the potential convert is immersed and again instructed in a few of the light and a few of the severe commandments. Afterwards as Cohen points out, "he is like

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen is citing the Talmudic supplement to the Mishnah that is often dated to a period of time shortly after the redaction of the Mishnah in the third century CE.

an Israelite in all respects” and his obligation to observe the commandments is “the same as that of the native” (p. 184-185).

Retroactively, rabbinic authorities – writing during and after the Second Temple era – co-opted some of the biblical characters and read the stories as though these characters converted to Judaism as the rabbis understood the process. When Pharaoh’s daughter finds the infant Moses, she is said to be going to the river as a *mikvah* to convert to Judaism (Macia, 2011, p. 77-79). A midrash on Exodus 18:12 (“And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took a burnt offering and offered sacrifices for God.”) asserts that his sacrifices indicated that he had converted, but the midrash debated whether he converted and made offerings to God after Sinai (like all the Israelites) or whether he made the offerings before Sinai (indicating that he knew the truth about God before the revelation at Sinai) (Macia, 2011, p. 74).

Ruth’s oath of allegiance to Judaism is directed to her connection to Naomi:

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you. (*Ruth* 1:16-17, JPS)

*Middrash Rabbah* enlarges the conversation:

And Ruth said, “Entreat me not to leave then, and to return from following after thee.” “. . . I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of

another.” When Naomi heard this, she began to unfold to her the laws of conversion, saying, “My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theaters and circuses,” to which Ruth replied, “Whither thou goest, I will go.” Naomi continued, “My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no mezu-zah,” to which she responded, “And where thou lodgest I will lodge.” “Thy people shall be my people” refers to the penalties and admonitions [of the Torah], “And thy god my god” to the other commandments of the Bible. (*Midrash Rabbah*, quoted in Abrams, 1992, p. 30)

The Babylonian Talmud adds more:

“We are forbidden,” Naomi told her, “to move on Shabbat *beyond* the Shabbat boundaries!”

“Whither thou goest, I will go,” Ruth replied.

“We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman.”

“Where thou lodgest, I will lodge.”

“We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments!”

“Thy people shall be my people.”

“We are forbidden idolatry!”

“And thou God my God.”

“Four modes of death were entrusted to the Beit Din!”

“Where thou diest I will die.”

“Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beit Din.”



“And there I will be buried.” (*Yevamot* 47b, quoted in Abrams, 1992, p. 31)

Over centuries the rabbinic view of conversion came to be codified in halakhic rulings. Jewish law is a complex system of legal reasoning, that begins with commandments laid down in Torah, is expanded upon and elaborated in the Mishnah, Gemorah, Talmud, and has been codified by medieval commentators – Maimonides, Caro, and others. It continues as an open system, continually enlarged as rabbinic authorities respond to inquiries about the application of *halakha* to specific situations. Understanding controversies about the legalities of conversion requires some understanding of how halakhic decisions are made.

The body of legal decisions by rabbinic authorities (*poskim*) who undertake to deal with application of *halakha* in specific situations is made up of *responsa* composed by these authorities. As David Ellenson (1989) points out, this literature is highly formal; each *responsum* is written as a letter in reply to a written inquiry. Following an “honorific apostrophe” identifying the author and the addressees, the *posek* summarizes the matter under discussion, citing legal precedents, biblical sources, Talmudic passages, medieval rabbinic authorities and codes, and resolving ambiguities in the understanding of these sources. A decision is then rendered, followed by a concluding exhortation to moral and religious uprightness. Some *responsa* at this point may include comments regarding any who might disagree with this way of understanding the situation and this ruling. The *responsa* literature regarding conversion includes a variety of rulings, some “stringent” and some “lenient” in their application of previous rulings and analogies.

Halakhic authorities have always had to adapt the law to specific circumstances and situations. From the Orthodox point of view all of the Written and Oral Torah was taught to Moses on Sinai and handed down through a series of sages and authorities. The *posek*, from this point of view, is the ultimate recipient of revelation. The textual basis for decisions may be biblical or rabbinic, and there may be disagreements among *poskim*, but the fundamental basis of their decisions is not only their reasoning but the authority of revelation. However, the Orthodox halakhic scholar Eliezer Berkovits, asserts that even if halakhic rulings claim a revelatory authority, *halakha* has to translate the intention of Torah into specific real life situations (2010). As *poskim* deal with specific situations, Berkovits points out that – and provides extensive examples of how – halakhic reasoning has always been informed by common sense, feasibility, and “the priority of the ethical . . . . furthering the larger moral principles embodied in the Torah” (p. 3). Divergence of rulings on specific questions can result from divergent views of these sources of information and changes in the context of the specific situations, not from any denial of the authority of Torah, both written and oral.

From a Conservative and Reform Jewish point of view the authority of halakhic rulings may not be simple revelation. Joel Roth, a member of the Rabbinical Assembly of American Conservative Judaism and a former member and chair of the assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards asserts that although the *grundnorm* of *halakha* is that “the document called the Torah embodies the word and the will of God, which it behooves man to obey, and is therefore, authoritative” (1986, p. 9), the written Torah is a historical document, “promulgated by J, E, P, and D” (p. 10). Although for Roth the text

is still authoritative, his view omits the direct contact with revelation that the Orthodox view asserts. Thus, from Roth's point of view, a wide variety of extra-legal considerations are valid in the interpretation of Torah since we are dealing with a human-created document from a different historical and social context. Rulings on specific situations from this point of view need to take into account the historical context of the Torah.

*Poskim*, Roth points out, have always taken into account scientific, historical, and other extra-legal considerations in making their decisions in specific situations. For Roth, a major systemic principle of the Jewish legal system is “*Ein lo la-dayyan ella mah she-inav ro'ot*” (A judge must be guided by what he sees). However, Roth acknowledges that if each *posek* is solely the judge of what he sees and how he interprets the relationship between Torah and the current situation, the halakhic system is susceptible to the possibility of anarchy. In fact, he concludes that “Ultimately, the only guarantee of the integrity of the halakhic system is the integrity of its recognized authorities” (p. 304). Roth does not deal specifically with questions about conversion, but his reasoning – that the judgments of individual *poskim* take into consideration both extra-legal considerations (social changes, compassion for those affected adversely by stringency, etc.) and that *poskim* base their rulings on a critical reading of Torah and on what the individual *posek* “sees” before himself – is relevant for understanding the liberal Jewish approach to questions about conversion.

Mark Washovsky, who is Chair of the Reform Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, argues for the “essentially *indeterminate* nature of the *halakhah* on controversial questions” (1994, p. 33), specifically questions about con-

version. He points out that differing rulings within the halakhic literature have always been preserved and that in controversial issues an emerging consensus has led to a “correct” decision. He notes that “Eventually, the ‘right’ answer will be identified with the opinion which commands the assent of a preponderance of *halakhists* over a significant period of time, and the minority opinions, though studied avidly in the *yeshivah*, will lose whatever authoritative power they once possessed” (p. 34). Thus, Washovsky argues that it is impossible to attribute an objective correctness to halakhic decisions and that “In addressing hard cases rabbis cannot avoid the necessity of making choices” (p. 34). That is to say, no decision is final, debates are always open, and rabbis chose on which texts and which precedents they will base their decisions. The choices that the rabbis make in deciding specific questions are affected by “what the judge sees,” including all the specifics of the situation.

### **Medieval converts**

Over the course of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries and into the Middle Ages, conversion to Judaism was increasingly condemned (Rosenbloom, 1978, p. 63), and the rabbis’ response was to emphasize the details of the rules for accepting converts, to limit the role of converts among the Jewish people, and to discourage converts (Novak, 1987). As early as the second century the Emperor Severus forbade Gentiles from converting to Judaism (Epstein, 1994). In medieval Europe, conversion to Judaism was stringently discouraged by Christian authorities. In Iberia and North Africa, beginning about 900 CE, the Muslim authorities forbade conversion to Judaism (as well as conversion to Christianity). Restrictions included forbidding the sale of slaves to Jews and the marriage of

Christian women to Jewish men. Emperor Theodosius the Great (379-395) made marriage to a Jew or Jewess equivalent to adultery. In the seventh century under Visigoth rule, converts to Judaism were subject to execution, as well as the Jews who converted them.

Rosenbloom, however, lists a number of known conversions to Judaism that did occur in medieval Europe as do Esther Seidel (1997) and David Eichhorn (1965). According to Rosenbloom slaves were one of the largest source of converts (1987, p. 79). Circumcision of male slaves and immersion for female slaves – if not full conversion – was a Talmudic requirement and made it easier for slaves to handle food and wine in a Jewish household. Conversion of female slaves facilitated legitimization of children fathered by the slave owners. Michael Panitz mentions one known medieval convert who was motivated by the wish to marry a Jewish woman with whom he had an affair (1983, p. 51)

Rosenbloom (1978) notes that the converts whose names were recorded tended to be Christian clergy, who seem to have come to Judaism as a result of study of Hebrew texts; most of these converts seem to have been executed or fled to Muslim-controlled lands where the Jewish community assisted them (Panitz, 1983, p. 50). Norman Golb (1988) found evidence of medieval conversion to Judaism in documents from the Cairo genizah. He also noted that many of these were Christian clerics; many of them were known for mounting heated attacks on Christianity. Based on his analysis of the accounts in the Cairo genizah, Golb estimates that approximately 15,000 men and women converted from Christianity to Judaism between 1000 and 1200 CE (p. 36). He attributes

their motivation to the theological difficulties that Christianity grappled with in that era, to evidence of moral decline in the monasteries and other church institutions, and to the theological appeal of Judaic monotheism (p. 36). Seidel (1997) notes that the medieval practice of staging disputations in which Christian scholars demonstrated the superiority of Christianity may have backfired as the Jewish scholars were adept at their own defense.

The Jewish response to converts in this era was mixed. Not only were medieval converts putting their lives at risk; the rabbis who accepted them and the Jewish communities they sought to join were at risk of punishment by Christian authorities. If these converts were primarily motivated by intellectual reasons and came to Judaism as a religious alternative, the rabbis may have been suspicious that intellectually motivated conversions would not include the same sort of adherence to Judaism as both ethnicity and religion. In the eleventh century Rabbi Salomon Isaac (Rashi) felt that converts would contaminate Jews with their old practices and beliefs. Perhaps he was right if converts were bringing along the notion of being Jewish as a religious status intellectually and voluntarily chosen. Rabbi Salomon Luria (Rashal) in the sixteenth century discouraged converts because accepting converts might pose a danger to the Jewish community. In the thirteenth century, Rabbi Gershom ben Jacob ruled that proselytes should be accepted only if they were informed of the risk of death for their decision (Seidel, 1997).

An important theme about converts entered the discourse in kabbalistic literature and in the work of Judah Halevi in the eleventh century. The *Kuzari*, Halevi's apologetic treatise, is presented as a dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, who de-

cides that Judaism is superior to Christianity, Islam, or the “religion” of the philosophers. The king’s religious search is prompted by a dream in which he is told that his piety was acceptable in its intentions but not in terms of his practice. The king’s conversion to Judaism is presented as based on his intellectual acceptance of the tenets of Jewish belief, but in many ways he remains a Khazar. In this discourse, Halevi distinguishes between born Jews and converts. He describes Jews – at least those who lived in the land of Israel in the past – as recipients of the gift of prophecy. Jews relate to God through the *‘amr ilahi*, an Arabic term that could loosely translate as the speech, word, or command of God. Sirat (1985) notes that Halevi used the term in three senses: a “divine spark that is transmitted by heredity” [that] “offers the possibility of union with the *Amr ilahi*” as “the divine Word, the divine Action, the divine Will” and “a supernatural way of living” (p. 146).

This relationship is not something that born Jews seek or strive for; it comes to them as their birthright. For Halevi born Jews had access to this relationship with God, and converts, who attached themselves to God and the Jewish people voluntarily, did not. For Halevi something particularly Jewish is inherited, although strangely it seems that the children of converts may acquire it. The born Jew is related passively to God, whereas the convert makes a voluntary decision to relate to God in this way, to imitate born Jews.

. . . [F]or Judah Halevi, native-born Judaism is the only real and perfect religion, and it acts as a model for proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Proselyte Judaism is a relatively successful imitation of Judaism, but

Christianity and Islam are in truth very inferior copies of it, demanding less yet promising more. (Lasker, 1990, p. 87)

This distinction between born Jews and converts is echoed in the Zoharic comment that the souls of converts “come under the wings of the Shekinah” but do not rise to the same level as the souls of born Jews (Wijnhoven, 1995).

Halevi wrote the *Kuzari* in the context of Sephardic Judaism, the same context as the Zohar, while the clerical converts Seidel and Eichhorn describe seem to have been predominantly European. Nevertheless, the contrast between intellectually motivated converts and Halevi’s notion of a heritable Jewish soul is evident. It can be argued that Halevi is not really proposing a racist notion of Judaism (Bodoff, 1989), but the idea of a distinctive “Jewish soul” persists in some Orthodox Jewish circles. For example, the Chabad website includes a story of an Australian girl who is mystically known to the Rebbe in Brooklyn as “really” Jewish even though no one knows that her mother was born Jewish (Touger, n.d.).

### **European Enlightenment**

New problems regarding conversion to Judaism developed with the European Jewish emancipation and enlightenment, the *haskalah*, and the rise of Reform Judaism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Until then, since Jews lived in their own enclaves, separate from the wider, secular society, a convert to Judaism would be expected to live in an observant community, and there was no question but that converts were going to be observant along with the community. However, emancipation changed that situation. When Napoleon insisted that European rabbis facilitate integration into European society,



they agreed on many points, including not to discriminate against Jews who sought civil marriage, but they refused to approve of intermarriages (Ellenson, 1983, p. 58). Intermarriages, however, did occur, and the rabbis were then confronted with non-Jewish spouses (or proposed spouses) who wanted to convert to Judaism.

The Talmudic position regarding conversion for the sake of marriage is fairly clear. Menachem Finkelstein quotes the Talmudic ruling in b. Yevamot (24b) that

Both a man who converted for the sake of a woman, and a woman who converted for the sake of a man and also one who converted for the sake of the royal table [i.e., to gain an official position] or for the sake of [becoming one of] Solomon's servants . . . : they were not valid converts; this is the opinion of R. Nehemiah, for R. Nehemiah used to say: Lion-converts, dream-converts [Rashi: a dreamer told them to convert], and the converts of Mordecai and Esther are all the same; they are not valid converts unless they were converted at the present time (2006, p. 222).

He also quotes the Mishna in Yevamot: "A man who was suspected of intercourse . . . with a Gentile woman, and she converted – he may not marry her, but if he married her, they do not take her from him" (p. 224). That is to say, the wish to marry a Jew is not an acceptable reason to convert, and if one is married (i.e., has had intercourse) before the Gentile converts, the couple cannot be married afterwards. But if – somehow – they do marry, the marriage is not invalidated.

Maimonides affirmed this position:

The correct procedure in this Mitzvah is as follows: When a man or woman comes to be converted, one makes enquiries lest it be for the sake of money they will come to possess, power they will gain or out of fear, that they have come to seek entry into the religion. If it is a man one makes enquiries lest he has set his eye upon a Jewish woman. If it is a woman one makes enquiries lest she has set her eye upon a young man of the young men of Israel. If no such cause is found, one informs them of the weight of the yoke of the Torah and the difficulty in observing it for those who come from other nations, in order they may depart. If they accept and do not depart and one can observe that they are returning out of love, then one accepts them, as the Bible said (of Naomi and Ruth): “When she saw that [Ruth] was determined, [Naomi] stopped speaking of [i.e., discouraging] her. (quoted in Wittenberg, 1996, p. 20)

From a halakhic point of view, the situation is problematic when a woman requests conversion before marrying a Jewish man<sup>2</sup>. However, there is an additional issue when a Jewish man has already married a Gentile woman in a civil ceremony. If a couple are married in a civil ceremony and then the woman converts, *halakha* forbids them to marry. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Orthodox rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University, J. David Bleich (1971) reviewed the mishnaic ruling that although such marriages are forbidden, if the couple does marry, they are not required to divorce. Bleich quotes

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the time, conversion is a halakhic issue when a Jewish man wants to marry a Gentile woman. When the situation is reversed, since the children will be Jewish, conversion for a Gentile man marrying a Jewish woman is not as urgent a problem.

commentaries to the effect that the marriage is forbidden both to prevent suspicion that there had been an immoral relationship and to prevent the aspersion that the woman's motivation for conversion is less than sincere. He notes, however, that Rabbi Moses Feinstein, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox authority, argued that the establishment of a permanent civil conjugal relationship means the motivation for conversion is not insincere in these cases. In addition, sanctioning the conversion and the marriage may be the lesser sin to the alternative of allowing a Jewish man to continue in a sinful relationship with a Gentile woman. Bleich notes that some other modern authorities have forbidden such marriages after the woman's conversion – and therefore forbid the conversion of Gentile women who are already married civilly to Jewish men. In any case, he argues that such converts should not be accepted unless the couple would agree to observe the “laws of family purity”<sup>3</sup> after the woman's conversion as any continued sexual relationship without observance of *niddah* would be even more sinful than the initial illicit relationship between a Gentile woman and her Jewish husband.

These were the primary halakhic statements that 19<sup>th</sup>-century European Orthodox rabbis relied on when the changing culture and the increase in intermarriage led to new responses to potential converts, especially those who requested conversion in the context of marriage or proposed marriage to a Jew. An Orthodox rabbi, Daniel Sinclair, reviewed the *responsa* of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbis regarding intermarriage and conversion. He noted that

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<sup>3</sup> The “laws of family purity,” “*tarahat hamispocha*,” refer to rules forbidding sexual relations (and even most physical contact) during and for some days after a woman's menstrual period (when she is *niddah*). At the end of this time, the woman must undergo immersion in a *mikvah*, a ritual bath, before the couple can resume marital relationships

Two distinct attitudes to the use of conversion as a means of preserving Jewish identity in the face of the breakdown of social barriers between Jews and non-Jews in the period between the Emancipation and the early twentieth century emerge. . . . The first is the permissive view which was based upon the discretion afforded to the Beth Din with regard to the acceptance of converts and the pastoral principle that it is better to perform an insincere conversion than have a Jew marry a non-Jew. Differences of opinion exist concerning the minimum sincerity required for a valid conversion and according to some authorities, sincerity may virtually be dispensed with as a requirement for conversion when the issue of Jewish identity is at stake. The second is a strict view, according to which sincerity is a vital prerequisite for a valid conversion and may not be dispensed with under any circumstances. In this view, the balance of sinfulness principle applied by the lenient school is either irrelevant to conversion, or leads to a strict conclusion since the almost certain irreligiosity of the convert after conversion tilts the balance of sinfulness in favour of the candidate remaining non-Jewish. (1990, p. 166)

David Ellenson (2005) details the changing responses of a succession of Orthodox Hungarian rabbis in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The situation in Hungary was common to all of the Orthodox rabbinate in Europe as they confronted a society that was newly open to Jews and the rise of European Reform Judaism. At first, Rabbi Moses Schreiber (the Hatam Sofer) offered no objections to conversion on religious or social grounds and

adopted legalistically lenient positions regarding conversions, based on his assumption that converts would lead fully observant lifestyles as they would be living in an observant Jewish community. In fact, Rabbi Schreiber was concerned that converts might be so observant that they would exceed the born Jews (Ellenson, 2005, p. 323-324). Later his attitude changed; Schreiber inveighed against Reform Jews, and his student, Rabbi Akiva Eger a few years later essentially banned conversions. Eger's reasoning was not only that conversion to Judaism was illegal according to the Hungarian state authorities but also that a rabbi could no longer be sure that converts would live observant lives. Ellenson points out that Eger's strict ruling "reflects a social-religious context in which Reform had arisen, where Jewish-gentile social interaction was now beginning to occur with greater frequency, and where the religious behavior of converts, after conversion, could no longer be taken for granted (p. 328-329)."

Later, Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher, whom Ellenson cites as a well-known mid-19th century rabbi and a student of Eger's, urged the acceptance of converts whose motivations included marriage to a Jewish woman because rejecting a worthy convert would damage the Jewish people. Converting the non-Jewish spouse would bring the entire family into the Jewish people and would in many cases prevent the continued sin of a Jewish man being in a sexual relationship with a non-Jew. In addition, if the conversion was denied, the couple might go to a Reform rabbi for a non-halakhic conversion. On the other hand, in the 1870's Rabbi Maharam Schick refused to allow the circumcision of a baby boy born to a Jewish woman and gentile father, despite the infant's being halakhically Jewish because his mother was Jewish. Schick reasoned that refusing circumcision

in such a case would “stand in the breach against this evil woman in this licentious generation” (quoted in Ellenson, 2005, p. 343). In addition, he insisted that – in order to discourage others from following her example – this woman should be expelled from the synagogue and not be allowed to purchase kosher meat.

The progression that Ellenson documents in the Hungarian Orthodox rabbinate’s attitudes toward conversion is based in their reaction to changing social conditions, including the emergence of Reform Judaism. If a non-Jewish fiancé could not be converted, the couple could resort to either a civil marriage (which had previously not be available to them) or to a Reform rabbi for a conversion that the Orthodox would not recognize as valid. Ellenson notes that when the Hungarian government in 1867 passed legislation promoting Jewish acculturation, the Orthodox rabbinate in Hungary refused to work with the Reform movement. Their rulings regarding conversions then reflected their increasing concern with “secularist tendencies” and the erosion of observance in the Jewish community. In 1867 Rabbi Akiba Yosef Schlesinger issued polemics against Reform Jews and insisted that converts should be accepted only if they pledged to live completely observant lives. The rabbis were increasingly concerned with the dilution of traditional Jewish observance both by the increasingly secularist Jews and by the inclusion of converts who might not be so observant. Those Orthodox authorities who allowed these conversions based their leniency on the hope that the conversion of a non-Jewish spouse would prevent a greater sin (that of the Jewish spouse’s living unmarried with a Gentile), on fear that Reform rabbis would perform the conversion (resulting in children who would only think they were Jewish because the Reform conversion was not valid), and

sometimes on a hope that a conversion motivated by marriage might lead to sincere attachment to Judaism.

As civil marriage or conversion with Reform rabbis became a common alternative, many Orthodox rabbis increasingly drew a “fence around the Torah,” insisting that converts must become fully observant and that motivation for conversion must be explicitly “for the sake of heaven” (Grossman, 1987; Golinkin, 2001). There were a few exceptions to this stringency. Those Orthodox rabbis who argued for more leniency in regard to intermarriage-motivated conversions usually argued that conversion was less of a transgression than allowing cohabitation of a Jew with a non-Jew, that not allowing the conversion would lead the Jewish spouses to leave the Jewish community, or that conversions that initially appear to be motivated by marriage may later turn out to be “for the sake of heaven” (Shilo, 1988). Those Orthodox rabbis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who adopted a lenient position interpreted *halakha* in the context of the social realities of the time; nevertheless, they refused to recognize conversions performed by Reform rabbis as legitimate (Ellenson, 1983, p. 71). This increasing stringency by the Orthodox and separation between Orthodox and Reform Judaism has continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Orthodox rabbis were concerned that the changing social circumstances and leniency toward conversion would affect the nature of Jewish identity. Clearly the Orthodox rabbis were interpreting *halakha* regarding conversion in the context of their changing society and their concerns that Jewish identity was threatened. Smuel Shilo, a professor on the Faculty of Law at Hebrew University, reviewed the rulings of a number of 19<sup>th</sup> and

20<sup>th</sup> century *poskim* and noted that “the non-legal background to their decisions was made up of their own psychological views of the convert, of individual Jews and of the Jewish people” all “within the historical context of Judaism and the Jewish people in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries” (1988, p. 354). In addition, Shilo concluded that these *poskim* “knew what the solution to the problem should be to their mind, and then found the reasoning needed to substantiate their feeling” (p. 364).

### **Reform Judaism and the universality of Judaism**

In contrast to the Orthodox stringency regarding conversion, the American Reform Jewish response to the issue of living in an open society has been the most liberal and accepting; even the basic halakhic requirements for converts were discarded by Reform rabbis. As early as 1878, Reform rabbis debated whether they could accept as a convert a non-Jewish man who wanted to marry a Jewish woman but would not undergo circumcision; they decided against doing so (Rosenthal, 1994). However, by the third Reform convention in 1892, a resolution permitting conversion with neither circumcision nor ritual immersion passed, and until recently Reform rabbis have accepted converts little or no ritual. That practice has been modified, however. The Reform *Rabbi's Manual* of 1988 included rituals for both circumcision and immersion for converts and encouraged Reform rabbis to “acquaint prospective converts with the halakhic background and rationale for *berit mila*, *hatafat dam berit*, and *tevila* and offer them the opportunity to observe these rites” (quoted in Golinkin, 2001, p. 85). Golinkin also notes that the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted new guidelines that recommend these rituals for accepting converts (2001, p. 86).



That Reform rabbis in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rejected most ritual, not only for conversion, reflected their emphasis on Judaism as a universal religion and their downplaying of the role of ethnicity. The emphasis on Jewish universalism led to the Reform movement's calling for active outreach, not only to the increasing numbers of non-Jewish spouses in intermarriages, but even to gentiles who might be attracted to the moral values of Judaism. They found a foretaste of the Reform emphasis on the high – and universal – moral standards of Judaism in the scriptures and saw Biblical converts as drawn to those values. In 1926 Leo Baeck said that Judaism was intended to become “the religion of the whole world” (quoted in Shusterman, 1965, p. 159), and in 1949, he even suggested sending missionaries to Asia (Rosenbloom, 1976, p. 497). The Reform leader David Eichhorn called for outreach to the “millions of non-Jews who are spiritually homeless because they can no longer accept the theological teachings of fundamentalist minister or dogmatic priest” (1965, p. 2), and he re-read Jewish history as having always included an active intention to encourage converts: “Judaism, by its very nature, is, and for a long time actively was a proselytizing religion” (1965, p. 3). Albert Goldstein (1965), writing in a collection of essays edited by David Eichhorn, supported his call for a new era of Jewish proselytism by citing prophetic statements and passages from the Psalms to demonstrate that the prophets welcomed conversions and that Judaism had always foreseen a time when all people would be attracted to the universal God of Judaism.

The teachers of the religious of Israel kept repeating, in an endless variety of ways: There is hope for the salvation of the homeborn and there is equal hope for the salvation of the outlander! Prophet, priest, and psalmist pos-

sessed a patient, tireless pedagogic courage that made them remind Israel ever and again: You are all gerim before God . . . He loves the alien. . . Therefore, you, too, must love the ger . . . . Let him be unto you as the homeborn and love him as you love yourselves . . . for many nations will join themselves to the Eternal and become His people. . . He Who gathers Israel's exiles in says, "I will yet gather to them those who were gathered against them." (Goldstein, 1965, p. 31)

In 1978, Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, in his presidential address, linked the problem of increasing intermarriage to the need for active outreach, not only to intermarrying spouses of Jews but also to "unchurched" Americans who might be looking for a spiritual home (Schindler, 1995). Lawrence Epstein, who has encouraged active proselytism based in the concept of "Jewish universalism" (1992), quoted the "most famous talmudic passage (Pesahim 87b) specifically praising conversionary work . . . by the prominent Rabbi Johanan, and agreed with by Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat, in which it is asserted that God exiled Jews from their homeland for only one reason, to increase the number of converts" (1994, p. 305). Dennis Prager (1995) suggested an advertising campaign seeking converts.

Attempts to organize Jewish proselytizing efforts began in 1944, with the United Israel World Union, organized by David Horowitz as "an international movement to disseminate the Decalogue Faith both within and beyond the confines of Jewry" (Rosenbloom, 1976, p. 496). Other organizational efforts included the Jewish Information Society, organized in 1959 by Ben Maccabee, which floundered largely because of lack of

general interest by Jews (Rosenbloom, 1976, p. 497). The Jewish Outreach Institute<sup>4</sup> has been perhaps the most persistent organized effort to attract converts. It has been headed by David Belin, Egon Mayer, and now Michael H. Shames. David Belin's pamphlets published in 1985 and 2000 offered the opportunity for anyone to "reach their full potential and become happier and more fulfilled human beings" (2000, p.2) by converting to Reform Judaism. The Jewish Outreach Institute continues to run a number of programs for intermarried couples and their families and for "Jews-by-Choice."

### **Twentieth Century Orthodoxy**

Orthodox Judaism in America in the twentieth century has had to respond to more social integration and possibility for assimilation than in nineteenth-century Europe. Intermarriage rates have increased, and the fear has been that American Judaism might disappear as more and more Jews married non-Jews and raised children who would not identify as Jews. As American religious culture became a "spiritual marketplace," within which movement from one church to another, from Catholic to Protestant, was relatively easy and accepted, conversion to Judaism became another choice. Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews in America have responded to the problem of intermarriage and conversions by seriously considering the possibility of converting non-Jewish spouses. The Orthodox authorities have approached this issue by emphasizing the difference between Jews and non-Jews and have emphasized the need to distinguish between Jews and non-Jews and to draw a well-defined line around what it means to be Jewish. Samuel Heil-

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<sup>4</sup> [www.joi.org](http://www.joi.org)

man (2006) has documented what he calls a “slide to the right” among American Orthodox Jews.

Menachem Finkelstein’s<sup>5</sup> modern compendium on conversion (2006) attempts to present all of the present rulings on issues concerning conversion, attending not only to the rabbinic literature but also to centuries of commentary and the *responsa* literature, especially decisions by Moses Feinstein, who was a dominant authority in Orthodox Judaism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finkelstein notes in his introduction that practical applications of rules in changing circumstances have led to changes in the rules and that most of these necessary revisions in regard to conversion have been required by social changes in the last two centuries.

Most of the applied halakhic material [concerning conversion] is concentrated in the *responsa* literature of recent generations, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. New questions and difficult problems regarding the accepting of converts arose in this period. The manner in which a ruling is issued by the respondent, who seeks to render a halakhic-legal decision on the query addressed to him, following the basic principles of the laws of conversion while not disregarding timely contemporary issues, and revealing his own doubts, is in itself instructive. (p. 17)

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<sup>5</sup> Menachem Finkelstein is an Israeli Orthodox rabbi who, as a Major General in the Israeli Defense Force, served as the Chief Prosecutor and Judge Advocate General of the IDF. Since 1988 he has been taught at the Bar-Ilan University Faculty of Law, where he teaches courses on halakha and military law, while also serving as a judge in Haifa and Petach Tikvah. His compendium on conversion was published in Hebrew in 1994 and translated into English.

In contrast to the Talmudic passages that Shaye Cohen cites, in which the convert is described as being told only some of the light and some of the heavy commandments, Finkelstein goes into considerable detail regarding later recent debates over what it means that the convert must be motivated to become Jewish “for the sake of Heaven” and must accept all of the commandments. These debates are crucial for understanding a major current halakhic problem regarding conversion: Can a conversion be annulled if there is evidence that the convert’s motivation was insincere or not “for the sake of heaven” or if there is evidence that the convert did not sincerely accept the obligation to observe all of the commandments? Moshe Feinstein asserted that even conversions performed by Orthodox rabbis would be null and void after the fact if the convert did not make a genuine commitment to Orthodox observance (Grossman, 1987, p. 5-6). Controversial instances of such nullification of conversions have been reported, mostly in situations involving ultra-Orthodox rabbis (e.g., Rosenberg and Kelsey, 2008).

In general Orthodox authorities have been suspicious of converts who are involved in intermarriages or intend to marry a Jewish spouse. In addition, they have generally insisted not only that the ritual requirements for conversion be adhered to but also that converts are willing to adopt an observant lifestyle, usually meaning keeping to a kosher diet, strict Sabbath observance, and adhering to the laws of family purity. Intermarriage has been considered to be the major reason for most American conversions to Judaism. David Golinkin, a Conservative rabbi, notes that in the United States the percentage of “conversionary marriages” has been dropping since 1980 while intermarriage has been increasing in frequency (2001, p. 83-84); thus he argues that liberal Jewish rabbis should

actively encourage conversions in intermarried couples. However, the validity of such conversions has been questioned. Is the wish to marry someone who is Jewish a legitimate reason for conversion? Should someone be accepted as one of the Jewish people if his or her motivation for conversion is not primarily an autonomous desire to accept the authority of the commandments but more a wish to satisfy some sort of pressure to make a Jewish family? Can a woman (usually) whose fiancé's family pressures her to convert so that their grandchildren will be Jewish make an authentic decision? <sup>6</sup> A non-observant, secularized Jew might marry a Gentile who would convert to please the Jewish family, but the couple would not live among observant Jews and the convert would not learn what it meant to be Jewish in a very important sense. If the convert does not live among observant Jews, what sort of Jewish identity would the convert develop if there was no evidence of his or her behaving Jewishly?

Some contemporary authorities continue to take note of these problems. Immanuel Jakobovits, who was then the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, wrote in 1992 that intermarriage should be discouraged at all times, and that unless the convert appeared to be sincere in his or her wish to join the Jewish people out of love of Judaism, conversionary marriages should be discouraged if not forbidden. After all, he says, Jewish youths should be encouraged not to pursue “the pernicious doctrine that all that matters in life is to be happy, to have ‘a good time’ – rather than to make the times good” (p. 55), and he asserts that it is preferable for there to be fewer but more committed Jews (p. 58). He

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Wasserman (1996), a Conservative rabbi, argues that families should not pressure a non-Jewish woman to convert as a condition of marriage, as there is no way that, under such pressure, the woman's conversion would be sincerely motivated.

compares the convert to someone seeking to become a naturalized British citizen who would have to demonstrate that “he will prove a law-abiding citizen, an asset and not a liability” (p. 59). He notes that converts in Israel “will certainly live in a Jewish environment, learn Hebrew, send their children to Jewish schools, and observe the Jewish calendar” (p. 59), but those in the Diaspora might not be completely “naturalized” as Jews, so he advises English rabbis to be more strict in determining which converts they would accept, taking in only those whose motivation to convert is demonstrated by their sincerity in adopting an observant Jewish lifestyle.

The Orthodox rabbi, J. David Bleich also took a stringent position. For him, any hint of an ulterior motive for conversion is impermissible.

It is quite evident that prospective converts are to be rejected even if proof positive of ulterior motive is lacking. The mere suspicion of impure motive is grounds for rejection of the applicant’s candidacy: the burden of proof with regard to sincerity is upon the prospective convert. Apparently, when it is obvious that material benefit or personal gain would accrue to the proselyte, protestations of religious conviction are unacceptable.

(1971, p. 20)

On another hand, in a thorough review of relevant rulings on the matter of marriage-motivated conversions, Chaim Povarsky, who was a Professor of Law at the Touro Law College and Director of the College’s Jewish Law Institute, noted that neither the lenient approach nor the stringent approach to these conversions has prevailed. He points out that there is no biblical requirement that converts be educated in the com-

mandments and that the Talmud does not require acceptance of the commandments as a requirement for conversion. After an extensive review of the issues, he concludes that:

*Halakhic* authorities are divided over the question of contemporary marriage motivated conversions. Some authorities maintain that these conversions are invalid even if the convert formally accepted the law. Although acceptance merely reflects the convert's willingness to convert and there is no requirement for a formal acceptance, these authorities believe that there is a need for a full and sincere acceptance. Since most marriage motivated conversions today lack such an acceptance and even contain a presumption of non-acceptance, the conversions are invalid.

Other authorities are of the opinion that because acceptance is perceived merely as an expression of the willingness to become Jewish, as long as there is no rejection of the law and the convert expressed his sincere willingness to become Jewish, the conversion may be valid even without an acceptance. Although in ordinary conversions non-acceptance reflects a lack of sincere willingness to convert, which would invalidate the conversions, in many contemporary conversions non-acceptance does not have this effect and consequently the conversions are valid.

These authorities also maintain that the rabbinical prohibitions against marriage motivated conversions and against the subsequent marriage of the couples involved may be compromised under mitigating circumstances which currently exist. (1992, p. 12)



It is significant that Povarsky's language describes marriage-motivated conversions as "invalid" rather than describing the prospective convert as unacceptable. It seems as though he is considering conversions that may have already occurred. The idea of validity of conversions is at the heart of the current controversy over whether "invalid" conversions can be annulled.

At this time most of the Orthodox rabbinate in the United States and Israel are concerned about the halakhic validity of many conversions, especially those performed by non-Orthodox rabbis (whose status and rabbinic authority the Orthodox rabbis dispute). The American Orthodox rabbinic establishment has increasingly taken a strict approach to conversions (Angel, 2012, p. 124). For these Orthodox rabbis, the sincerity of a conversion is measured by the convert's adherence to an Orthodox lifestyle. They require the potential convert to engage in a lengthy period of study and to pledge to be obedient to aspects of Orthodox observance, emphasizing observance of kosher food rules and Shabbat restrictions and observance of the laws of family purity. They base this requirement on the Talmudic dictum that the convert must accept the "yoke of the commandments" in its entirety. Any reservation in the convert's mind, even over a single point of rabbinic decisions, is seen as refusal to accept the obligations of being Jewish.

There are exceptions to this position. Marc Angel, an American Sephardic Modern Orthodox rabbi who has taken less stringent positions, describes his teachers in the late 1960's and his son's teachers in the 1990's as advocating a stringent approach to examining the convert's motivations and sincerity to the point of refusing to "perform a conversion unless they were willing to bet \$100,000 of their own money that the convert

would be totally observant of halakha” (2012, p. 124). Angel traces this stance to the views of Rabbi Ytitzchal Schmelkes (in 1876) and Rabbi Akiva Joseph Schlesinger (in the early 1900’s), noting that Schlesinger even would require a convert to adopt the appearance of ultra-Orthodox Jews, wearing *tzitzit*, *payes*, and beards (p. 123). Angel, who contests this stance, cites examples of persons who despite sincerity and commitment were refused acceptance as converts for what would appear to be minor issues. One woman was refused conversion because her prospective husband was not sufficiently observant. Another was told that he would have to incur costs that he could not pay and was refused conversion because he could not live in an Orthodox neighborhood.

Angel’s attitude toward converts is more accepting. He does limit himself to accepting converts whose conversions are certified by Orthodox rabbis, and he does reject what he refers to as “shotgun” conversions. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that individual rabbis must make decisions about conversions based on individual and specific circumstances, and he insists that all such conversions should be accepted by other rabbis. In taking this position, Angel is in opposition to a stance increasingly taken by Orthodox rabbis in Israel and in the United States who have begun recently to assert that “invalid” conversions can (and should) be annulled. Along with another modern Orthodox rabbi, Eliezer Berkovitz (1974), Angel (1983) has even argued for acceptance of non-Orthodox conversions.

### **American Liberal Judaism**

The other streams of American Judaism have accepted converts but not as avidly as Reform Judaism. American Conservative Judaism has always adhered to halakhic re-

quirements for conversions. Conservative rabbis' manuals have required potential converts to undergo at least several months of study, meetings with a rabbi, and attendance at services. Both circumcision (or *hatafat dam brit* for men who have already been circumcised) and immersion, witnessed by a *beit din*, are "essential and indispensable ritual requirements" (Golinkin, 2001, p. 87). Conservative rabbis had been ambivalent toward conversion performed by Reform rabbis as these requirements may not have been met. However, in 1983 the Law Committee of the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism ruled that someone who had "lived as a Jew for a period of years" could be accepted without re-evaluating the manner of the original conversion (Golinkin, 2001, p. 88).

From a liberal point of view, a Masorti (Conservative) English rabbi, Jonathan Wittenberg, points out that motivation for conversion is often more complex than it would seem. He suggests viewing conversion to Judaism as more of a process than a single event. An initial motivation to convert for the sake of marriage should be seen instead as the catalyst, and "The term motivation could then be reserved for his or her attitude to Judaism, encompassing the willingness to learn and the depth of commitment to the process of doing so" (1996, p. 23). In addition, motivation may evolve over time, so that a convert welcomed into a Jewish family and community may learn over time and come to want to be more observant. Wittenberg's viewpoint resonates with explanations for Hillel's acceptance of the man who asked to convert in order to be able to wear the beautiful garments of the High Priest (an office that a convert could not fill); despite this questionable motivation, Hillel accepted the convert with the expectation that as this man

learned more about what it meant to be Jewish and learned the commandments, his motivation would change to a wish to be Jewish “for the sake of Heaven.”

Other liberal Jewish authorities have taken similar viewpoints. Moshe Zemer, a Reform rabbi in Israel with expertise in *halakha*, reviewed the history of rulings regarding motivation for conversion (1994). He noted that despite Maimonides’ reprimanding a rabbi who humiliated a convert for the idolatry of his ancestors, “prospective converts are treated badly by official rabbinical establishments in many parts of the world” (p. 83). Bernard Zlotowitz, also a Reform rabbi, also advocates a lenient position and concludes his review of decisions regarding “ulterior motives” for conversion:

So long as they renounce their former religion, accept the uniqueness of the God of Israel, are willing to circumcise their male children, cast their lot with the Jewish people, we should encourage them and embrace them. The psychological trauma of leaving a religion in which one was reared is very profound. If a person is willing to undertake such a step, which is not easy, let us stretch out our hand to him/her and to welcome them, after proper study and preparation into the Household of Judaism. (1994, p. 78)

Orthodox authorities also claim that only their conversions are valid, since those performed by Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist rabbis may not be performed in a halakhic fashion or by proper rabbinic authorities. Thus in order for their converts to be fully accepted as Jewish, liberal rabbis have tried to arrange for conversions in cooperation with Orthodox rabbis. In the 1950's there was discussion between moderate Orthodox and Conservative rabbis of the possibility of setting up joint rabbinic courts; these

discussions failed when the Orthodox rabbis involved were pressured by more stringent authorities (Grossman, 1987, p. 10). A cooperative board of Reform, Conservative, and “Traditional Orthodox” rabbis in Denver, Colorado, set up in 1978 to arrange for all converts to have their certificates signed by the Orthodox rabbis also failed in 1983 (Grossman, 1987, p. 10). Informal cooperation between liberal and Orthodox rabbis does occur but not openly (Grossman, 1987, 2001, p. 10). In these cases, the requirement for the convert to commit to complete observance is interpreted variously. The Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America disapproves of these “unregistered” conversions (Herring, 2008), and therefore those Orthodox rabbis who do work with liberal rabbis and their converts are often disparaged. In 2006 the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America set up a number of approved regional rabbinical courts that would grant Orthodox conversions. They continue, however, to require converts to adopt an Orthodox observant lifestyle, including living in an Orthodox community. These standards are set out on the website of the Rabbinical Council of America Geirus Policies and Standards Network.<sup>7</sup>

### **The State of Israel and conversions**

Since the foundation of the state of Israel and the institution of the “law of return,” the division between Orthodox and liberal conversions in America has taken on another level of complication. The Law of Return has meant that the Jewish state has had to define who is Jewish in legal terms. Do converts qualify for Israeli citizenship? Israeli law gives rabbinic authorities legal control over Jewish marriages. Can converts marry other Jews in Israel? Which converts? At times the rabbinic courts and the state courts

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.judaismconversion.org/>

have been at odds over these questions. For instance, in 1970, Benyamin Shalit, a born Jew married to a non-Jewish woman, demanded that his children be listed as “Jewish” by nationality on their identity cards. Shalit and his wife both described themselves as atheists and wanted the “religion” blank on the children’s identity cards to be left blank. The request was granted by the Israeli Supreme Court over rabbinic objections.

Despite the civil authorities’ initial stance in the Shalit case that *halakha* would not be the determinant of who is Jewish by the civil authorities, rabbinic authorities in the state of Israel have increasingly taken a stringent stance toward conversions. Even though the Israeli civil authorities have allowed non-Orthodox converts to acquire Israeli citizenship, converts who do not have the proper Orthodox certificate have often encountered difficulties, especially when they apply to marry other Jews, and converts from diaspora communities have encountered problems with immigration and becoming fully Jewish citizens of the Jewish state.

The Israeli religious authorities’ orientation toward conversion is split between those who can be labeled religious Zionist and the ultra-Orthodox (Ariel Picard, personal communication, June 2010). The religious Zionist orientation views converts as people who want to join the Jewish people and the Jewish state. These rabbis do not see themselves as lenient so much as they see themselves as Zionist, and they see converts as people who want to join the Jewish people. Religious observance, they presume, will follow from being a member of the Jewish community. The ultra-Orthodox, on the other hand, seem to fear contamination of religious Jewish identity as the Israeli society becomes increasingly secular. Thus, they take a strict approach toward conversions, insisting that

converts adopt a fully observant lifestyle. Increasingly the rabbis appointed as Israeli civil authorities to determine the validity of conversions (and thus, of the right to marry other Jews in Israel and to be buried in Jewish cemeteries) have been predominately those rabbis who identify as ultra-Orthodox.

The conflict over conversions between the religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox rabbis has also focused on the status of the influx of Russian immigrants who began to come to Israel in the 1990s. These people came to Israel and were granted citizenship under the Law of Return as they had at least one known Jewish grandparent. Most of them, however, had no religious Jewish affiliation and may not be halakhically Jewish if their Jewish ancestry was not through the maternal line. There has been concern that many of these new Israeli citizens were more Christian (if anything religiously) than Jewish. Many were already married to – and accompanied by – non-Jewish spouses. For the religious Zionists, formally converting these immigrants, making them Jews as well as citizens of Israel, was important. On the contrary, the ultra-Orthodox authorities feared that these immigrants would most likely not become observant and thus would not be “really” Jews despite their legal status. They would then have children who might want to marry other “real” Jews. Their status as Jews would also dilute the reality of Judaism as defined religiously by the ultra-Orthodox.

In an attempt to increase the number of these immigrants who would identify as Jewish (as well as Israeli), the Israeli government established special regional rabbinical courts to handle conversions, and Ariel Sharon, as Prime Minister, appointed Rabbi Chaim Druckman to head these conversion courts. Druckman was a former religious Zi-

onist party Knesset member and was known to be lenient in regard to converts who wanted to be both Jewish and Israeli. Druckman then became embroiled in 2007 in the controversy over the validity of conversions that did not meet Orthodox criteria, when the conversions he oversaw were annulled.

### **Can conversion to Judaism be annulled?**

Despite the Talmudic dicta that the convert coming out of the *mikvah* is like a newborn Jew and that a Jew who sins is still a Jew, a number of Orthodox authorities have taken the position that conversions they consider insincere can be annulled. They measure sincerity by the strictness of the convert's observance of an Orthodox lifestyle, including keeping kosher, observing the Sabbath and the laws of family purity, and even style of dress. They do not assert that such converts become Jewish and then not Jewish, but that the conversion really did not occur and the so-called convert was never really Jewish. This possibility seems to echo Halevi's notion that born Jews have a different relationship with God than converts do. Born Jews remain Jews even if they are not observant, but converts – who have adopted a relationship with God voluntarily – cease to be Jews if they do not maintain this relationship properly. The issues that arise from annulling conversions are most problematic in Israel, where national identity is linked to religious identity and where questions about a person's religious identity can determine whether a couple can have a Jewish marriage in Israel and have their children accepted as Jewish. Some annulments have been reported in the United States, and some religious authorities in Israel have refused to accept even Orthodox conversions from outside of Israel if the convert does not live an Orthodox lifestyle.



The issue of annulment first arose in connection the case of the Langer children. These were the children of Chava and Otto Langer (Novak, 1987). Chava Langer, coming from a religious Jewish family in England, had originally married a man who was pressured to convert and then had separated from him without obtaining a *get*, a religious divorce. She then married Otto Langer and had two children by him. In 1966, one of the children applied for a marriage license in Israel and was informed that he was a *mamzer*<sup>8</sup> and could not marry. After several years of appeals, a rabbinic court headed by Rabbi Shlomo Goren, later the Askenazic Chief Rabbi in Israel, declared that Mrs. Langer's first husband's conversion was null and void, because he had failed to live an observant Jewish lifestyle and had reverted to the practice of Catholicism after his conversion. Thus, Mrs. Langer's first marriage was invalid and not an impediment to her marriage to Otto Langer, and her two children were legitimate.

Conversions that were clearly based in deception have also been annulled. The conversions of a Muslim couple were annulled when they underwent a conversion ceremony in order to be able to immigrate to Israel and then openly reverted to Islam afterwards (Ellenson, 1994, p. 50). In another case, two Christians deceived a rabbi and pretended to convert in order to immigrate to Israel and convert Jews to Christianity; again, this couple was judged not to be Jewish (Ish-Horowicz, 1994).

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<sup>8</sup> A *mamzer* is the child of a Jewish woman who could not be married to the child's father. In this case, if Mrs. Langer's first marriage had not been ended in a religious divorce, she was still halakhically married to her first husband and could not marry Otto Langer. Halakhically a *mamzer* cannot marry another Jew, except another *mamzer* or a convert.

A complicated case arose in the 1980's when the children of a convert, Mrs. Paula Cohen, were refused admission to a Jewish school in London. Mrs. Cohen had converted in Israel, and the rabbi there added a stipulation that her conversion was valid only in Israel. She then married Yosi Cohen in a Reform Jewish ceremony in London, not in Israel because his status as a *cohen* precluded his marriage to a convert. They returned to Israel where one son was born; two more children were born to the couple after they again moved to England. An Orthodox *beit din* in London then declared that Mrs. Cohen's conversion was invalid; thus, since her children then were not Jewish, they could not participate fully in the Jewish day school in which they had been enrolled. The English Reform rabbi Moses Ish-Horowicz reviewed the halakhic arguments involved in this case, noting that at one point, it was suggested that Mrs. Cohen would be Jewish in Israel but not Jewish as soon as she took a flight from Israel, and Jewish again if she returned (1994, p. 174). Eventually, the Israel rabbinic and legal authorities invalidated the geographic restriction on Mrs. Cohen's conversion.

The issue became heated in 2007 when a woman who had converted fifteen years previously came with her husband to a rabbinic court in Ashdod, Israel, to apply for an amicable divorce. Instead of granting the religious divorce, the rabbi in charge instead inquired into the woman's religious practices and rendered a decision that her conversion was invalid because she did not live a sufficiently observant lifestyle. Neither were her children then Jewish. This decision involved extensive investigation of the woman's lifestyle, including testimony from her husband and from an Orthodox observant family who had acted as sponsors for her conversion. Further appeal of the decision resulted in a de-

cision by a three-judge panel of the Great Rabbinical Court that not only was her conversion invalid but that all of the conversions overseen by Rabbi Druckman since 1999 were invalid. Over the next three years, until a rabbinic court in Tel Aviv upheld the validity of her conversion, the woman and her husband were subjected to several rounds of interrogation, and the Jewishness of her children (and thus their ability to marry in Israel) was in jeopardy.

This woman's conversion had taken place in Israel, after two years of study and examination by the Special Rabbinic Court for Conversion, then headed by Rabbi Druckman. Therefore Druckman himself came under attack. He was excoriated for generally being lax in accepting converts and for accepting converts who were not fully observant. As head of the rabbinic court for conversions, Druckman apparently had signed conversion certificates when he had not been physically present at the convert's immersion. As a rabbi, Druckman was a religious Zionist for whom it was important to accept converts, especially those who came to live in Israel since these people were an addition to the Jewish people and the Jewish state (personal statement, Ariel Picard, 2010). The ultra-Orthodox rabbis who forced him from office were more concerned that converts become religiously observant Jews and saw less than observant converts as a threat to the cohesiveness of the Jewish people.

Druckman was subsequently released from his position as head of the conversion court, and a panel of judges in the Great Rabbinical Court headed by Rabbi Avraham Sherman decided that all of the conversions he had overseen since 1999 were invalid. Sherman also disqualified Druckman as a rabbinic judge, accusing him of being evil and

an apostate (Henkin, 2009, p. 22). Needless to say, this decision put a great number of people into a legal and religious limbo, not only the converts but any children they may have had after converting and marrying another Jew. How binding this decision may be is unclear; Ariel Picard, an Israeli Orthodox rabbi who is on the faculty of the Shalom Hartman Institute, in a personal communication in 2010 said that whether these converts or their children could be married as Jews (or buried) in Israel would likely depend on the decisions of individual rabbis in each case. At this time, converts in Israel whose conversions were overseen by Rabbi Druckman or other more lenient rabbis (such as those rabbis who oversee conversions of Israelis who are serving in the Israel Defense Force) may or may not be granted marriage licenses depending on whether the local rabbinical court that issues the licenses accepts or does not accept the conversion as valid.

The controversy over Druckman's conversions was fierce. When Druckman was released from his position, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar asserted that he would reverse the court's decision and threatened to resign (Jeffay, 2008). Rabbi Yehuda Henkin wrote a detailed defense of Druckman and questioned whether Rabbi Sherman was relying on valid interpretations of *halakha* or his own personal prejudices (2009, p. 23). The Druckman controversy became involved with questions about who had the authority to accept converts – only Orthodox rabbis or also rabbis from the Masorti (Conservative) or Reform traditions? The Ne'eman Commission of the Israeli government proposed a solution to the problem, allowing potential converts in Israel to study with rabbis of any tradition and to have their conversions certified by specially appointed Orthodox courts. This solution – which resembled in many ways the inter-denominational

cooperation in Denver in the 1970's – was rejected by the chief rabbinate in Israel (Ellenson and Gordis, 2012, p. 150). At this time, the conversion courts in Israel are dominated by an ultra-Orthodox rabbinate, and controversies continue not only over conversions by non-Orthodox rabbis in Israel or the Diaspora but also over conversions of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and conversions of non-Jews who serve in the Israel Defense Force.

The reaction to the controversies over Rabbi Druckman's conversions included a proposal by a Zionist Knesset member, David Rotem; the "Rotem bill" would have legitimized conversions by non-Orthodox rabbis, conversions that had been recognized by the State. However, a later provision attached to the bill would have granted exclusive control over conversions in Israel to the Orthodox rabbinate, dominated by ultra-Orthodox authorities. The Rotem bill was vigorously opposed by liberal Jewish leaders in the diaspora since the liberal rabbinate would have been essentially denied any authority to perform conversions and their converts would not be eligible for citizenship if they immigrated to Israel. The status of Reform and Conservative converts who immigrate to Israel and apply for citizenship there continues to be debated. At one time legislation was even proposed (but not passed) to deny converts the right to Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return (Ettinger, 2010).

Whether *halakha* allows conversions to be annulled is debated. David Ellenson and David Gordis (2012) cite an article by Zvi Zahor (in Hebrew) to trace the idea that conversions can be nullified back to the responsa issued by Rabbi Yitzhak Schmelkes in 1876 (p. 152) (also cited by Marc Angel, above). Schmelkes introduced the notion that a

convert would have to “agree to observe the totality of Jewish law at the moment of his conversion” and that “If a conversion ceremony takes place but the person does not genuinely intend to observe Jewish law, the conversion is invalid” (p. 153). Although Ellen-son and Gordis note that Zahor regarded Schmelkes’ stance as revolutionary, they also point out that many authorities would disagree with Zahor and would assert that Schmelkes’ demand was only a statement of the fact that accepting the “yoke of the commandments” is a prerequisite for conversion to Judaism.

Avi Sagi and Zvi Zahor (2007), both professors at Bar-Ilan University and Fellows at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, trace the idea that the convert’s sincerity is to be measured by his or her behavior after the conversion to Rabbi Yitzchak Brand, whose book published in Hebrew in 1982 included the admonition that a convert who fails to observe the commandments over the course of time after his or her conversion ceremony is to be considered “an absolute Gentile” (p. 253). They also cite a 1983 decision by Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, an ultra-Orthodox leader of the Lithuanian community in Israel, to the effect that it should be the duty of marriage registrars in Israel to determine the sincerity of converts when they come to apply for a marriage license (p. 253-4). Although Rabbi Elyashiv’s opinion was accepted as meaning that marriage registrars should determine how sincere the convert was at the time of the conversion, Rabbi Gedalya Axelrod (a member of the rabbinical court in Haifa) interpreted Rabbi Elyashiv as meaning that marriage registrars should assess the convert’s sincerity based on his or her behavior at the time the convert applied for a marriage license. That is, if in the judgment of the registrar the convert was not living a sufficiently observant lifestyle, the

registrar could deny the couple a marriage license based on the registrar's decision that the conversion was invalid because the convert was obviously not sufficiently sincere in his or her intention to accept the commandments. Rabbi Axelrod recruited other rabbis "to enlist the registrars as guardians of the threshold of the Jewish people; i.e., even if the 'proselyte' had 'fooled' a rabbinical court into enabling him to undergo giyyur, his intent to join the Jewish people would be thwarted by his inability to marry a Jewish spouse" (Sagi and Zahor, 2007, p. 256).<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Axelrod went as far as urging that certificates of conversion be qualified by adding notations that the conversion is valid only as long as the convert is observant and that the certificate must be renewed yearly (p. 259-260).

The possibility of annulment hinges on questions not only about motivation but also about mental reservations. Bleich (1971), writing from an Orthodox perspective and before the Druckman controversy, points out that the question of annulment can be seen to hinge on the issue of whether mental reservations held at the time of conversion can invalidate the conversion. He cites a number of authorities to the effect that mental reservations regarding acceptance of all the obligations of being Jewish would invalidate a conversion (p. 23-24). Bleich discusses the debate whether one can distinguish between acceptance of the commandments and the convert's awareness that he lacks only the moral stamina or willpower to withstand temptation; such awareness of one's possible

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<sup>9</sup> Sagi and Zahor (2007) point out that marriage registrars in Israel are required by law to accept certificates of conversion signed by the special rabbinical courts for conversion – all staffed by ultra-Orthodox rabbis. Thus, by declaring that marriage registrars are halakhically required to refuse licenses to converts they judge as insincere, Rabbi Axelrod placed his halakhic innovation in direct conflict with Israeli law.

failings would not invalidate a conversion although mental reservations regarding the binding force of commandments would.

Many who take the position that conversions cannot be annulled cite the Tosephta that “A proselyte who accepted all the teachings of Torah, though he is suspected of ignoring one religious law, or even the entire Torah, is considered an apostate Jew,” and the statement in Yevamot that “even if the proselyte betroths a woman after his relapse into non-Jewish ways, his betrothal is valid and his wife must receive a divorce before she is permitted to remarry (Ellenson, 1994, p. 51-52). On this basis David Novak, a Conservative rabbi, writing in the *Orthodox Jewish Law Association Studies* (1987) contests Rabbi Goren’s decision in the Langer case; Goren had based his decision on a ruling by Maimonides regarding converts who had ulterior motives and reverted to idolatry, and Novak points out that Maimonides also ruled that a convert who reverted to idolatry is merely a Jewish apostate (p. 173-174).

Zahor (2008) described a fictitious case that paralleled the situation that led to the controversy, pointing out how extensive the problems could be if the woman’s conversion were nullified: Her children’s marriages would be nullified; if her son had become a rabbi who oversaw divorces or conversions, the status of those affected by his decisions would be in jeopardy. To argue that conversions could not be annulled, Zahor compared them to the halakhic change of personal status that occurs upon a Jewish marriage. He pointed out that if the words of a betrothal (*kiddushin*) were said by a man to a woman in front of witnesses even if there was no intention, the couple would be considered to be married. Zahor asserted that just as *kiddushin* with recital of the proper words in front of



witnesses irrevocably changes a person's status from unmarried to married, so too the ceremony of conversion irrevocably changes a person's status from Gentile to Jew, and just as lack of intention does not invalidate a marriage, so too any lack of intention or unwillingness to be observant of some of the Law does not invalidate a conversion.

The possibility of annulling conversions also involves the question of what is conversion to Judaism, that is, what happens existentially to the convert in the process of becoming Jewish. If conversion is an event, from which the convert "comes up like a newborn baby," then annulment is less possible. Under that view the convert who reverts to idolatry (or another religion) is an apostate Jew, but still a Jew. If conversion is a process that includes the formality of ritual and proceeds through the convert's subsequent life as a Jew, then conversion is something that can be reversed by the convert's behavior. The distinction between conversion-as-event and conversion-as-process is tied to the dual nature of Judaism as religion and as a people, a community.

Novak takes the position that conversion to Judaism is both an event and a process.

It is an event in that conversion requires the fulfillment of a definite number of objective criteria the precise time and place of which can be publicly attested. However, it is also a process in that the very acceptance of Judaism has antecedents and entails a subsequent commitment to maintain and intensify one's Jewish identity for an indefinite duration so that this Jewish identity can be readily presumed. (1987, p. 153)

For Novak, the convert is both making a religious choice and choosing to join the Jewish people. One choice can be made explicitly at a specific time and place; the other choice is demonstrated by one's living as a Jew. For Novak, this duality is inherent in Judaism.

The dialectic between conversion as an event and conversion as a process in essence reflects the dialectic between religious conviction and ethnicity in the history of Judaism. On the one hand, Judaism is something which must be chosen as a matter of conviction; without such free choice the commandments would be meaningless. Such choice can only be an event. On the other hand, Jewish identity is not chosen but inherited, it is a historical process in which Jews find themselves. To emphasize event at the expense of process would make Judaism only a matter of choice, lacking the continuity of an historical community. To emphasize process at the expense of event would make Judaism only a matter of historical inevitability, lacking the deliberate conviction of choice. The paradox is rooted in the theological duality of God's irrevocable choice of the people of Israel and His insistence simultaneously that they freely confirm that choice repeatedly. (p. 185)

Aharon Lichtenstein, Director of the Yeshiva University *kollel* in Jerusalem, similarly argues that conversion to Judaism is a dual process. "It seems to me that in gerut, both in the process and in the outcome, there exist two elements that are to some extent parallel, to some extent complementary, and to some extent contradictory" (1988, p. 2).

Conversion to Judaism involves an element of *teshuvah*, repentance, a “profound revolution” (p. 2). This aspect is a “religious experience, a spiritual effervescence” and “private and personal – if you will, even subjective” (p. 3). The other aspect is “objective, formal, communal” (p. 4). The formality of conversion is essential and requires witnesses. In this way, Lichtenstein points out that conversion to Judaism is unlike Christian conversion, which involves only the subjective aspect of *teshuvah* (p. 14). There is a tension between these two factors, and therefore Lichtenstein argues for a thorough investigation of the potential convert’s heart. “When the ger grasps the scope and the complexity of his commitment, and when the members of the Beth Din are attentively attuned to the possible strivings of his heart – out of a mutual sensitivity to the majesty and the tones of the event, the gap is steadily bridged” (p. 14).

The tension that Novak and Lichtenstein describe is present in the rabbinic literature. Sagi and Zahor reviewed the rabbinic literature concerning conversions in detail, searching for the implicit meaning of the process, “the transcendent eidos manifesting itself indirectly in the words of the text” (2007, p. 1). They identified two paradigms under which the rabbinic authorities seemed to operate, which they labeled as the Demai paradigm and the Yevamot paradigm. These two ways of understanding what is transformative in the process of conversion each implicitly define what it means to be Jewish. For the Demai paradigm, “the essence of Jewishness is commitment to the commandments” (p. 268); for the Yevamot paradigm, the essence of being Jewish is belonging to the Jewish people, a kinship (p. 269). Conversion under the Demai paradigm involves the convert’s transitioning from a previous religion to the Jewish religion and thus the

commitment to observance is the core of the process (p. 269). Circumcision and immersion are the formalities that signify the convert's change of heart and religion, including the acceptance of the authority of the commandments, even though the convert remains a Jew no matter his behavior afterwards. Under the Yevamot paradigm, the process of conversion, especially the final stage of immersion, is a transition from a Gentile identity to a Jewish identity, a rebirth. Circumcision removes the convert's Gentile status, and immersion brings him (or her) into the Jewish people. The obligation to adhere to the commandments is then the same for the born Jew and the reborn convert.

Sagi and Zahor point out that while most rabbinic authorities have operated under the Yevamot paradigm, increasingly the Demai paradigm has begun to be dominant. In addition, new variants of the Demai paradigm have developed recently, including the position that circumcision and immersion are the formal, technical acts required for conversion but that the process is valid only if it reflects the convert's inner subjective state of mind (p. 269).<sup>10</sup> They point out that beginning with the nineteenth century Eastern European rabbis have increasingly taken the position that "Instead of giyyur constituting a unconditional transformation of identity, it was declared to be an eternally contingent status, subject to revocation whenever a proselyte might fail to conform to expected religious behavior" (p. 290). This development, Sagi and Zahor point out, then has implications for the Jewish identity of even those born Jews who are not observant.

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<sup>10</sup> Sagi and Zahor point out that this view of conversion closely parallels the views of Protestant Christianity toward converts to Christianity. For Protestants baptism is the outward act symbolizing an inner spiritual change.

These radical changes reflect a new position with regard to the meaning of Jewish identity. On this view, only those who are fully committed to observance are authentic Jews. All others have, at best, peripheral significance in the eyes of halakhah. The totally contingent status of proselytes is but an extreme expression of the radical devaluation of all Jews lacking unconditional devotion to halakhah. (p. 291).

### **The current situation**

In Israel, the Orthodox rabbinate holds legal authority regarding matters of personal status (e.g., whether a couple can marry or divorce, etc., whether a conversion is valid). This legal power is wielded by local rabbinic courts ultimately under the authority of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Chief Rabbis. Thus, in Israel, the issue of annulment of conversions can have far-reaching effects, as Zahor (2008) observed. Over the years, the Israeli rabbinate has included both stringent and lenient positions toward conversions. Ellenson and Gordis reviewed the views of five Chief Rabbis in Israel.<sup>11</sup> They noted that these rabbinic authorities cited not only halakhic precedents but also differences in how their decisions were affected by the establishment of the State of Israel. Ellenson and Gordis concluded that the Chief Rabbis' decisions were based not only on halakhic precedence but also on their differing views of the effect of the social conditions.

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<sup>11</sup> Including Abraham Isaac Kook, who was the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi before the establishment of the State of Israel; the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ben-Zion Meir Uziel; the Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ovadiah Yosef; the second Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, Isaac Halevi Herzog; and Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi involved in the case of the Langer children.

Ultimately, it is not halakha that has divided the Jewish people regarding the issue of conversion. Halakhic standards . . . have proved themselves malleable in the hands of many Orthodox authorities. What has often determined the final disposition of matters of conversion is not only Jewish law but conflicting viewpoints about Jewish social policy, for which Jewish law can often serve as a powerful and creative tool. What has usually separated adherents of the different positions on conversion is a sense of what is good for the Jewish people – a vision of thriving Jewish life, of which conversion policy has always been a reflection. (2012, p. 150)

The views of the Orthodox rabbinate in Israel reflect the division between religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox. The ultra-Orthodox in Israel, who see the state as a secular entity as threatening to their way of life as any other secular state, draw the line that converts to Judaism must be willing to make the choice to live a thoroughly religious and observant life. The religious Zionists – for whom the establishment of the State of Israel has made a fundamental change in what it means to be Jewish – tend to welcome converts who demonstrate their wish to become members of the Jewish people and citizens of a Jewish state. This division can be acrimonious. When Rabbi Haim Amselem, a right-wing ultra-Orthodox politician, published two erudite rabbinic texts on the subject of conversion, arguing for more liberal acceptance of conversions of Russian immigrants to Israel, he was vehemently attacked by other ultra-Orthodox rabbinic authorities and essentially forced to leave his political party (Ellenson, 2012).

Ariel Picard (2010), writing as a Fellow of the liberal Orthodox Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, argues for the religious Zionist viewpoint. In addition to being taught mitzvot, converts should learn what it is to be an Israeli Jew.

. . . [C]onverts – both men and women – should get to know the synagogue prayer service, as well as Bialik and Agnon and Yad Vahem and Remembrance Day for the IDF fallen, and the talit and tefillin and the Institute of Jewish Festivals at Kibbutz Beit Hashita. The responsibility for one's personal lifestyle and that of his family should be left in the hand of the convert, in the hope that he will find his place in the diversity of Jewish-Israeli existence. The responsibility for conversion of this type should be in the hands of a Beit Din that will represent Jewish-Israeli society. Its role will primarily be educational and it will have the responsibility of guiding the convert and assisting him in his absorption into Israeli society.

Aharon Lichtenstein, an Orthodox rabbi on the Faculty of Yeshiva University in Israel, favors the religious aspect of conversion over the Zionist aspect.

The legal aspect of gerut and the attachment to Keneset Yisrael involved in it are not solely an issue of a seal of approval. Keneset Yisrael does not merely mediate between the ger and the Almighty. She is a participant and not just a broker; a concerned party and not just an agent of God. In the encounter of the I and Thou that is established through gerut, the ger meets two Thou's: The Lord of the Universe and his nation, Israel. Not, God forbid, the latter alone; such an attitude borders on idolatry. Surely,

he confronts Knesset Yisrael solely in the light of its being “holy unto God, the first of His harvest.” In this context, however, there is a very real encounter. (1988, p. 5)

The stance taken by the Israeli Orthodox rabbinate has implications for American Jews as well. A few reports of annulled conversions in America have surfaced. There have been incidents in the United States when ultra-Orthodox rabbis have annulled conversions because the convert was not as observant as the rabbis felt was appropriate. One ultra-Orthodox rabbi declared that a woman convert was not Jewish – and neither was her child born to a Jewish husband – because she wore pants and occasionally did not cover her hair in public (Rosenberg and Kelsy, 2008). Some Orthodox rabbis have refused to participate in any conversions. At least once a convert from North America was refused recognition as an immigrant (despite being married to a Jewish wife) because his Orthodox conversion was not recognized by Israeli ultra-Orthodox religious authorities, apparently partly because during his service in the Canadian military he had not been allowed to be fully observant (Tommer, 2011).

When the Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi in Israel announced in 2006 that converts from the diaspora would not be accepted in Israel unless their conversions were overseen by rabbis on an “approved” list, the Rabbinical Council of America, the largest Orthodox rabbinic group in the Diaspora, set up a committee that pledged to abide by the Chief Rabbi’s requirement that converts make a full commitment to Orthodox observance. Sagi and Zahor’s observation that “The totally contingent status of proselytes is but an extreme expression of the radical devaluation of all Jews lacking unconditional devotion



to halakhah,” (2007, p. 291) is consonant with the devaluation of liberal Jews by many Orthodox rabbinic authorities. The status of Conservative and Reform rabbis is not accepted by Orthodox authorities; thus marriages, divorces, and conversions performed under the auspices of Conservative and Reform rabbis are not seen as valid by the Orthodox rabbinate (including those in charge of marriages, divorces, and conversion in Israel).

As these matters of personal status then can become doubtful, a wedge is driven between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox Jewish worlds. For instance, a man whose father was Jewish but not his mother would be considered a member of the Jewish people in a Reform congregation. However, if his daughter or son became more religious and wanted to join an Orthodox congregation or marry into an Orthodox family, problems would occur.<sup>12</sup> If a woman’s religious divorce is written by a Conservative rabbi and she remarries, might her children or grandchildren find themselves excluded as *mamzers*?

This division between Orthodox and liberal Jewish authorities – and communities – parallels the increasing cultural isolation and fundamentalism among the Orthodox in America observed by Samuel Heilman (2006). Heilman asserts that in America over the last half of the twentieth century, even the liberal wing of Orthodoxy, modern Orthodoxy, has come to see the ultra-Orthodox as embodying the real essence of Judaism. The ultra-Orthodox – who have been most assertive in regard to insisting on the Demai paradigm for conversions and for defining converts religiously by their observance – have become enclaves of a “scholars’ society” that defines itself by its differences from the surround-

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<sup>12</sup> It might seem that in such a case, a conversion by an Orthodox rabbi might be arranged to solve the problem. However, Angel (2012) has observed considerable intransigence on the part of the Orthodox rabbinate toward such conversions, with obstacles being put in the way of marriage and child-bearing in those cases.

ing world. Unique modes of dress, gender separation, the formation of exclusive neighborhoods, disparagement of worldly learning and valorization of Torah study – all define the boundaries of Judaism for the ultra-Orthodox.

Ultra-Orthodox Judaism increasingly has become what William Meissner (1996) describes as a closed religious system, which he compares to paranoid thinking. As Orthodox authorities lean toward the ultra-Orthodox, they increasingly adopt the view that Judaism needs to be defended against assimilation into the wider culture of the diaspora and the secular state of Israel. Part of that defense means erecting barriers against converts who might bring with them aspects of that external world. The insistence that converts who are not completely observant are not really Jewish is part of that defense. It is a short step then to the assertion that Reform Jews are not really Jewish because they reject the authority of *halaka*. The “conversion crisis” then is one aspect of the possibility of schism within Judaism, with one group – the Orthodox – defining the other group of more liberal Jews as not really Jewish.<sup>13</sup>

Attempts have been made to prevent such a schism. A proposal in Israel that training for conversion be done under the auspices of rabbis from various streams of Judaism while the actual conversions would be done by Orthodox authorities was one such attempt, but unfortunately it failed. Jonathan Magonet (1990) reviewed the differences between Orthodox and liberal Jewish rabbis concerning converts. He concluded that it

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<sup>13</sup> Conversion is one of the major issues in this crisis, as one of the aspects of “personal status,” including also marriages and divorces, processes which have halakhic implications not only for the person involved but also for any children.

might be possible for some sort of rapprochement, if each side was willing to review some of their assumptions.

The orthodox may have to choose between the halakha of strict conversion and the halakhic value of “Klal Yisroel”, the unity of the Jewish people, that may require a greater leniency in practice. The non-Orthodox, particularly the American Reform movement, will have to re-examine the limits they set on their freedom to operate beyond the boundaries of traditional Halakha particularly when, as a result, the unity of the Jewish people is seriously threatened. (p. 247)

Among the modern Orthodox in the United States, the modern Orthodox rabbi Marc Angel (2012) disparages the attitude that less than totally observant converts are a threat to Jewish religious identity and urges a more open attitude toward converts.

We must teach prospective converts in a spirit of respect and kindness; we must do our best to bring them to an appreciation of Torah and mitzvot; we must help them strive to become fine members of the Jewish people. We must oppose unequivocally “shotgun” conversions that make a mockery of giyyur; rather, we must engage each convert in a serious, life-transforming process. This process is filled with challenges, with emotional highs and lows. Not every candidate for conversion will or should be accepted. Although our general attitude must be inclusive, there are cases where we feel we must say no. Each case is unique; each prospec-

tive candidate presents a different set of issues; each rabbi must weight carefully how to deal with each situation. (p. 141-142)

It is not clear that anyone, even the most Orthodox rabbi, would disagree with Angel's position. The problem is, however, who will decide. Angel leaves the decision to individual rabbis but does not address the issue of whether Orthodox rabbis would accept converts from liberal Jewish rabbis.

Darren Kleinberg (2006), a modern Orthodox rabbi, notes that Orthodox rabbis have rarely cooperated with Conservative and Reform rabbis in attempts to resolve community issues. In regards to conversion, Kleinberg calls for compromise on all sides. While he calls on the Reform movement to re-institute the formalities of conversion (circumcision and immersion), he also calls on Orthodox rabbis to be flexible (as he points out they have been at other times and in other circumstances).

Orthodox Jews must be willing to employ some of the legal creativity that is already so much a part of their system of halachah, much as the Conservative movement (which remains within the halachic system but is more flexible in its approach to decision-making) has done. It must make full use of the numerous legal concepts at its disposal to apply halachah in a manner that allows the Orthodox Jew to hold true to his or her unwavering commitment to Jewish law without, at the same time abandoning the rest of the Jewish people. Throughout Jewish history, rabbis have employed these legal concepts to rule in innovative and sometimes radical ways, and the same should be done today. (p. 92)

Ultimately, Kleinberg acknowledges that the crucial point will be the meaning of the acceptance of the commandments.

If the Reform movement is prepared to require that a kabbalat hamitzvot affirmation be made in the presence of an Orthodox beit din, the Orthodox rabbinate must be more flexible regarding what that means. As has been well documented by Rabbi Marc Angel, over the ages, kabbalat hamitzvot has been understood to mean anything from “a commitment on the part of the convert to observe the halakha in full, to “a commitment of the proselyte, in the presence of the court, to circumcise and immerse himself,” and that, in any case, only for the last 130 years has it been interpreted as requiring total observance of the mitzvot. (p. 93)

The current controversies regarding conversion to Judaism are clearly not yet solved as the sort of compromise that Kleinberg calls for seems unlikely. Michael Rader (1998) notes that “The individual efforts of candidates for conversion, and the collective protests of the Conservative and Reform Movements in Israel, appear only to have strengthened the determination of Israel’s Orthodox rabbinical courts to keep the gates of our faith shut as tightly as possible (p. 28). The problems regarding conversion to Judaism are not insignificant and represent one of the wedges developing between Orthodox Judaism and the more liberal streams both in Israel and in the diaspora.

In both Israel and the United States, Orthodox rabbis see the Jewish people as increasingly threatened by secularism. The notion of a “secular Jew” (as many Israelis identify themselves) is foreign to them; secular Jews may be ethnically connected to the

Jewish people but are alienated by their lack of religious commitment. The notion that a convert to Judaism might interpret the religious aspect of his or her new identity in ways that do not conform to Orthodox observance and lifestyle would have been almost impossible when the Jewish community was distinctly separated from the surrounding culture. Joining the Jewish people was identical with becoming religiously identified as Jewish in one's outward behavior.

In every era the dual natures of Jewish identity have been intertwined, and converts had to become both members of the Jewish people and religious Jews. When Judaism was clearly an ethnicity, religious and ethnic identity were practically congruent. The god-fearers in the Roman empire might have found something attractive religiously in diaspora synagogues, but they did not convert, did not become Jews. Medieval converts from Christianity apparently were motivated by religious commitment, but they had to be accepted into a Jewish community both in order to practice as a Jew and for survival.

Now that born Jews can adopt the lifestyle of the surrounding culture – and remain Jewish – must converts be more observant? Can membership in the Jewish people be disconnected from Jewish religious observance for converts? These questions are also questions about the nature of Jewish identity. The issue of identity and its implications for conversion has also been the subject of discussion. Moshe Halbertal (2008) has reviewed how, especially in Israel, “the subject of conversion has led to some of the most telling moments in the shattering of Jewish identity and its radical purity” (p. 38), arguing that “the traditional concept of Jewish identity has been replaced by a plurality of incommensurable notions which render the attempt to subordinate the definition of Jewish

nationalism to the halachic framework both problematic and mistaken.” I would add that it is not only the conflict between Jewish nationalism as an aspect of Jewish identity that conflicts with the traditional halachic framework but also that the notion that one can be a Jew who is also a member of a non-Jewish surrounding culture, as in America, conflicts with the traditional halachic notion that being Jewish means being separated and distinct from the surrounding culture.

Halbertal points out that there is no longer a shared agreement among all Jews as to what constitutes entry to the Jewish community since Orthodox rabbis do not accept – and are unwilling to work with – more liberal streams within Judaism. The option of civil marriage for intermarried couples means that some couples, Jewish and non-Jewish spouses, form families outside of the Jewish (or Christian) community. For the Orthodox, these families are then lost to the Jewish people, while Reform and Conservative rabbis have sought ways to retain them. Halbertal acknowledges that converts who are not required to adhere to Orthodox observance or who convert to marry a Jewish spouse who has not been observant (and probably will continue so) are not joining the same sort of Jewish community as they would have joined when all Jews were *de facto* observant and lived in observant communities. Halbertal concludes that there are now two conceptions of Jewish identity: covenantal and – in Israel – national (or in the diaspora, what might be termed “cultural”). “[O]ne bases identity on a life of standing before God as obligated, the other bases such identity on solidarity” (p. 45). He proposes a third manner of identifying as Jewish – “the cosmopolitan identity of being a Jew” (p. 45).

To be a Jew in this approach is to emphasize the power of a particular identity in shaping moral rules and political privileges. A Jew exhibits his or her own Jewishness in his compassion toward the vulnerable, and its principle stance for universal political and moral values. This form of being a Jew, expressed in the notion of tikkun olam, is rooted in the Jewish historical condition of vulnerability and marginality. The capacity to adopt the cosmopolitan point of view stems from the unique stance of the Jew in the margins of society occupying simultaneously the position of an insider and an outsider. (p. 45)

It is not clear how Halbertal's notion of a "cosmopolitan Jew" would differ from the Reform concept of Judaism as a universal religion, devoid of ritual or law that would differentiate it from any particular non-Jewish culture. He is, however, urging a tolerance for a plurality of Jewish identities, and he suggests that joining the Jewish people in the cosmopolitan sense would "consist of the willingness to share the fate of the Jewish People and to belong to one of the existing Jewish cultures" (p. 50). This is a notion of conversion that replaces the Orthodox notion of Jewish identity with identification with one of a plurality of ways of being Jewish. Clearly if a plurality of Jewish identities and cultures is not accepted by all Jews, a situation will develop in which some Jews do not consider other Jews – born or converted – as Jews. American open society and Israel as a secular state have created a social setting that Judaism has never encountered before, in which the role of converts has become part of the wedge that could separate the Jewish people.



## Chapter 3

### ADVICE FOR AND BY CONVERTS

There is an extensive literature written about converts to Judaism, much of it written as advice to potential converts. These texts include conversion manuals – books written to inform potential converts about Judaism and about the process of conversion – and conversion narratives, first- and second-person stories about individual converts. Most of the conversion manuals include some first-person or second-person accounts of conversions along with information about the process and advice for potential converts, and many of the collections of conversion narratives are written to encourage potential converts by illustrating what the process was like for others. Some of the conversion narratives are collections of short narratives, and some are book-length accounts of the convert’s journey to Judaism. These stories provide examples of writers’ and editors’ images of what a convert should be and thereby tell potential converts not only what to expect but also what to be like.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to printed texts some websites offer instruction and support to potential converts. For instance, Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn runs the website of the “Conversion to Judaism Home Page,”<sup>15</sup> which offers advice to potential converts as well as suggestions for organizing outreach efforts. On another website<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Cukierkorn offers a long-distance program for people who do not have a local Jewish community or a rabbi

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<sup>14</sup> I have limited this review to conversion manuals and narratives published in the last three decades, since my interest is in the experiences of contemporary converts to Judaism. Since conversion narratives are written after the fact, often years later, some of the descriptions may be of earlier years.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.becomingjewish.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.convertingt Judaism.com/>

who would work with them directly. Rachel-Esther bat-Avraham, who describes herself as “a traditional, observant Jew who has done a lot of research,” provides information for converts from a “traditional perspective” on the BecomingJewish.org website.<sup>17</sup> The attitude toward converts on these websites is welcoming and encouraging.

The Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America also maintains a website,<sup>18</sup> which emphasizes that conversion to Judaism is a decision that affects every aspect of one’s life: “Judaism governs every action that a person undertakes, from the moment he or she gets up in the morning until the moment he or she retires at night.” On another website<sup>19</sup> an unsigned essay emphasizes the rigors of becoming Jewish, especially since the only valid conversion would be under the supervision of an Orthodox rabbi and would require commitment to a fully observant lifestyle. This website author emphasizes that the convert would have to deal with antisemitism and attacks by “fundamentalist Christians yelling at you for wanting to become Jewish.” If the potential convert is not up to all these obstacles, the author suggests an alternative:

You might consider joining a group of Righteous Gentiles. There is a growing movement in the United States and other countries of what is called the Noahide or the Bnai Noah Movement. . . . There are many advantages to this approach. As a member of the Bnai Noah . . . , you can be righteous and still eat pork. You can drive your car to the movies on the Sabbath; you can dress any way you want, and you won't need two sets of pots, pans, and dishes. If you do any of this after you have become Jewish,

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.becomingjewish.org/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.judaismconversion.org/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.beingjewish.com/conversion/becomingjewish.htm>

you have sinned. And once you have become Jewish, the Torah says you are always Jewish, even if you stop believing.

Like these two websites, Orthodox conversion manuals and narratives present a different attitude toward conversion from that presented in the liberal Jewish texts aimed at potential converts. The Orthodox texts in general present conversion to Judaism as a difficult process that involves overcoming all obstacles to a fully observant lifestyle, and they valorize converts who adopt a fully observant lifestyle. The Orthodox convert is idealized as a person who so completely adopts an observant lifestyle that he cannot be distinguished from the most observant born Jews. There is some debate in the Orthodox texts as to the validity of conversions that do not involve such commitment; some authorities assert that conversion without a commitment to full observance is not valid. On the other hand, in the liberal Jewish conversion manuals, conversion is presented as a negotiable change of identity into a community that is usually welcoming. A recurrent theme in the liberal Jewish conversion narratives is the notion that the convert is someone who is finding a home in Judaism and is discovering that in some sense they have always been Jewish, and conversion is the process of confirming that identity.

### **The Orthodox perspective**

Maurice Lamm's (1991) comprehensive conversion manual is one of the first texts written for and about converts. Lamm, a professor at Yeshiva University's rabbinical seminary, has written other books that could be called instructional texts – *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (1969) and *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (1980) – from what has been labeled a “modern Orthodox” perspective. Lamm's conversion manual is encyclopedic, including details of what the potential convert would need to know

about Judaism and its beliefs, holidays, rules of *kashrut*, etc., as well as the procedures involved in conversion, and how the convert might deal with his or her original, non-Jewish, family after becoming Jewish. Lamm begins the book with seventeen stories written in the first person by converts, many of them excerpts from other publications. Throughout the book, Lamm refers to some of these narratives as illustrating specific points about the process of converting to Judaism. These narratives are rather short, each emphasizing one or two points which Lamm makes explicit in a brief comment at the end of each narrative. Although some of the narratives indicate that the convert and his or her family may not be completely observant, Lamm makes no comment about the need for full Orthodox observance by these converts.

In a section on “Entering into the Covenant,” Lamm points out that the convert is called upon to acknowledge “the authority of Torah, the five books of Moses, and the oral interpretation of that law by the Sages of the Talmud and the Codes of Halakhah” and that the convert “cannot willfully reject even one of these laws . . . may not deny the Rabbis’ authority to establish a particular law,” and “The convert’s commitment to Judaism must include a commitment to observance” (p. 111-112). However, Lamm acknowledges that some converts

. . . may feel disposed to observe the tradition but lack the emotional stamina to keep it and not let it slip out of consciousness. This does not by itself cast doubt on the conversion. There is an inherent recognition in the laws of conversion that people can and do grow. (p. 112)

Lamm would thus see a conversion as not valid only if the convert had no intention of ever being observant. However, the convert’s behavior after conversion does not

mean that there was no intent, and there is hope that with growth, a person's level of observance may improve.

A more strict Orthodox perspective is presented by Herbert Bomzer (1996), also a graduate of Yeshiva University's rabbinical college and a student of Moshe Feinstein, an Orthodox rabbi known for his stringent rulings on many halakhic questions. Among his credentials, Bomzer includes recommendations by prominent Orthodox authorities, including the late Lubavitcher rabbi and the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, which refers potential converts to him. Bomzer presents the process of Orthodox conversion by describing a number of the converts he has worked with. The descriptions of the experiences of converts by Bomzer almost all end with a happy marriage and the establishment of a fully observant Jewish family. In each case, Bomzer describes his initial attempts to dissuade the potential convert until he is convinced of the person's sincerity and persuaded that their motivation is purely for the sake of commitment to being Jewish. He requires potential converts to live in an Orthodox Jewish community, to study extensively under the supervision of an Orthodox rabbi, and to be questioned in detail by a *beit din*. One of Bomzer's examples is a woman who submitted a "paper answering about sixty questions geared to the knowledge of how to live an Orthodox lifestyle" and was then "tested orally for hours about her cognitive knowledge, commitment, and emotional affinity to G-d, Torah, and *mitzvot*" (p. 10) In addition, he requires each potential convert to take an oral and written oath "to be observant, religious, Orthodox . . . and to raise his/her family in that way of life" (Dedication).

Bomzer asserts that reluctance to be fully observant can stand in the way of an Orthodox conversion: "I recall a case in which a young man accepted every command-

ment but couldn't stand the thought of giving up nonkosher wine!" (p. 15). Bomzer cites the authority of Moshe Feinstein to tell potential converts that one who violates "*Torah* law after conversion could possibly lose the status of convert because the conversion could be retroactively nullified. Non-compliance with commitments would be a sign that there was no real acceptance of the yoke of the *mitzvot* at the time of conversion" (p. 117).

Bomzer's and Feinstein's extreme position discouraging converts who do not agree to an Orthodox lifestyle and allowing for the nullification of conversions does not represent the position of all Orthodox rabbis. Marc Angel (2005), himself a Past President of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America, has taken a more liberal position and has engaged in debate about the issues around conversion. Angel cites numerous halakhic authorities to defend the position that Orthodox rabbis should encourage conversions (especially in cases that otherwise would involve intermarriage). His position is that although conversions performed by Reform and most Conservative rabbis are not halakhically valid, setting up a new category of non-halakhic converts would create problems including the status of their children. Thus Angel's solution is for Orthodox rabbis to be more accepting.

Although non-halakhic converts are not Jewish according to Jewish law, they have, at least in some important ways, left their former status as Christians or Muslims (or whatever other religion they had been practicing). They have taken on a Jewish identity, and cast their lot with the Jewish people. It would be wrong to ignore the Jewish commitment they have demonstrated, even though they chose to join the Jewish people through a

non-halakhic conversion. Yes, they are not Jewish according to halakha; but neither are they Christian or Muslim. They are in a new category, somewhat akin to the status of a *ger toshav* (resident alien). It is the task of the halakhic community to encourage such individuals to convert halakhically, thereby totally entering the peoplehood of Israel. (p. 9-10)

Angel argues that conversion according to *halakha* need not involve the complete commitment that Bomzer demands. He disagrees with a rabbinic authority who instructed rabbinic students not to accept converts unless the rabbi could completely guarantee that the convert would be totally observant. When one of the students observed that no one could absolutely guarantee another's future observance, the teacher seemed to agree that Orthodox rabbis should do conversions rarely or never. (p. 11). In response Angel cites the need to confront the emotional and spiritual struggles of potential converts and often the struggles of the Jewish families these potential converts will marry into. He sees the potential convert as someone who is engaged in a long and difficult spiritual quest, the endpoint of which will be a commitment to an observant lifestyle. Exactly when the formal conversion occurs in this process does not seem to be important to Angel.

Accordingly, the stories of converts that Angel provides include some who progress over years, often after converting with a non-Orthodox rabbi, toward an Orthodox conversion and more observant lifestyle. In his description of the procedures for conversion, Angel emphasizes the importance of evaluating the candidate's motivation and emotional suitability for making this serious decision. He requires the convert to have studied "the basic laws and customs of Judaism" and to participate in Jewish communal

life and “identify with the Jewish people everywhere, including the State of Israel” (p. 134). However, he does not demand the oaths that Bomzer describes. Angel expects observance, but more important to him is that halakhic conversion should be a possibility and an advantage both for the potential convert and for Judaism.

To meet our responsibility to the Jewish people today and to our future generations, the Orthodox community must address the issue of conversion directly, compassionately, convincingly. It must present a clear and appealing alternative to non-halakhic conversions. It must break out of its self-imposed shell and act boldly for the sake of the Jewish people. (p. 15)

Lamm’s book is written to be read by potential converts, but neither Bomzer nor Angel are writing specifically to be read by the same audience. They are writing to defend their positions, one restrictive and the other more lenient, to an audience of Jews who are concerned about the issues of intermarriage and conversion. All three, however, draw a firm line that only Orthodox, halakhic conversions are valid, and the only valid reason for conversion is love of God and the Jewish people. Both Bomzer and Angel cite intermarriage as the situation leading to most conversions. Both acknowledge that Jews may marry non-Jews and that the non-Jewish spouse may later want to convert, and both are suspicious of the motivation of someone is converting in the context of marriage. They differ in terms of how rigidly each would define the requirement for observance for the convert.

The insistence on purity of motivation and intensity of devotion to a lifestyle defined by *halakha* is the dominant theme in narratives of Orthodox conversions. The convert is portrayed as willing to overcome all obstacles in order to become a fully observant



Orthodox Jew, someone who exceeds all the usual hallmarks of an observant Jew. The ideal of the Orthodox convert is described in a story by Nissin Mendel. The “Ger Tzedek of Wilno” was an 18<sup>th</sup> century Polish nobleman’s son who, while studying for the Catholic priesthood, became determined to become a Jew. He renounced his social position and his family, traveled far away from home, and overcame many objections to his conversion. He became an ascetic Torah scholar and died as a martyr when his identity as a Christian apostate was revealed to authorities who burned him at the stake. Mendel asserts that

A "Ger Tzedek" (true convert) is a gentile who became a Jew out of a sincere and deep conviction in the truth of the Jewish religion, without any other motivation whatever. Indeed, this is the only kind of conversion that the Torah recognizes.

For all such converts to Judaism it has always entailed supreme sacrifices; breaking off family ties, relationships with friends, giving up an easier life, perhaps also a promising future in the former society -- all in order to embrace a religion that has often been despised and persecuted by the world at large, and to join a people that has always been a small minority in a hostile world.

*Migrant Soul: The Story of an American Ger* (Shafran, 1992) is a contemporary account of a dark-skinned, mixed race man who married a divorced Jewish woman who was not religiously observant. They had two children, and he became interested in Judaism, eventually converting with a Conservative rabbi. When they became friends with Orthodox Jews, he was informed that these friends would not recognize his conversion,

and they persuaded him that since he sincerely wanted to be Jewish, he should go through an Orthodox conversion to be legitimately Jewish. When he began to study Jewish texts intensely, he encountered hostility to Orthodoxy in the liberal Jewish community but nevertheless fulfilled all the requirements for an Orthodox conversion. His wife had to obtain a *get*, a religious divorce from her previous husband, in order for Shafran and herself to be married again, and she underwent a surgical reversal of a tubal ligation in order for them to have another child. When he lost his job and became more intensely involved in “studying,” they accepted a much reduced lifestyle and eventually moved into an ultra-Orthodox community. The book ends with the author’s describing how his own young daughter mistook this devout convert for a rabbi instead of “just a mister” like every other Jew.

Shlomo Brunell (2005) describes his whole family’s conversion. Brunell was a Finnish Lutheran minister who seemingly rather abruptly developed theological doubts about the tenets of Christianity. He left the Lutheran ministry and sought conversion to Judaism – not only for himself but also for his wife and four daughters – in Finland. He describes himself as discovering that he had a Jewish soul, comparing himself to an eagle chick that is raised by a hen until he hears the voice of the mother eagle looking for a missing chick. He also notes Rabbi Josef Lifland’s teaching that converts were present at Sinai in a different way than the souls of all Jews then and now. Convert’s were present, he says, only in their *mazal*, destiny, an “influence that flows from above into the soul” (p. 63). Living a fully observant lifestyle is the demonstration of that *mazal*.

Initially Brunell encountered difficulties in pursuit of conversion to Judaism. He lived some distance from Helsinki, where the Jewish congregation did not have a rabbi,

and when they did get a rabbi, he was at first reluctant to give time to a stranger calling out of the blue. Brunell had to travel back and forth from his home to Helsinki, undergo circumcision, and finally after a year be immersed in a *mikvah*. Not only was Brunell converted, but also his wife and his four daughters. Even while preparing for the formal conversion to Judaism, Brunell decided that he and his family were called to make *aliyah*, to live in Israel. The process of obtaining the necessary paperwork and permissions, finding an absorption center that would help them adjust to Israeli life, and physically moving was fraught with obstacles. In addition, Brunell, whose only training had been in Christian theology, had to find work in Israel – as a cleaner, a construction worker, and eventually as a manager for a company that installs business workstations.

Although Brunell is openly deeply emotionally as well as intellectually drawn to Judaism, he does not provide a full account in this book of what the conversion – and subsequent move to Israel – meant to his wife, who seems simply willing to go along with him unquestioningly, or how his daughters felt about the change in religious orientation, name, identity, and eventually home. Throughout the process, Brunell expresses some concern for his daughters, who have to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture, but he does not discuss how they came to their own individual commitment to Judaism in any depth.

Once settled in Israel, Brunell encountered another major obstacle to being fully Jewish. The rabbinic authorities in Israel would not accept the family's conversion certificates from their Helsinki rabbi. Each member of the family had to study again and appear before *batei din* in Israel. Their daughters had to change to religious schools from secular schools for new immigrants. Brunell and his wife were accepted, but each of

their daughters had to appear before a *beit din* for questioning repeatedly. Brunell and his wife first had to have their legal status as “married” reversed and then go through a Jewish wedding. One daughter, after her conversion, fell in love with an Israeli, a yeshiva student, who realized that he could not marry her because he is a *kohen*, who cannot marry a convert. The girl was disappointed but accepted the impossibility of their romance.

Throughout all these obstacles and complications, Brunell remained committed to fulfilling any requirements to full recognition of his Jewishness. He sums up his family’s experience:

We lived in a distant land, another life, in a different world. What I knew about Jewish life and Jews was from the Tanach. I envied the Jewish people because they had a special relationship with God. They were selected from all the nations to be special, to be holy. That’s why the Almighty also gave them a Holy Land, a place where they could fulfill this purpose of being special to God and special to the rest of the world. A light to the nations – to show the world the purpose of life.

And I wanted to be holy; I wanted to have this relationship with God, so even if there was only one change in a million for me to do it, I would join this holy people. (p. 125)

The conversion described in *The Bamboo Cradle: A Jewish Father’s Story* (Schwartzbaum, 1988) is not the author’s but that of his adopted Chinese daughter. However, the story also illustrates the idealization of overcoming obstacles to becoming fully observant and of demonstrating an attachment to being Jewish above all else. While teaching in Taiwan, Avraham Schwartzbaum and his wife adopted a foundling infant.

They worked through all the bureaucracy of bringing her to the United States, but when they tried to enroll her in a local Jewish day school, they found that only an Orthodox conversion would make her eligible for the school. The Orthodox rabbi also would not convert the child unless the adoptive parents pledged to raise her in a fully observant home. Therefore, Schwartzbaum and his wife took on all the obligations of being Orthodox Jews. Schwartzbaum became so fervent that he got into disputes with a number of Jewish agencies for not being as observant as he felt they should be. For instance, he objected when the local Jewish day school did admit a child whose mother was a Conservative Jewish convert, and he protested when the local Jewish Family Services insisted that Jewish interns remove their headcoverings when seeing the service's clients. Eventually, Schwartzbaum and his growing family made *aliyah*, and he describes his Chinese daughter's adaptation to living in Israel as a Jew. The book ends with her speech at her *bas mitzvah*, when she formally accepted her conversion and declared: “. . . I would like to make one promise to my family: I will never forget who I am – a Jew, a *cheilek* of *klal Yisrael*, a part of the Jewish people.”

*Ordained to be a Jew: A Catholic Priest's Conversion to Judaism* (Scalamonti, 1992) is an autobiographical account of a young man's progress into Orthodox Judaism. Raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, John Scalamonti entered a “minor seminary” when he was fourteen and determined to become a priest. From that point on, he lived a highly regimented and restricted life designed to protect his youthful religious vocation from any contamination by the outside world. After his ordination and while pursuing an advanced degree in theology, he began to have doubts about his commitment to the priesthood. When his superiors refused his request to live for a time as a parish priest, he

chose to leave the priesthood. Working as a restaurant manager, he met a young woman from an Orthodox Jewish family. With her family he began to learn about Judaism in a way quite different from what he was taught in a conservative Catholic setting, and in order to marry her, he decided to convert to Judaism. Other than describing his commitment to keeping kosher and to Torah study, Scalamonti is not explicit about his level of Jewish observance. He and his wife have refused to allow their children to visit his parents for Christian holidays in order not to confuse them religiously, and in a final chapter of the book, Scalamonti's wife describes how his commitment to Judaism led her to a more intense involvement as well.

Tova Mordechai's autobiography (2002) is strictly not a conversion narrative as she was halakhically always Jewish. The daughter of an Alexandrian Jewish mother (who converted to Christianity) and an English father, Mordechai grew up in a strict Christian cult. She was obedient to the cult leader's decisions and tried in every way to pursue a life of faith, including for a time "living on faith," that is, owning nothing and praying for all of her needs to be met by divine intervention as gifts. She struggled with a desire to believe and to be connected with God.

I wanted so terribly to serve Jesus. Hadn't I tried with all of my being to love him and to be faithful to him? My father had taught me from the time I was a little girl that once you accepted Jesus into your heart, he would never leave you, no matter how wayward you became, for he had promised that even though we might deny him, he would always remain faithful. It was so difficult to understand, and so worrisome to me that every-

one else seemed to be able to believe it. Why couldn't I believe it? With my whole heart I wanted to. (p. 260)

The cult leader adopted a number of Jewish observances over the years, and Mordechai began to be attracted to Judaism and to doubt the leader's teachings. She eventually fled the cult and was taken in by a Lubavicher Jewish family. At the beginning of her first Shabbat with this family, Mordechai experienced an epiphany. After the family had prepared for Shabbat, Mordechai went to her room.

As I opened the door, I stood back, somewhat startled. I couldn't go in.

Something was in that room . . . . Peace. The room was filled with a peace so thick you could touch it. I stood still for a moment, and then I noticed that the whole house was filled with this peace. I remained motionless on the landing for a while, allowing the storm to calm within.

God was in this home. In twenty-five years, I had never sensed His presence so strongly. (p. 301)

Over the next few years Mordechai spent time with Lubavicher families and studied in girls' schools run by Lubavicher anti-missionary rabbis. She was declared by an English *beit din* to be Jewish and not in need of conversion, and she moved to Israel to continue to study. She describes the struggle over these years to unlearn the evangelical Christian theology she had grown up in and her growing acceptance of an observant Jewish lifestyle, including marriage to a man who also converted from Christianity, in Safed. Photographs in the book show a traditionally clad husband with two sons and a daughter and Tova wearing an obvious *sheital*. She acknowledges that learning to live an observant Jewish life has been difficult but rewarding.

People often ask me if I ever experience any doubts. The answer is no. Certainly, I have felt overwhelmed at times, but I feel secure in my existence as a Jew in the eyes of God. To live within the confines of Torah is, for me, the greatest freedom of all. With my return to Judaism, I have abandoned the idea of perfection. The Torah was not given to angels, but humans: humans who are fallible and who, yes, do occasionally err. True strength is the courage to admit one's weaknesses, and to grow and change as a result. (p. 442)

Both Scalamonti and Mordechai both grew up in highly regimented religious environments, and both became Orthodox Jews, living again in a religious environment that is also rather regimented. The evangelical Christian cult that Mordechai grew up in was as isolated from the outside world as was Scalamonti's experience in a conservative Catholic seminary. Both describe conflicted relationships with their fathers. Mordechai's father essentially abandoned her to the cult when she was an adolescent; she notes that after her move to Israel and her marriage to an Orthodox Jew, he continues to fast weekly, praying that she will return to Jesus. Scalamonti's father, a musician, was absent for long stretches of time. In these ways, both of these conversion narratives would seem to fit Ullman's (1989) paradigm of converts as seeking replacement father figures. Mordechai's escape from the Christian cult was supported by a rabbi who took a personal interest in her, and Scalamonti describes his wife's father and the Orthodox rabbi he initially studied with as very supportive mentors.

In addition Mordechai's account emphasizes the persistence of a "Jewish soul" that is inborn biologically and related to an ontological difference between born Jews and



gentiles and which struggles to return to Judaism no matter the obstacles. This concept is also exemplified in a story on the Chabad website (Touger and Touger, n.d.). An Australian adolescent girl pestered a local rabbi, asking him to convert her as she had always felt a connection to Judaism. For several valid reasons, he refused, and she became depressed. Eventually the rabbi wrote to the Lubavicher rebbe for advice and got no response until later when the rebbe asked him what was happening to “that Jewish girl.” After some persistent inquiry, the girl’s mother revealed that she had been raised in an Orthodox Jewish family but married a gentile. The girl was welcomed into the Lubavicher community and became a teacher in a Lubavicher school.

### **The Liberal Jewish Perspective**

The notion of a Jewish soul is not absent in liberal Jewish conversion narratives. For instance, Stephen Dubner describes his return to Judaism (1998) after being raised by parents both of whom were Jews who converted to a charismatic style of Roman Catholicism. Prompted by a need to understand his parents and their religious conversion, Dubner discovered an extended Jewish family and reconnected with them. However, his return to Judaism did not involve a return to Orthodoxy; he writes very little if anything about his level of observance. He focuses mostly on his search for a family and for the sort of intense personal relationship that his parents had with God; he finds these as a Jew. At the end of his account, he went to Christmas mass at the church where his mother found a connection with Jesus, wondering and fearing that he would find the same connection.

I waited. The Our Father was finished. I half expected a sublime clarity to fall upon me, as had befallen my mother in this very church.

But it didn't happen. Not on that night or any other. I was relieved. In the tips of my fingers, in my mind and my heart, in the past and present and future, I consider myself a Jew. I believe that God feels the same way. I have a relationship with Him, a little one-sided perhaps, but I am doing my best. We speak more and more. (p. 316-317)

The idea of a Jewish soul has been transformed in the context of liberal Jewish outreach; for liberal Judaism, even gentiles might have a Jewish soul that reveals itself in the person's seeking conversion because in converting they are "coming home" to Judaism in a spiritual sense. The emphasis in the liberal texts is more on the spiritual aspects of conversion than on the convert's level of observance. These texts mix vignettes that provide a personal viewpoint with discussions of issues that converts may face. These texts acknowledge that converts may come to Judaism for a number of motivations and may convert with Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Orthodox rabbis. Often the author's emphasis is on the psychological and spiritual dimensions of being Jewish rather than the convert's commitment to observance of *mitzvot*.

Lawrence Epstein was one of the most active among liberal Judaism to call for active outreach to non-Jewish spouses and to others who might possibly be interested in conversion (1992, 1994b). Two of his books are conversion manuals, written to be read by potential converts, *Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook* (1994a) and *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism* (1998). Both are as comprehensive as Lamm's conversion manual, covering many of the details of the process of conversion. Epstein acknowledges that individuals convert to Judaism for "romantic" reasons but also as a consequence of deep spiritual or personal needs that they find fulfilled in Judaism. He

presents the potential convert with the choice of affiliating with Orthodox, Conservative or Reform congregations and describes the divergence in what each of these streams of Judaism expects regarding observance. For example, answering a question about whether a woman convert can marry a Jewish man who is a *kohen*, Epstein points out that

Reform Judaism does not recognize these distinctions, and so a Reform Jew who has been told he is a *kohen* can marry a convert. Conservative Judaism, in general, says that it is not historically possible to determine exactly who is or is not a genuine *kohen*, so that Conservative rabbis allow a marriage between a man whose family believes he is a *kohen* and a convert. Orthodox Judaism recognizes these distinctions and does not sanction a marriage between a *kohen* and a convert. (1994a, p. 72)

Thus, clearly Epstein does not expect all converts to Judaism to become as fully observant as Orthodox rabbis may. Although he uses brief vignettes in both books to illustrate specific points, he does not seem to hold up any motivation or way of being Jewish as the ideal for a convert.

Other liberal Jewish conversion manuals similarly advocate a diverse path for converts rather than a demand for a specific level of observance. *Embracing Judaism* (1999), originally written by a rabbi, Simcha Kling, and revised by Carl Perkins, is a basic textbook for converts endorsed by the Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Joint Commission on Intermarriage. The first chapter is the “personal story” of Rachel Cowan, a convert who became a Conservative rabbi. This book emphasizes the essentials of what converts need to know about Jewish history, beliefs, liturgy, and life-cycle events. The author’s stance toward the convert’s level of ob-

servance is typically Conservative; there are *mitzvot* and there are differing ways to observe them. For instance, the author describes keeping kosher as including not eating in non-kosher restaurants or eating only fresh foods or only vegetarian foods in non-kosher settings. The author's position is that keeping kosher is a decision the individual makes for a purpose.

A commitment to eat only kosher foods provides a constant reminder of the covenantal nature of Judaism. Every time a choice must be made whether or not to eat certain foods, one is reminded that one is a Jew. Sometimes one must remind others that one is a Jew. One has the opportunity to think about one's faith, one's identity, and one's character several times a day. (p. 69)

Two guides to conversion are written by converts themselves and reflect the converts' choice of a liberal Judaism. The authors focus not only on what is required of a convert – the “how” of conversion – but also on the stresses that converts will face, including issues with the convert's original family, holiday celebrations, unwelcoming attitudes by some born Jews, etc. They combine practical advice with an emphasis on the spiritual and communal changes that a new Jewish identity would entail.

Lena Romanoff, herself a convert to Judaism, is the Director of the Jewish Converts and Interfaith Network in Philadelphia. Her conversion manual, *Your People, My People: Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew by Choice* (1990), includes chapters for gay, Black, and single converts, including one vignette of a lesbian convert finding acceptance in a Reform synagogue led by a lesbian rabbi (p. 195). Romanoff's em-

phasis throughout the book is on the spiritual and emotional aspects of conversion, and at points she seems to disparage the Orthodox requirements for converts.

However, a few converts have told me that they obtained their Orthodox conversions under less than ideal circumstances, having undergone what they considered to be quick and superficial conversions that seemed to them little more than formalities. Others, who converted for less than ideal motives – such as to appease family members or to be accepted as Jews in Israel – later confessed to me that they felt compelled to tell the rabbis what they wanted to hear regarding their intentions to practice traditional Judaism rather than be honest about the less-than-traditional life-style they felt they could more realistically commit to. (p. 16)

Lydia Kukoff, also a convert herself, wrote *Choosing Judaism* (2005) initially in 1981, published by the UJR Press. Kukoff speaks almost exclusively from a Reform Jewish perspective, and in the preface to the revised edition, she acknowledges that the book was specifically written to address the outreach program of the Reform movement in the 1980's. Kukoff does not specifically address the sorts of details of that Lamm and Epstein do; this is not really a conversion manual in the same way as theirs are. Kukoff uses a very direct voice, as though she is speaking informally to the reader, and a large number of short vignettes (highlighted in boldface throughout the text) to illustrate issues she is addressing. Kukoff's focus seems to be mostly on the convert's need for psychological and social support for starting a new life as a Jew. She devotes chapters to issues that may arise with "Your Non-Jewish Family," "Your Jewish Family," and "Your Jewish Spouse," and she provides a lengthy glossary of words in Hebrew and Yiddish that a

convert may need to learn as well as a briefly annotated list of helpful and interesting books that converts might want to read. In third chapter, she describes situations in which converts have become more observant than their Jewish-born spouses, but she does not seem to expect that converts or their spouses will be exceptionally observant.

Anita Diamant begins her book of advice to potential converts (1997) with a description of her husband's conversion. Her engagement to a non-Jew brought Diamant to learn more about her own identity as a Jew, and her fiancé studied along with her. When a rabbi they consulted refused to perform an interfaith marriage, her fiancé decided to convert. "In the process of accompanying me on my search for an authentic Jewish identity, Jim had found a spiritual and communal home for himself as well" (p. xix). Diamant's "handbook" addresses potential converts with a wealth of advice, emphasizing not only practical issues (what a *mikvah* is like and what to expect there) but also the sort of psychological and spiritual issues that Kukoff and Romanoff focused on. She includes written-out *kavannot*, prayers, and examples of synagogue services written to welcome converts into the community.

Diamant does not emphasize a strict level of observance as what it means to become Jewish. Observance is an individual matter, not an expectation. She tells the prospective convert that

As a Jew, you are obliged to grapple with the *mitzvot* and to discover which ones evoke in you a sense of being commanded – a feeling of "I don't think I can skip this one anymore." As a liberal Jew, you are free to experiment with the *mitzvot* and to discover how to make them your own. But you are also obliged to act upon what you learn. (p. 215)

For Diamant, Jewish identity is as much an attachment to a sort of ethnicity as it is a religious identity. She advises the potential convert that

Becoming Jewish is means attaching yourself to four thousand years of history, to a complex literature, to a brand of humor, even to certain foods. Becoming an American Jew means acquiring a relationship to at least two foreign languages: Hebrew and Yiddish. Converting to Judaism means learning what to do in a synagogue, how to send and receive the verbal and nonverbal cues that signal Jewishness, getting the jokes. Being a Jew asks you to subsume a part of your individuality into the larger, corporate experience of the Jewish people. (p. 17-18)

In a chapter on “Family Matters,” Diamant notes that converts sometimes discover that they have some Jewish family roots – a grandparent or great-grandparent. She ascribes this phenomenon to a notion of a Jewish soul.

The Jewish mystical tradition explains this phenomenon with the legend of the *gilgul*. According to the fourteenth-century text *Sefer ha playa* (The Book of Marvels), a *gilgul* is a Jewish soul that was somehow lost or separated from Judaism. The means of separation vary and are of secondary importance: Once there was a Jewish orphan who was adopted by gentile parents . . . Once there was Jew who converted to Christianity . . . . However the story begins, the Jewish soul passes from one generation to the next, living a Christian or Muslim life. But eventually the soul’s yearning for Jewish expression grows overwhelming, seeks out other Jews, and finds its way “home.” (p. 53-54)

This concept that the convert is someone who becomes aware of an innate Jewishness, a Jewish soul, and finds his or her way back to Judaism, coming home in a sense, recurs throughout the liberal Jewish conversion narrative literature.

Originally written in German and translated in to English, *Not By Birth Alone* (Homolka, Jacob, and Seidel, 1997) was written “to fulfil the positive duty to show friendship towards non-Jews and make it very clear that if any of them wish to join us in our community of faith, a warm welcome should await them” (p. vii), in the context of European and English post-World War II society. A very brief chapter discusses the Orthodox insistence on complete observance and refusal to accept as valid conversions performed under non-Orthodox auspices. A note of regret is apparent in regard to the rigidity of the Orthodox authorities and their reluctance to accept converts.

The Progressives understand that the Orthodox authorities cannot accept their conversions, and don't hold it against them. But then they are not usually called upon to do so except in the relatively rare cases in which a Progressive proselyte, or a descendant in the female line of such a proselyte, seeks acceptance in Orthodox Judaism for a purpose such as marriage. And in those cases, one would have thought, the Orthodox authorities would lean over backwards to regularize the applicant's status, by their rules, with a minimum of fuss or difficulty. That, rather than attacking other conversion procedures, is the task to which they should devote their considerable learning and ingenuity. (p. 100)

After individually authored chapters on the history of conversion and current attitudes toward conversion in Europe, the United States, and Israel, the authors include ten



conversion narratives, a few of which describe the convert's path not only into being Jewish but also into the rabbinate. There is little or no mention of the convert's becoming especially observant, and what seems to be idealized is the convert's determination to belong to the Jewish people.

The liberal Jewish conversion narrative literature is diverse, including both book-length autobiographical accounts and collections of shorter conversion narratives. Most of these emphasize conversion as the outcome of a spiritual journey that continues even after the formality of conversion. For instance, Linda Shires (2003) does not so much provide a linear autobiographical narrative as she describes a continuing struggle with aspects of Judaism even after her conversion to Conservative Judaism. Her book is structured as a series of commentaries on issues raised by various Torah portions and includes chapters on feminist issues, the problems of defining who is Jewish, dealing with the Holocaust, etc. Her grasp of philosophical and theological issues is informed by her familiarity with a wide range of philosophical and theological texts.

Julius Lester's conversion narrative (1988) also exemplifies the emphasis on spirituality (rather than observance). He describes his progression from being raised in a rural Arkansas Afro-American family to becoming a civil rights activist and writer and eventually an academic who taught a course on the relationships between Blacks and Jews. He struggled with his family's Christianity and with finding himself defending Jewish political positions. And he found himself wishing he could have been Jewish.

But being a Jew is more than loving Judaism; it is also belonging to a people. I cannot conceive how a person not born Jewish could belong to the

Jewish people. I do not even know what that means – to belong to the Jewish people.

Part of me is glad I can never be a Jew. Part of me is angry with God for not having me born a Jew, and I would convert tomorrow if I were not black. (p. 144)

Later he dreamed that he is Jewish.

The joy of the vision permeates my body and I smile. I want to laugh aloud, to get out of bed and dance. I want to shout: I am a Jew! I am a Jew! I am a Jew dancing the joy of God! (p. 160)

Despite the controversy stirred up by his public advocacy of Jewish and Israeli positions and the ensuing alienation from other Blacks, Lester proceeded with conversion with a Reform rabbi – chosen because of his fears of the pain and effect of circumcision. Nevertheless, somewhat later he did go through with circumcision and a Conservative conversion. His wife, inspired by his pleasure in being Jewish, also decided to convert. Exploring his family history, Lester found that his family were slaves to a Jewish family and probably descendents of the family as well. He describes the intense feeling of real acceptance as Jewish when the *gabbai* at a synagogue where he is not known offers him a *aliyah* simply by asking Lester whether he is

“*Kohen or levi?*”

“Israel,” I responded.

“*Shishli,*” he responded. “What’s your Hebrew name?”

“Yaakov ben Avraham.” (p. 241)

Again, later, when he is asked to lead the *Hallel* service and finds himself joined by the congregation.

As I hear the voices from the congregation rising to meet mine, there is no separateness between me and them. We have become music; we are embodied prayer. (p. 243)

Nan Fink's (1997) spiritual journey is more complicated than Lester's. She was born into a Christian family, and when she was in college, she married a Protestant minister. After the birth of her children and a divorce, she lived for a time with (and eventually married) Michael Lerner, an Orthodox Jew, who with Fink started a magazine focusing on Jewish activism, *Tikkun*. For several years, she lived with Lerner and attended an Orthodox synagogue. Sitting behind a *mihitzah* with the women, she encountered hostility toward herself as the non-Jewish woman who had replaced Lerner's Jewish wife. She studied in Israel and rejected an Orthodox rabbi's offer to supervise her conversion when he seemed more concerned with what she could offer financially than with her spiritual needs. Eventually, she decided to work with a Conservative rabbi affiliated with a Jewish renewal congregation, and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a prominent figure in Jewish renewal speculated that "Perhaps you have the soul of one who was killed in the Holocaust" (p. 47). Just before formalizing her marriage to Lerner in a traditional Jewish wedding, she went through with a perfunctory Orthodox conversion ceremony.

After the marriage to Lerner broke up, Fink questioned her commitment to Judaism but not her commitment to political activism. She was troubled by the Orthodox attitudes toward women, and her feminist activism led for a time to a lesbian relationship. Eventually Fink found a spiritual home in a Jewish renewal congregation in Berkeley,

California, where she is seen as one of the community religious leaders. For Fink, spirituality overrides observance.

. . . [M]y Jewish spiritual practice has continued to flourish. Now that I have let go of the orthodox idea of doing it in a certain way, I feel free to explore the possibilities.

I have taken on those observances that mean the most to me. Each one has spiritual depth, and together they complement each other. For example, praying for the earth to be healed leads me to commit myself to use the earth's resources with care. I study about the Torah's concern for the land, and then I involve myself in *tikkun olam*, political action, by writing a letter protesting the toxic waste dump nearby. (p. 244)

My practice shifts from time to time. Recently I've become unsettled about the issue of food. Orthodox Jews observe *kashrut* because it is mandated by Jewish law, although it makes no logical sense. For them it is a state of commitment to God. I feel the pull of the tradition, but environmental and ecological issues also concern me, and I care about the life and death of the animals we eat. The easiest way out of this dilemma is to become a vegetarian. But even that is not so simple, because sometimes I hunger for chicken. Is kosher chicken really more holy than free-range chicken? Is it really crucial that I eat no animal blood? The point for me is to remain conscious of every act, so that I know what I am doing and make the connection with the divine. (pp. 245-246)

Most of the liberal Jewish conversion narrative literature is in collections of shorter accounts. These have been collected for differing reasons, but mostly to try to convey to potential converts what the experience is like and what issues are likely to be encountered on the way to conversion. The diversity of these accounts says to the potential convert that any path into Judaism that he or she pursues is valid.

A small collection of conversion narratives was co-authored by Rabbi Bernice Weiss, who graduated from the liberal Academy for Jewish Religion, and a journalist, Sheryl Silverman (Weiss and Silverman, 2000). Almost all of the situations described in these accounts concern conversion in the context of intermarriages, and Weiss includes first-person narratives by both parties, the one who is converting and the born Jew along with her own observations and comments. She focuses on how the couple resolved family conflicts and psychological issues in the process of one spouse's conversion. Although a few of the accounts end with the convert becoming Orthodox and observant, Weiss does not seem to valorize those who choose Orthodoxy over those who choose Conservative or Reform Jewish identities. One of Weiss's converts says,

I went through a year-long study program and decided to go the whole nine yards and have a Conservative conversion. But already I was moving toward the Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox synagogue was the only place I felt at home; to me, there was a feeling of community that the Conservative and Reform were missing. (p. 128)

However, another convert made another choice:

I wanted to undergo a Conservative Jewish conversion, but the rabbi said two words to me that brought terror to my heart: Brit Milah, the ritual cir-

cumcision that every Jewish male undergoes. So I opted to go the Reform route since a Reform conversion didn't require this procedure. (p. 87)

Weiss' converts repeatedly speak of Judaism as "value system" that they feel at home with. For example, Weiss quotes converts as saying:

Judaism is the belief system I feel most at home with. I have evolved; I know I'm ready to embrace it. I'm there now and it feels comfortable. (p. 37)

Judaism has provided me with a value system that I know I want to pass on. (p. 58-59)

There's the traditional saying, if someone converts it's as if he or she has always been Jewish. I feel I have a Jewish soul. Since I was little I was in a constant struggle to understand God and where I fit in the universe. I didn't just accept what was given to me: I was always questioning and trying to understand. Now I feel at peace. (p. 143).

The theme that the convert is a Jewish soul that is returning to Judaism also recurs throughout a collection of conversion narratives edited by Catherine Myrowitz (1995). Herself a convert, Myrowitz set out to collect stories of "people who search for greater meaning in life and discover Judaism's carefully wrought understanding and nurturing of the human spirit, manifested in ritual, prayer, and values" (p. xxi). Her interviewees "encountered some spiritual experience in their coming to Judaism. This was described by some as a connection to those who perished in the Holocaust, by others as a second soul coming into them during the *mikveh*, in the miraculous *besharit* nature of their lives that led them to become Jewish, in the ongoing relationship and communication with God,

and in countless other ways” (p. xxiii). The spiritual experience as “coming home” to Judaism is illustrated by a few of the more than thirty conversion narratives collected by Myrowitz.

I do not know why or exactly when I decided to become Jewish. Decided is not the correct term. Rather, when I *knew* that I was Jewish. There was no doubt in my mind. I *felt* Jewish. I belonged among Jews. (p. 93)

One Friday night after seeing a movie, we were walking down the street past a building with lights in the windows and people singing. I said to my husband, “Oh, I have to go in there! I know that song!” I didn’t even know it was a synagogue, but I was drawn inside, irresistibly, and my husband followed me reluctantly. The song the people was singing was “*Adon Olam*” (“Lord of the World,” a traditional *Shabbat* song), and I can still remember the moment of hearing it. It seemed as if all these candles . . . were lit up, stretching back and back through time, and my candle was there too! Then I understood: “Ohhhh! This is what I’ve been looking for!” . . . There was a very familiar feeling like when you meet someone and it’s as if you’ve always known them, or you go some place, and it seems you’ve been there before. I knew I was home. (p. 159-160)

One of Myrowitz’s interviewees described visiting the Anne Frank house while on a high school trip to Europe and feeling an

overwhelming feeling of connection with something – something really, really affected me. I don’t know what it was. I would like to think that there was some connection to the events and people back then. There

were all those lost souls, and somehow there was a reason for my feeling of connection. That was the beginning.

I don't feel my conversion was something that I *chose*. It was like it chose me. From that point on (at Ann Frank's house), it was as if something was driving me toward Judaism, and I really had no choice. (p. 15)

*Embracing the Covenant: Converts to Judaism Talk about Why and How*

(Berkowitz and Moskovitz, 1996) is not as informative as it is inspirational. Very short (one to two page) narratives are surrounded by "gleanings," short paragraphs and bits of poetry. Alan Berkowitz and Patti Moskovitz do provide some basic information for potential converts regarding the process of conversion; they note that Orthodox and Conservative rabbis may require converts to meet with a *beit din*, undergo circumcision, and go to a *mikvah*, but they also describe a "ceremony of welcome" to be done in a synagogue sanctuary. They also provide some "practical advice" on beginning the process of conversion. The theme that the convert is someone who is fulfilling a Jewish soul by returning to Judaism is illustrated in a number of their short accounts.

I moved to Japan, and before long I left Catholicism, my family, and a total way of life. I was deeply alone. I moved back to California and felt a call to convert to Judaism. I had gone to several synagogue services with a Jewish friend in Japan, had been touched by my studies in the Torah, and was left empty by the other religions I had been studying. But with Judaism, a voice welled up in me: "You are home. You have finally come home." Tears welled up in my eyes. I had never had this reaction before with any religion I had studied or participated in. (p. 61)



I felt that I have been on the path to Judaism throughout my life. Actually declaring myself a Jew and being accepted as one by the Jewish community has been immensely meaningful to me. I feel that I have found a home. (p. 75)

As a Jew I am happier and more myself than I have ever been. Judaism provides a context and structure which allows me to be myself, to accept my depths. It makes it okay to be different. In becoming a Jew, I have found what was always right under my nose. I've found my heart, my soul, my life. (p. 56)

I don't feel as did the biblical Ruth upon leaving her people and taking on another religious affiliation. For throughout my life, I have felt some cultural or ethnic bond to the Jewish people. Today, this bond is deeply rooted within my soul. Becoming Jewish for me is *teshuvah*, a returning to part of my ancestry which has been denied me. (p. 94-95)

*The Choice: Converts to Judaism Share Their Stories* (Weiss and Rubel, 2010) is the latest of these collections of conversion narratives, including more than forty stories either written by converts or transcribed from interviews. One of the co-editors, herself a convert, states that the idea for creating this collection came about because “. . . I could find lots of information about the mechanics of the conversion process, but I could find almost nothing about the spiritual, psychological, and intellectual parts of that experience” (p. 1). The collection is a mixed bag, organized roughly into groups by the age of the convert. Several narratives are grouped together because they concern converts who proceeded onto rabbinical training. Some of these stories concern conversions that oc-

curred after an intermarriage; many of them concern converts who were not married to Jewish spouses. At least two of the narratives are told by converts who are gay; one of these did obtain an Orthodox conversion. Most of the narratives describe conversion with Reform or Conservative rabbis; a few of the converts have become Orthodox.

The “returning home to Judaism” theme occurs in a number of these narratives. One convert describes a dream when she was in a residential school for deaf students:

I had a dream that I was Jewish. Even when I woke, I just couldn't shake it. Later that day, I went to the Bible study classroom where they had a chalkboard. I drew my dream on the board and wrote, “I am Jewish.” (p. 14)

Later she attended a service at the Hillel at Gallaudet University.

When I entered the shul for the first time and picked up the siddur, I felt immediately at home. It was as if I had known these prayers for years, even though I was seeing them for the first time. (p. 16)

Another convert begins her story:

In the D'var Torah I gave, the Shabbat after I officially converted to Judaism, I took issue with the recent convention of referring to converts as Jews by choice. This label implies that converts construct their Jewish identities from scratch, as the result of a deliberate and voluntary decision. These assumptions clashed harshly with my own experience. In fact, I argued, I was born with a Jewish identity – not a legal one, to be sure, but an emotional and intellectual one. The only real choice I had was the same choice that every Jew by birth has: to ignore my Jewish identity or to em-

brace it, to build a life that was rooted in Jewish principles or a life that was not. (p. 63)

### **Conclusions**

Although much about the experience of converts can be gleaned from this literature, there are problems with relying on this material alone for description of how converts negotiate the change in identity involved in becoming Jewish. All conversion narratives are written after the fact, sometimes years after a writer's formal conversion. As narratives of the convert's experience, these accounts as they are told and written must have a degree of coherence and structure. In addition there is the issue of why converts choose to write these stories. Those that are written for inclusion in conversion manuals are designed to encourage other potential converts and may be slanted in the direction of portraying the experience in ways that the writers of the manual would prefer.

The motivations for writing conversion narratives that are included in other collections is unclear; it may be that the need to "tell a story" not only to oneself but also to an audience includes aspects of Lewis Rambo's "commitment" stage of conversion – the need to portray an acceptable motivation and mastery of the appropriate rhetoric (Rambo, LR, 1993, Rambo and Farahadian, 1999). Rambo (1993) also notes that some Christian groups require the convert to tell the story of their conversion in an acceptable way with accepted rhetorical forms (p. 138).

Although the "narrativization" of Jewish conversion narratives has not been studied, this process as it affects Christian conversion narratives has been examined. Charles Griffin (1990), who takes Charles Colson's narrative of his conversion to evangelical Christianity in prison as his primary example, describes conversion narratives as "person-

al mythmaking” and questions how the convert’s motivation for writing affects the factuality of the narrative.

But while all autobiographers labor to create coherent narrative identities for themselves, those who have undergone radical religious or secular conversion experiences during their lifetimes do so under constraints peculiar to those experiences. For conversion represents both a problem and an opportunity to autobiographers, challenging them to create myths of self that account plausibly for the dramatic shifts in attitude and behavior that follow from an authentic conversion experience even as it provides them with the kind of insight that makes such an account possible. (p. 152)

Griffin also notes that the rhetoric of the convert’s new spiritual home may affect how the convert comes retrospectively to view his or her own history.

Traditionally, studies of conversion rhetoric have focused on the means by which secular or religious evangelists secure conversions through the use of various discursive strategies. Although certainly valuable, such studies are also limited insofar as they confine rhetoric to the status of a mere “trigger” or “stimulus” to the actual conversion process. But if, as has been argued here, that process continues to play out over a period of months and years during which time rhetoric plays a significant role in helping the individual to recast his/her view of life, then the role of rhetoric in the conversion process is both more subtle and more powerful than has so far been explained. (p 162)

Wade Clark Roof (1993) also described religious narratives as a form of story-telling:

We tell stories not so much to illustrate as to affirm who we are and what gives identity, purpose, and meaning to our existence. . . . Narrative is motivated by a search for meaning; when people tell stories, essentially they bring order and direction to their lives. (p. 298)

In a very detailed study of Christian conversion narratives, Peter Stromberg (1990, 1993) describes the use of “ideological language” and the need to bring coherence and meaning into a narrative of transformation.

The conversion narrative, like the ritual, induces a sort of “solidarity,” in this case a solidarity of motives. The conversion narrative enables the believer to forge a sense of coherence by using ideological language to embrace intentions that, as the analysis has shown, persist in spite of being denied. It is this sense of coherence that signals, both to the believer and to the observer, a transformed identity. (1990, pg. 54)

If conversion narratives, then, are written as part of the process of solidifying the coherence of a transformed identity, to demonstrate that the convert had an appropriate motivation, and to “tell the story” in an approved way, what do we learn from these narratives? We learn what converts are being told they should be like – told not only by authorities but by the converts these authorities approve of. From the conversion narrative literature it is clear that the ideal of an Orthodox Jewish convert is different from the ideal of a liberal Jewish convert. The Orthodox Jewish convert is someone who commits himself or herself to living within the boundaries prescribed by Orthodox observance, who is more “one of us” than “we” are perhaps. The liberal Jewish convert is someone who embodies the spirituality that liberal Judaism in America has embraced.

Thus the recurrent theme, especially in liberal Jewish conversion narratives, that the convert is someone who has discovered that he or she has been in some sense “always Jewish,” may reflect not so much the motivation that brings converts to Judaism but a rhetoric learned in the process, possibly from the conversion narrative literature itself. It is, of course, interesting to speculate concerning the motivation (deliberate or unconscious) of liberal Jewish authorities for encouraging this rhetoric. Is it a response to the Orthodox and kabbalistic notion of the “Jewish soul” inborn in those who are halakhically born Jews but somehow deficient in converts? Or is it a need to justify the welcoming of converts in the face of the Orthodox resistance to conversion as an aspect of assimilation; if converts can be seen as vaguely but somehow already Jewish, then there is no fear that converts will bring foreign worldviews with them since their ethos and spirituality is already “Jewish” in a sense and therefore not to be seen as a possible source of contamination of essential Jewishness?

## Chapter 4

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The principal goal of my research has been to learn about how potential converts to Judaism experience the process of becoming Jewish, both in terms of religious beliefs and in terms of joining the Jewish people. I was particularly interested in the development of the “coming home” theme identified in the conversion narrative literature reviewed in Chapter 3; was this a rhetoric that converts learned while studying to become Jewish or was it something that had been in their minds as an aspect of their motivation to pursue conversion? Since intermarriage has been considered one of the major reasons for converting to Judaism – and one of the major halakhic issues regarding conversion – I was interested in the role of marriage or proposed marriage to a Jewish spouse as a motivation for conversion. In view of the split between Orthodox Jewish authorities who demand a total commitment to observance and the more liberal modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform authorities who seem to emphasize a commitment to being one of the Jewish people, I was also interested in how these new Jews adapted to keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, and other aspects of Jewish observance as well as other ways in which they constructed a Jewish identity for themselves. As I interviewed participants in this study, I focused on these and other questions that developed from the interviews.

Although I used an online survey as an initial source of data, my basic methodology was qualitative rather than quantitative. Those participants who agreed to be interviewed allowed me to gain a more in-depth view, beyond their responses to the survey questions, of how they were attracted to Judaism and how they experienced becoming Jewish. The authors of the available conversion narrative literature and the participants

in the few previous studies of converts to Judaism had all converted some time before they wrote their narratives or were interviewed, and such narratives are subject to retrospective re-interpretation. Therefore I wanted to recruit participants who were either just considering conversion to Judaism or who were in the process of conversion but had not formally converted in order to learn about their experiences prospectively.

Such a plan involved a number of complications and compromises. I needed as many participants as possible. However, it would be difficult to develop an in-depth understanding of the individuals if there were too many participants. In order to recruit as many participants as possible, I could not limit myself to local sources (e.g., local rabbis who were conducting Introduction to Judaism classes, etc.), and I wanted to be able to recruit participants nationally. Using an online survey allowed participants to respond from any location. However, since I wanted my research to reflect the voices of the participants themselves, I wanted to be able to interview them individually. Participants responding to a survey would answer only the questions included in the survey. Directly interviewing potential converts allowed them to bring up issues that were important to them and sometimes to expand on their responses to some of the survey questions.

Therefore, I chose both to create an online survey that would be easy for potential participants to access and also to ask those who completed the survey to volunteer to be interviewed by telephone. Interviewing participants by telephone allowed me to have a direct personal contact with participants who were geographically dispersed. However, telephone interviews are, of course, limited in some ways. There is no visual element to the conversation, so the contact is somewhat impersonal. Direct personal conversations



with participants would have been ideal.<sup>20</sup> However, doing all of the interviews in person would have involved nearly impossible travel and scheduling unless I was willing to work with a geographically limited sample. Doing the interviews by telephone also allowed them easily to be recorded and transcribed. I used a telephone conference service, which gave me a toll-free phone number that the participant and I could both call into. The conference service recorded the conversation and then sent to me by e-mail as a computer audio file. These audio files then were sent to an online transcription service to produce a written record of the conversation.

I requested approval for this study from the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University, who reviewed the text for the recruitment materials as well as the survey and interview questions. The research was determined to be exempt from further IRB review.<sup>21</sup>

### **Recruiting participants**

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. I first sent about one hundred letters to rabbis of congregations in several states, enclosing cards (see Appendix A) to be given to anyone they knew who might be considering conversion to Judaism. This approach netted only one or two participants. I next contacted a rabbi connected with the Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din of Southern California, Jerrold Goldstein, who for-

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<sup>20</sup> It would have been interesting to use one of the available computer programs for video conversations such as Skype or Oovoo. However, neither of these allow for the ease of recording that the telephone conference call system did, and I could not be sure that participants would have easy access to a computer and a video chat program.

<sup>21</sup> That is, the protocol met criteria for exempt status under the federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b) as involving “the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior unless” and the identity of the participants was protected. The certification from the IRB is in Appendix J.

warded my request for participants to a number of rabbis in California who he knew to be working with potential converts. This contact resulted in a significant number of participants. Dawn Kepler, whose website Building Jewish Bridges<sup>22</sup> focuses on working with intermarried couples, also provided referrals to a number of participants, as did Rabbi Neil Weinberg,<sup>23</sup> who works with converts and potential converts in the Los Angeles area. Several of these rabbis also forwarded my request to colleagues they knew were working with potential converts.<sup>24</sup> A few participants were recruited by direct contact; people I met who identified themselves to me as potential converts were given the online address of the survey and were asked to volunteer for interviews.

All of the rabbinic contacts were identified as Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or “transdenominational.” I contacted the Orthodox Institute for Halakhic Conversion<sup>25</sup> but received only a terse, unsigned e-mail response, “Sorry. I do not feel this would be appropriate for me to be involved in.” I was unable to obtain referrals to other Orthodox rabbis who were conducting conversions, so my participants were limited to people who were converting with liberal Jewish rabbis.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> [buildingjewishbridges.org](http://buildingjewishbridges.org)

<sup>23</sup> Judaism by Choice, <http://judaismbychoice.org/>

<sup>24</sup> I did not ask on the survey where the participant was living at the time he or she was interviewed. A few people did mention where they were, but I did not track locations. I suspect that the majority of my participants are from the West Coast, but a significant number were quite widely dispersed, including participants from Toronto, New York City, Boston, and Oklahoma.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.halakhicconversion.org/>

<sup>26</sup> There was one exception to the liberal Judaism bias. The first respondent to the survey was a woman who had previously converted with a Conservative rabbi. She and her husband, however, had become more observant and were planning to immigrate to Israel.

## Gathering data

Participants who were referred to me were asked first to complete an online survey. At the end of the survey, I asked if the respondent would be willing to be contacted some time in the future for follow-up information and whether he or she would be willing to be interviewed by telephone. If so, I asked for contact information. Most of those who were willing to be contacted again or to be interviewed supplied an e-mail address; a few also gave a telephone number or a mailing address.

In order to protect confidentiality, each completed survey was given a serial number; for those participants who were also interviewed, the date of the initial interview was added to that number. For example 33-20111205 would mean that this was the 33<sup>rd</sup> completed survey and that the participant had been interviewed on December 5, 2011. The code numbers and contact information were kept in a password-protected computer file. About a year after the first surveys and interviews, I used this information to contact those participants who had indicated their willingness to participate in follow-up surveys and interviews. Later, when all the follow-up surveys and interviews had been completed, each participant was assigned a name chosen at random. The file linking these names to the code numbers and contact information was also kept in a password-protected computer file, and when all analysis of the data was completed, this file was deleted in order to completely protect the anonymity of the participants.

The online survey consisted of four sections.<sup>27</sup> The first consisted of demographic questions, e.g., age, religion of family of origin, whether the participant was in a mar-

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Therefore, she was in the process of obtaining a formal Orthodox conversion that would be accepted by the rabbinate in Israel.

<sup>27</sup> All of the survey questions are listed in Appendix Two.

riage or committed relationship with a Jewish partner, etc. This information was helpful in framing questions during the telephone interviews. The second section was constructed to obtain information about the respondents' attitudes toward Judaism, Jewish people, and Jewish beliefs, and the third part attempted to assess at what stage the respondents were in the progress toward formal conversion. A fourth section focused on how the respondents experienced their decision to convert to Judaism.

I borrowed the second and third sections of the survey from the work of Martha Bockian, whose PhD dissertation (2001) had proposed a stage model for conversion to Judaism. Her model was based on a previously described "stage of change" model (the University of Rhode Island Change Assessment Scale) that originally had been applied to the process of change in psychotherapy and had been expanded to describe behavioral change in treatment for alcoholism and obesity. The original model posited five stages of intentional change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Bockian had developed a survey instrument, the Survey of Attitudes, Beliefs and Customs (SABC) and the Stages of Change Questionnaire – Jewish Conversion (SOCQ-JC). This instrument was refined in a published version of her research (Bockian, Glenwick, and Bernstein, 2005). Bockian identified five stages toward conversion to Judaism, corresponding to the stages in the original model; she originally observed that converts to Judaism did not follow the stages as neatly as would be hoped and that conversion to Judaism generally required a longer time frame than the original stage model had posited (2001, p. 96). Both Bockian's original dissertation and the published version of her work (Bockian, Glenwick, & Bernstein, 2005) focused on the validation of the five-stage mod-

el for behavioral change applied to conversion to Judaism, so she did not address questions about motivation.

The fourth section of the survey was directed to my own question about the theme found in the conversion narrative literature that converts experienced a sense of somehow “coming home” to Judaism or a feeling that they had in some sense always been Jewish. I was also interested in whether converts experienced the decision to convert in ways that were similar to the Christian models outlined in Williams James’ work on conversion and whether the decision to convert might fit more to a Pauline or Augustinian paradigm. Therefore I chose statements from James’ narratives (slightly modified) and statements from Jewish conversion narratives that I felt described these alternatives. Participants were asked to respond on a five-point scale between “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” to each of thirteen statements about the experience of conversion.

The initial telephone interviews were recorded. Each participant had to give permission for the recording by responding to a prompt from the telephone conference line when the recording was started. While the conversation was being recorded, each participant was read a description of my research that included information about confidentiality.<sup>28</sup> The participant then gave verbal consent to the interview. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with a set of questions that were asked of each participant. These questions covered in the initial interviews are listed in Appendix D. In addition, I encouraged participants to elaborate on their initial responses, often with additional questions to elicit more details. At the end of the initial interviews, I thanked the participants and asked if they would be willing for me to contact them about a year afterwards.

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<sup>28</sup> The research description and consent is available in Appendix C.

The process of collecting surveys and arranging the telephone interviews was not without difficulties. In the second section of the survey (the SOCQ-JC), a few statements were inadvertently repeated; a few participants noted the repetition and asked if I were checking for consistency. Arranging the telephone interviews was difficult at first. I first tried to set up appointment times with interviewees by e-mail, giving them the toll-free number and code number for the telephone conference line that both of us would call at an appointed time. However, sometimes there were misunderstandings due to time zone differences so that I was on the conference line at a different time than the interviewee. Sometimes interviewees forgot the appointment or could not get to a telephone at the arranged time. In those cases, I found myself waiting on an open telephone line, listening to the on-hold music, and being billed for the time by the conference line company. Eventually I told interviewees to call me at home (or on my cell phone) when they were ready to start the interview; I would then give them the toll-free number and access code and ask them to call me at that number. I would then “meet” them on the conference line number.

After the calls were completed, the telephone conference company sent me by e-mail a link to the recording, which I could download as a computer audio file. This process was also not without complications. One interview was lost because I forgot to key in the prompt to record the call. Two interviews were lost because I did more than one interview in a day and confused which interviews had been downloaded. Nevertheless, in general the process worked well. When I had completed the initial interviews, I was able to e-mail the computer audio files to a transcription company, which returned computer word processing files to me within a short time.

The initial interviews were spread out over about five months. Beginning about ten months later, I started to contact those participants who had given me permission and contact information, asking them to complete a second survey, which was identical to the first survey. Again, I asked for permission to interview them a second time. The participants were given the code number I had assigned to them initially, so that I could link the second survey and interview with the first ones. I read the same consent statement to each interviewee and then went through a second set of questions (which are listed in Appendix E).

### **Methodology of Interpretation**

These interviews provided a great deal of raw information. The way I organized and interpreted this data is best described methodologically in terms of grounded theory techniques. Steven Engler (2011) notes that grounded theory methodology is appropriate “when there is little or no literature on relevant similar cases; when existing concepts/theories seem inadequate for aspects of the material at hand; or when one wishes to explore the possibility of alternative modes of conceptualizing a case” (2011, p. 274). Since most of the literature about how converts to Judaism experience the process of conversion is retrospective, it seemed appropriate to look to people who were in the process of conversion in order to more fully understand the issues involved in Jewish conversions.

As an interpretive methodology, grounded theory is not easily defined. Originally described by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) as a methodology for sociological research, grounded theory is a “general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” so that “Theory evolves during

actual research . . . through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 273). Through a process sometimes labeled as a “constant comparative method,” grounded theory studies attempt to construct a theoretical understanding out of available data. John Cresswell (1998) describes a grounded theory study as one in which “the researcher collects primarily interview data, makes multiple visits to the field, develops and interrelates categories of information, and writes theoretical propositions or hypotheses . . .” (p. 55-56).

Engler (2011) points out that there is no “formulaic set of rules for carrying out a [grounded theory] analysis” (p. 257). The process of moving from raw data (e.g., interviews) to theoretical conceptions is referred to as “coding.” The usual procedure is to begin with the initial data, which is subjected to analysis by various coding schemas, leading to the creation of increasingly abstract “concepts” and “categories.” Engler defines codes as “the initial descriptive, inchoately interpretive, terms and phrases that label elements of data,” concepts as “constructs that combine characteristics or particulars of a set of codes,” and categories as “more general glasses that bring together concepts, with the latter serving effectively as properties of the former” (p. 257). Initial or “open” coding labels elements of interview data in ways that then can lead to the formation of concepts that group many elements together. Later, as analysis proceeds “theoretical coding looks for relationships between the codes and extracts additional concepts, categories, and properties from this process of comparison” (p. 259). Axial coding involves a process of creating a “coding paradigm or logical diagram” in which “a central phenomenon (i.e., a central category about the phenomenon)” is identified in order to explore causal conditions, actions or interactions that result from the central phenomenon, contexts and



conditions affecting these relationships, and consequences of the interactions with the phenomenon (Cresswell, p. 57).

Since I had constructed the survey and the questions included in the interviews to specifically address the process of conversion to Judaism, I did not begin my analysis of the interviews with the sort of open coding that many descriptions of grounded theory suggest. Instead, I constructed a coding schema that organized the interviews into a coherent focus on specific issues. After all of the interviews were transcribed, I edited them, deleting repetitions and any information that might affect confidentiality. I then coded the interviews, extracting often direct quotations (or summarized quotes) from each interview as shown in Appendix F for one participant.

I then summarized this information into a narrative form. These summaries comprise Chapter 5. All told, 51 people completed the first survey. Of these 32 were interviewed. After ten to twelve months later, 31 people completed a second survey, and of these 20 were interviewed a second time. One person who had completed the first and second survey but had not been interviewed agreed to be interviewed after the second survey; for that participant, questions from both the first and second interviews were combined.

In a grounded theory study, the goal of axial coding is to explore the central phenomenon in terms of causal conditions, strategies by which the phenomenon is addressed, the context and intervening conditions that shape those strategies, and the consequences of those strategies (Creswell, 1998, p. 151). In this research, of course, the central phenomenon is the process of conversion to Judaism. Rather than attempting to create an axial code myself, I used a framework for the study of religious conversion developed by

Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (1999; Rambo, 1993). Rambo and Farhadian break the process of religious conversion into seven stages that include both psychological and social aspects of the process. It may be unfortunate that they chose the term “stages” for each aspect of the process of conversion since their stages can overlap temporally and may not occur in a fixed order for each individual. Also at times the stages blur into each other. Nevertheless, since conversion to Judaism is both an inner, psychological process and an outward change in social status, Rambo and Farhadian’s stages provide a heuristic model that enables examination of the convert’s psychological experience in the context of the social environment of Judaism in America. According to this model religious conversion proceeds from:

- (1) “context” (not so much a stage as a description of the potential convert’s social and psychological environment), through
- (2) “crisis” (anything that may catalyze the process of conversion, which would include for Jewish conversion, questions of motivation),
- (3) “quest” (the potential convert’s response to his or her crisis);
- (4) “encounter” (the ways in which the potential convert encounters the new religious group),
- (5) “interaction” (the development of a new identity by the potential convert – which for conversion to Judaism would include the required period of study and synagogue attendance),
- (6) commitment (usually some sort of public declaration by the convert of his or her new religious identity – in terms of conversion to Judaism, this would encompass the formality of conversion), and

(7) “consequences” (ways in which the new convert must adapt to his or her new identity).

Chapter Five presents the summarized narratives of each participant’s interviews, and

Chapter Six is the analysis of the interviews using Rambo and Farhadian’s framework.

## Chapter 5

### THE PARTICIPANTS

The following are narrative summaries of interviews with those participants in my research who agreed to be interviewed. Names were assigned arbitrarily and are not the participants' real names. The first group are those participants who filled out the first survey and were interviewed and then responded to a request that they do the survey again and were interviewed a second time. The second group includes those who were interviewed only once and were either lost to follow-up or declined to be interviewed a second time. One final participant had completed an initial survey but was not interviewed; she was interviewed after she completed the second survey.

#### **Participants who were interviewed twice**

##### **Abigail**

Abigail was a 30-year-old unmarried woman who was raised by an Episcopalian mother and a Jewish father who was not religious. Her father's parents were deceased, so she had little contact with any Jewish relatives. She attended the Episcopalian church with her mother, including Sunday school and a Christian summer camp. She was confirmed in the Episcopalian church. However, she said that she always felt that there were "just fundamental things about Christianity that never really struck a chord with me," so that she felt that her involvement with the church was mostly "social and communal and values-oriented."

After taking a college course on the Holocaust, Abigail started asking her father more about Judaism. The impetus to her considering conversion to Judaism was some sort of "life-altering" spiritual event that occurred in the year before she was interviewed

for the first time. On the first survey, Abigail indicated that she felt that her conversion “chose her” because of the “spiritual things that happened last year,” which were dramatic enough that she felt like a different person. In both interviews she said it would take too long to describe what happened.

Abigail converted with a group who took classes together with a Conservative congregation’s rabbi. She said she chose to work with a Conservative rabbi because she had found information about this congregation’s program on the Internet; it seemed well organized, and the rabbi seemed responsive. Her formal conversion occurred about four months after she was interviewed for the first time and included meeting with a *beit din* and immersion in a *mikvah*. The group that she had studied with had a celebration together afterwards; family and friends of others in the group were invited.

Even when she was interviewed the first time, Abigail said that she did not intend to keep kosher. When she was interviewed about eleven months later, she said she was affiliated with a Reform congregation. She said that she had switched because “it became clear to me that that’s where I fit in better because of my reasons for converting and what’s important to me.” She was not keeping kosher and said that her synagogue attendance was irregular and had become mostly a “social experience.”

Abigail had said at the first interview that she was learning that Judaism is “more than just a religion” and was becoming connected to the Jewish community. However, during her second interview, it seemed that she was more involved with the spiritual event that had propelled her into converting than she was connected to a Jewish community. She did not have a regular prayer or study practice.

## **Agatha**

Agatha was a 35-year-old married woman who was interviewed twice, about thirteen months apart. At the time of the first interview, she was completing an Orthodox conversion; she had done a Conservative conversion (in Israel) several years earlier. At the second interview, this conversion process had been completed.

Agatha was raised in an evangelical Christian family and had been baptized, but her religious education after about age 10 was minimal. Her family's reaction to her conversion to Judaism was fairly neutral. She was first introduced to Judaism when she was eighteen and was dating a young Jewish man. She also learned about then that her maternal grandfather had been Jewish. She described herself as something of a religious seeker and said she had been "taking on elements of Judaism in my life" and pretty much practicing as a Reform Jew for a few years before she met her present husband. She feels that she would have proceeded with conversion even if they had not married.

Agatha said that her husband was not religious when they married; however, over the last few years her husband has become more religious, and now that they are planning to return to Israel to live permanently, she wanted to obtain an Orthodox conversion in order to be able to be more accepted socially among her friends in Israel.

The Orthodox conversion involved Agatha's studying with a Modern Orthodox rabbi, meeting with a *beit din*, and immersing in a *mikvah*. She and her husband also had to remarry. As an Orthodox Jew she expects to be fully kosher and "100 per cent *shomer Shabbat*." Although she noted that many women in the Orthodox synagogue that she attends do not cover their hair, she does, and she is learning to follow the laws of family purity.

Agatha felt that her motive for conversion was definitely more spiritual and communal. “For me, it is definitely a religious thing in that I sometimes find it difficult to understand why born Jews who are secular don’t embrace their Judaism.” She wants her children to identify as Jews, to have a good Jewish education, and to marry Jews. She is a synagogue member and engages in continued regular study and regular prayer.

### **Brenda**

Brenda was a 27-year-old single woman, a college student who was still living with her mother (who was seriously ill at the time of the second interview). She was interviewed twice, about a year apart. Brenda was baptized in the Lutheran church, and although her mother was fairly active religiously, Brenda described her religious education as fairly minimal. She was first acquainted with Judaism when she started taking religious studies classes as her minor in college. She described her attraction to Judaism as based primarily – at least at first – in reading literature about Judaism and Old Testament stories. After thinking about it for a few years, at the first interview she said she had finally “gotten up the guts” to call a synagogue and inquire about conversion. She said that her mother was accepting of her decision.

Although her initial attraction was primarily religious, Brenda felt at first that she had found a supportive community in the synagogue. She mentioned one older woman who had befriended her; Brenda felt they would be friends even if she did not proceed with conversion. Brenda acknowledged at first that keeping kosher would be difficult for her because she was still living in her mother’s home. She was uncertain about how observant she would be eventually.

A year after the first interview, Brenda had pretty much suspended her progress toward conversion. She felt that the Conservative rabbi – who had told her that she would be expected to observe holidays, attend services regularly, and keep kosher – was not supportive. She felt there was no organized program of progress toward conversion. In addition, she said she was told by people in the congregation that she should attend only the Friday night services because the Saturday morning services would be too long and uninteresting to her. She was graduating from college and planning to attend a graduate program in Holocaust studies in another state and thought that she might consider proceeding with conversion there.

On the first survey, Brenda endorsed two more conversion descriptions than she did on the second survey. She also seemed to be confused about what it meant to have a child baptized and was uncertain about whether Jesus would return as the Messiah or whether the Messiah would not be Jesus. On the second survey she said she would have a Christmas tree, largely because she was living with her mother who would put up a Christmas tree.

### **Curt**

Curt was a 29-year-old man who was raised with no real religious affiliation or instruction. He thought of himself as nominally Christian but knew little about what that meant. He was not even sure whether he had been baptized. He grew up in a neighborhood that he described as a “suburb of Israel,” so was exposed to friends and neighbors who were Jewish from childhood. An uncle was married to a Jewish woman, so he had attended some *seders* with that family.



Curt became interested in learning more about Judaism when he became engaged to an Israeli woman who had been raised Orthodox. They took some classes together initially so that Curt could understand more about her religion since they agreed to raise their children as Jewish. In that process he became more interested and decided to pursue formal conversion. He said that their plans to marry were not dependent on his converting, but if they were not to marry, he was not sure whether he would pursue the formality. For Curt, becoming Jewish was primarily a matter of joining the Jewish people. He and his fiancée visited family in Israel about once a year, and he thought they might even consider moving there if “this country keeps going the way it’s going” and if there were work opportunities for them there.

Curt attended a conversion program at a Conservative synagogue. He chose a Conservative program because it seemed more structured and thought out than the conversion programs at a few other synagogues. Although his fiancée had been raised Orthodox, she also felt more comfortable with the Conservative congregation. Curt also felt that the demands of an Orthodox conversion would be too much for him. By the time Curt was interviewed a second time, about a year after the first interview, he had completed the formal conversion, including meeting with a *beit din*, a *hatafat dam brit*, and immersion in a *mikvah*. Afterwards he got together with others who had completed the conversion program at about the same time for a sort of celebration with friends and families.

Curt and his fiancée had discussed the degree of observance that they were comfortable with. Their kitchen may not have been koshered, but they did not have *trayf*, non-kosher foods, at home or mix meat and milk at home. Lighting candles on Friday

and attending Friday evening services was important to them, but work demands made it difficult for them to be completely observant.

When he first completed the survey, Curt had indicated uncertainty on questions about whether Jesus would return as the Messiah and whether God existed as a Trinity. When he was interviewed a second time, he said he had learned more about what those assertions meant. He described becoming Jewish as “like coming home;” this was a feeling that had grown in him over the course of the conversion classes. After about a year of instruction, he described sometimes traveling for work, and then going “straight from the airport to *shul* on Friday night. I get there, and I feel relaxed. I’m just at home.” He also had realized that when he was younger, he had almost exclusively dated Jewish women and felt at ease with Jewish friends.

### **Darlene**

Darlene was a 30-year-old woman who married her Jewish husband two years before the first interview; they had been “together” for about ten years. They have no children. At the time of the first interview she had just completed a Reform conversion ceremony; she was interviewed a second time about a year later. Darlene was raised as a Lutheran. Her parents were Sunday school instructors, and she was actively involved in the church as a youngster, going to church camp and participating in church-related social action groups. Although her parents were devout, they were supportive of her decision to convert.

Darlene had only become acquainted with Judaism and Jews in college. While living with her husband and after their marriage, she described herself as essentially living as a Reform Jew. The decision to formally convert came when “It just felt right for

me.” The formalities of conversion for Darlene were minimal. Her rabbi preferred to describe it as “affirmation” rather than conversion. The ceremony took place at her in-laws’ home and was a small affair with just family. There was no *beit din*, no *mikvah*, and no recognition in the synagogue.

Darlene described conversion to Judaism as both a religious and a matter of joining the community, but both aspects seemed somewhat tenuous. “We are members of temple, but we don’t necessarily have that kind of connection that I had as a child to my church. My connection to Judaism is mostly through our family, through my husband’s family!” She said she had a close relationship with her Reform rabbi and agreed with him that Judaism was “frankly, like Hillel quoted, Do not do unto others, as you would not do unto yourself. That’s really the way I see it.”

When interviewed a year later, Darlene’s Jewish identity seemed to be centered around cooking and holidays. On both the first and second surveys she gave ambivalent to positive responses to a number of items endorsing Christian beliefs and practices. She put up a Christmas tree in her home – in fact a few weeks before Christmas – in order to share the holiday with relatives. In regard to Christian beliefs, she seemed unsure whether Jesus would return as Messiah, whether God was Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and whether Jesus was God. “To be truthful again I just began being liberal minded. I see things fairly open ended; none of us really frankly knows. That is just the way I feel. I feel like the open endless in me is okay. Basically I don’t know.”

### **Doris**

Doris was a 30-year-old unmarried woman who had been raised in what she described as a very liberal Presbyterian church. Her parents were very active in the church,

and she attended Sunday school and church activities regularly as a child. However, she refused to go through confirmation when she was fifteen as she had decided by that time that she was not a believing Christian. Therefore, beginning in adolescence she started learning about a variety of religions. Doris grew up in a neighborhood where she had many Jewish friends from childhood. By the time she was in college, she was seriously considering conversion to Judaism and had started attending events at a local synagogue.

Doris postponed formal conversion for several years, partly because she was afraid that the decision would be hurtful to her parents and partly because she was not sure that she believed in God. Her parents now are supportive of her decision. When she was interviewed for the first time, she had decided to convert and was participating in a fairly intensive course of study with a Conservative congregation. When she was interviewed about a year later, she had not formally converted, although she expected to do so in a few months. The delay was due partly to a change in the administrative structure at the synagogue; the rabbi who was most active with the conversion courses had left and there was some confusion over whether Doris had missed too many of the Saturday morning classes. Doris said she hoped that these issues would be resolved without her having to attend a lot more classes as she felt she had already learned the material that was covered. She expected that the formal conversion would involve a *beit din* and a *mikvah*.

For Doris, conversion to Judaism started off as mostly a matter of joining the community she had been involved with for some time. “It started for me as being mostly a sense of feeling that I belonged with this group of people. I started out being very agnostic but feeling in some bizarre way that I fit in and I felt at home with Jewish people.”

For Doris, conversion to Judaism felt like “coming home” as well. “I do have this sense, perhaps it's irrational, but I do have this sense that I am somehow more comfortable and at home and more connected or something, with the Jewish community. I feel like by formally converting, I will be making official something that I have felt for an incredible long time.”

Doris felt that she would be more observant if she had a family and children as she would want to instill Jewish values and practices into the children. Living alone, she tries at times to keep some degree of kosher, and she spends Shabbat reading Jewish texts, including the *parsha* and *haftorah* for the week. She attends Shabbat services about three times a month, a frequency that she notes is better than for some people.

### **Felice**

Felice was a 23-year-old unmarried woman who was raised in South America. Her mother is Episcopalian. She received a thorough religious education, including attending Sunday school, first communion, and confirmation. She attended parochial schools until middle school, when she went to a non-parochial boarding school. She said that she quit going to church as soon as she “had the freedom and action to do so.” She became acquainted with Jews in middle school and eventually read books about Jews and Judaism. She thought about converting for some time and finally decided when

I was in a store, and this woman handed me a pamphlet. She asked if she could give me something and I thought she was going to give me a coupon or something. I looked, and it said in big bold letters, The Lord Kills, Repent. She started getting really in my face and saying you have to read the Bible, and you have to believe everything it says, and she started to point

things out there, that God hates, God judges, God should be feared. Even babies die and are killed by God, and God hates Christmas, God hates – I’m sure it said something like God hates fags. I just looked at her and said, I’m sorry, I’m Jewish, and I walked away.

Felice’s family is supportive of her decision, especially since she seems to have found a spirituality that she is happy with while others of their children have simply left the church. Felice converted with a Reform rabbi, although she also feels welcome at the local Conservative synagogue. The formalities included a *beit din* (which apparently included at least one lay person) and a *mikvah* (which her mother came for). There was some recognition in the synagogue afterwards; Felice asked people to be sure to come to Friday evening services, and some friends made a cake for her.

Felice intends to keep kosher but has problems with Shabbat observance. She is a dancer with a local ballet company and has Saturday performances and rehearsals. Initially on the first survey, Felice was ambivalent regarding whether Jesus would return as the Messiah, but at the second interview with her she had decided that “he was just maybe a radical kind of a hippie thinker. And he had some nice things to teach.”

## **Grace**

Grace was a 27-year-old unmarried woman who was raised Roman Catholic but had little formal religious education. She seemed to have been something of a religious seeker since childhood. She said she had been attracted to Hinduism, kabbalah, and astrology. She knew Jews since childhood as friends and neighbors, and the decision to convert seemed to have come after she had been active in Jewish “leadership” groups and had worked on creative projects with Jewish partners for some time. She sought out a

Conservative rabbi, and the formalities of her conversion included a *beit din* and a *mikvah*. Her family had little comment about her decision to become Jewish. “They are fine about it, and regardless I’m going to do what I want to do anyway.”

Although Grace described herself as a spiritual seeker, she seemed to emphasize the community aspect of being Jewish over the religious. “Being Jewish is not necessarily how you identify religiously; it’s more how you live actively in the world.” She emphasized her informal connection to a higher power and her own “practices” rather than regular formal prayer.

Since her formal conversion, Grace has remained active in Jewish “fellowships” and study groups. She was also active in speaking to Jewish organizations and synagogue groups. She described being involved in formal Torah study with one of these groups that met every other week. Her Shabbat observance seemed to center around attending synagogue services. Since she is vegetarian, keeping kosher was not much of a problem for her.

## **Henry**

Henry, who did not give his age on the initial survey, was an unmarried gay man who was raised as Roman Catholic. His religious education, however, was fairly minimal, ending with his first communion. He had Jewish friends beginning in elementary school and said that he made the decision to convert to Judaism when he was in high school. However, his mother asked him to hold off until after his grandparents died as she was concerned that they would be upset.

Henry was interviewed a second time about eleven months after the first interview. At that time he had not completed a formal conversion. He mentioned some

“questionable experiences” with a congregation that he was working with at first. This congregation had asked him to pay dues and had asked him to give a talk at their High Holiday services, and Henry seemed to feel that they were in some ways too liberal. He had started studying with another Reform rabbi, and he expressed some feeling that he did not know enough or wasn’t observant enough to formally convert yet. He acknowledged that these were his feelings, not the demand of the rabbi he was studying with. In regard to observance, Henry said that he was keeping kosher and observing Shabbat “incrementally.” He expects to be more observant over time.

Henry chose a Reform rabbi because he felt he could not truthfully tell a *beit din* that he would be completely observant and because he felt that the Reform congregations were more accepting of a gay man as a convert. He felt that converting was both a matter of joining a community and a spiritual change. He expected that the formality of conversion would include discussion with a *beit din*, a *hatafat dam brit* (as he was already circumcised), and a *mikvah*.

## **Howard**

Howard was a 39-year-old unattached gay man who had been raised in a fairly observant Byzantine Catholic family; he attended Catholic schools until the eleventh grade. Even when he went to a public school, he had no acquaintance with Jews. He did some genealogical research since his grandparents had emigrated from Europe and got some information that suggested that his ancestry may have been at least partially Jewish. He felt he was not connected to Catholicism since adolescence. He was somewhat vague about what made him seriously consider converting to Judaism; he alluded to some coincidences and “signs,” such as meeting someone who turned out to be Jewish.



Howard had started studying with a Reform congregation but after a time began studying with a more structured conversion program at a Conservative synagogue. When he was interviewed a second time, about nine months after the first interview, he had completed the formal conversion about five months earlier. He was a member of the synagogue and was continuing to study Hebrew, to take classes with an adult bar mitzvah group, and to attend a Jewish studies class.

Howard's formal conversion included meeting with a *beit din* and writing a number of essays. He remarked that he had written much more than the rabbis apparently expected. There was a *hatafat dam brit* and immersion in a *mikvah*. The group he was studying with had a sort of "naming ceremony" after their formal conversion. Howard was working on keeping kosher; he did not buy foods without a *hechsher*, and he was vegetarian. He noted that he had previously tended to put off tasks until the weekend so that he was adjusting to more Shabbat observance.

### **Irene**

Irene was a 33-year-old married woman who was raised as a Roman Catholic. She attended Sunday school weekly and had catechism classes in the evenings. She was baptized and had a first communion but not a confirmation (because she left high school a year early). She had school friends who were Jewish, but she did not consider conversion to Judaism until after her marriage to a Jewish man, which was a year before the first interview with her. She described trying to arrange an interfaith wedding but became discouraged when her Catholic priest did not respond to her inquiries about how to handle the issue. Although when she was first married, she told her husband that she was "pretty adamant" about maintaining her Catholic identity, gradually she began to feel that

keeping up preparations for Christmas and Easter was burdensome. Eventually, she came to feel that it would be difficult to raise children in a mixed-faith home. She and her husband took an introduction to Judaism class and she began to consider conversion.

Irene had been working with a Reform rabbi over the year between interviews. However, she said she was postponing the formal conversion because she wanted to study further. Her rabbi was giving her books to read, which took her considerable time (as she was also working on a PhD dissertation at the same time). They meet fairly regularly for intense discussions. She felt that the formal conversion – which would involve meeting with a *beit din* and going to a *mikvah* – would probably occur within the next year, although she was not in a rush. She knew of others in the class she took who formally converted immediately after the class, but she was aware that those women were in the process of marrying Jewish men.

Irene described conversion primarily in terms of its making a unified family for her and her eventual children. “I really wanted our family to share that common spiritual bond, but then also I wanted our children to be raised with a very strong foundation in some religion. Knowing that we had a split household, I wasn’t sure how effective I would’ve been as a parent to try to raise them both with Catholicism and Judaism, but really, to me, being Jewish is about sharing that connection with my husband.” She and her husband – and her in-laws – do not keep kosher, but regular attendance at Friday night services is important to her (even though there are sometimes conflicts with her work and study schedule). She is active in her synagogue with a team who visit people who are in hospitals or nursing homes.

Of all the participants, Irene probably endorsed the fewest conversion descriptions, only the second and third on the first survey, and she did not respond to that section of the second survey. On the first survey, she said she was uncertain whether it was important for a Jewish boy to be circumcised, and when asked about that response, she said, “For me, it would be important, but would I shun someone who was Jewish because they weren’t circumcised? No. I try to be extremely accepting of that kind of thing, but I understand why it is important, biblically, for Jewish men to be circumcised. I would expect in the future, if I had sons, for them to be circumcised, but I wouldn’t look down upon someone who chose not to.”

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer was a 25-year-old woman, unmarried at the time of both interviews. However, she considered herself to be in a “committed relationship” with an Israeli Jewish man; at the time of the second interview, they were engaged. At that time Jennifer had completed a formal conversion with a Conservative rabbi about two months earlier. The conversion included a *beit din* and *mikvah*. Afterwards, the rabbi mentioned her becoming Jewish during the next Shabbat service.

Jennifer was raised in a non-denominational Christian church. She had a fairly extensive religious education, attending Sunday school regularly, being baptized in adolescence when she considered herself “saved,” and participating in a number of church activities, including church choir, summer camps, and discussion group. Jennifer said that her mother, who is not very religious, was supportive of her conversion to Judaism. Her father, however, who is more religious, was initially unhappy with it but “over the years” has come to accept her decision.

Jennifer first became interested in Judaism when she wrote a paper on Judaism for a college sociology class. While still in college, she decided to pursue conversion, and she attended Shabbat and classes at the university's Hillel house. After college she moved to New York City because she wanted to experience the Jewish culture there and because it would be easier to walk to synagogue there.

Jennifer said that her friends are now surprised that she and her fiancé make Shabbat at home and that she attends Friday night and Saturday morning services. She is working on keeping kosher. She also said that she abstains from sexual relations during her menses but does not go to the *mikvah* every month.

Shortly after the second interview Jennifer and her fiancé were leaving for Hong Kong, where they would live for a couple of years in connection with his work. She said that as soon as she knew they would be moving, she inquired about the Jewish community in Hong Kong and was reassured that it was "flourishing," with synagogues and Jewish day schools there. She plans to continue studying, specifically mentioning learning the *brachot* so she can have an *aliyah* in her synagogue and hoping eventually to learn to read Torah.

### **Joyce**

Joyce was a 32-year-old unmarried woman who had been raised by a father whose family was Catholic and a mother who was Protestant Christian. She said she had attended Sunday school irregularly and at least once went to a church summer camp with her father. She was baptized when she was eighteen. She is estranged from her parents.

Joyce said she had little contact with Judaism until in her 20's she received a "revelation from God "that He was going to bless me with my soul mate and I was going

to be going to Israel.” Since that meant that she was meant to marry a Jewish spouse, she thought she should learn more about Judaism. At first she attended a Messianic Jewish congregation. However, she said that as she learned more, she realized that “there is a lot of paganism in Christianity and Catholicism.” In addition, she said she had been “persecuted” by pastors, and she did not want to be considered a Christian any more. Also she said she had received another revelation from God that she should go to Israel and be a rabbi.

Initially Joyce was attending a Conservative synagogue but not participating in a structured conversion program. She said she was reading books that the rabbi gave her. For Joyce conversion was very much a spiritual matter. “It’s more faith and having a relationship with God and knowing God for who He really is and that His word actually says get rid of all this dogma that I’ve been fed all my life.” She did not mention involvement in the community as important to her. Joyce was living in shared quarters and could keep kosher only as much as possible. She was trying to observe Shabbat – “very much so.”

On the first survey, Joyce indicated that she believed that Jesus is God and would “return as the Promised Messiah.” She indicated that this was indeed her belief; “I’ve experienced God on a one-on-one level. I’ve been through a lot of stuff in my life and God has interacted with me on a very close level. That’s one part of my beliefs that I can’t part with.” However, she added that she would never insist that anyone else who was Jewish would have to accept that belief.

About a year after the first interview, Joyce contacted me herself asking about doing a second survey and interview. At that time she had changed synagogues because she

felt the rabbi at the first synagogue was judgmental and had not provided her with a structured program toward conversion. At his suggestion she had taken an introduction to Judaism class and learned that others who were contemplating conversion were doing more structured study with their rabbis. She said that she prayed and that God found her another rabbi and a synagogue she felt comfortable with. She said she was living a Jewish life and trying to follow “all the 613 *mitzvot*,” keeping kosher and observing Shabbat restrictions regarding handling money, writing, or using electronics.

At the time of the second interview, Joyce was also just finishing a third semester of biblical Hebrew at a local community college. She said that learning to read Torah in Hebrew had convinced her that Christianity was a “made up religion” and that much of what she had been taught as a Christian was not based on the Torah as she was now more able to read it. She said she had “experienced God one on one” and that that experience now convinced her that God was “not triune.” She hoped to complete a BA in Jewish Studies and eventually rabbinical school in California. She still hoped to be able to go to Israel and help people there somehow.

### **Keith**

Keith was a 28-year-old married man who was raised in what seemed like a strict evangelical Christian family. Although he was baptized as an adolescent, he said that he never considered himself to be saved and that the religious teachings about the Trinity “never really made any sense to me.” He described himself as into “ego” as a younger man, the sort of “white dude” who hung out with “Mexicans and Black guys.” He had a tattoo of the “Ram of Satan” on his chest (eventually covered over with Hebrew letters).

Keith's initial contact with Judaism was reading a book by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin as an adolescent. After doing some research on his own, he contacted a rabbi. His decision to convert to Judaism apparently was accompanied by a change in attitude. "The way that they're telling you to act with people just made a difference in the way I felt, the way I started treating people; my attitude on life has just changed hugely just because of this idea that Jews put forth about compassion and kindness to other people and what you don't want done to you, you don't do to someone else." Keith's grandparents who are evangelical Christians were upset over his conversion. He said he "got some of the Jesus killer stuff."

At the time of the initial interview Keith was studying with a female Reform rabbi. He had completed a formal conversion at the time of the second interview about eleven months later. His conversion included a *beit din*, *hatafat dam brit*, and immersion in a lake as a *mikvah*. After the formal conversion, he was given an *aliyah* at the synagogue, and his rabbi announced that he had converted. His wife was also studying for conversion at the time of the second interview.

Although Keith converted with a Reform rabbi, he said that he is interested in Hasidic Jews, and he sometimes attends services at a Chabad synagogue. He understands that the rabbi there considers him to be a "righteous gentile." At the time of the second interview Keith said that he was keeping kosher by eating only vegetables, fish, and dairy since dividing the kitchen dishes would be difficult for his wife. He and his wife light candles for Shabbat, and Keith attends services as often as he can. He said that if he cannot go to services, he says prayers at home. He wears *tzizit* and covers his head. He said

that he and his wife were starting to observe the laws of family purity. He was taking a beginning Hebrew class at the time of the second interview.

### **Michelle**

Michelle was a 27-year-old woman who was interviewed the first time about two weeks after she had started talking with a Conservative rabbi about converting. Her parents had been active in a Methodist church when she was a young child, but within a few years the family had moved, and Michelle said that they had never found a congregation they were comfortable with again, so her religious education ended before she finished elementary school. She was baptized but never felt that “We are all inherently needing to be saved since birth.” She felt that informing her parents of her decision to convert would be problematic, not because they would oppose her decision but because she might not be “true to myself” since she was in a relationship with a Jewish man.

Michelle recalled that when she was a child, her family’s church held a *seder* to celebrate Passover, and she remembered asking her mother why – if Jesus was Jewish – they were not. She first learned about Judaism when she took college courses that touched on the subject. Later a friend she had been close with since high school converted to Judaism, and Michelle discovered that “The more I learned the more I was finding that all of this, all of the things that I had myself decided I believed, somebody else had. There was a whole culture and religion about the same things.”

At the time she was in a relationship with a Jewish man and possibly “headed for” engagement. Although she said that if they did marry, she would need to convert in order for the marriage to be successful, she did not feel “obligated.” “I never once felt pressured to learn; everything that I did was on my own. I guess it’s just one of those things



where you discover certain things and you want to keep learning more.” At the time of the second interview, about a year later, she did not mention being in a committed relationship.

At the time of the second interview, Michelle had formally converted about four months earlier. She chose a Conservative conversion. She had explored Reform Judaism but found that “It just didn’t feel right. It seemed to me that what makes somebody Jewish and this is part of what you’re supposed to do, part of the covenant, that you should probably do them. Her conversion included writing essays, meeting with a *beit din*, and immersion in a *mikvah*. Afterwards, she said she was given an *aliyah* in the synagogue, but there was no other celebration.

Michelle said that keeping kosher was difficult for her but that it was “One of those things for me that will probably grow more into being, as far as kosher goes, probably more getting there is a step by step process.” She attended synagogue Shabbat services regularly but said that her level of observance “isn’t as much as I had anticipated that it would be at this point.”

### **Nancy**

Nancy was a 32-year-old married woman who was raised Roman Catholic. Her own mother had converted from the Lutheran church in order to marry her father. Nancy attended weekly catechism classes through confirmation in adolescence. When she met her Jewish husband, she was still a practicing Catholic. Her husband was not religious, and the rabbi (a family friend) who officiated at their marriage suggested they attend a group for interfaith families. After their daughter was born, they decided that “It just

made more sense for me to support Judaism” for the children’s sake. Nancy’s family is supportive of her decision.

Nancy and her husband are members of a “very liberal Reform synagogue” that includes other interfaith families. She felt that they were living as a Jewish family and noted that her daughter refers to her as Jewish. When she was first interviewed, she was planning to proceed with formal conversion in about five months. However, when she was interviewed a second time, about fourteen months later, she said that she had decided to postpone the formal conversion because about six weeks after the first interview she had become severely depressed. She did not think that the depression was related to the conversion as she had been somewhat depressed ever since the birth of her daughter about two years earlier.

Nancy expected that she would formally convert in a short time after the second interview. She expected that the conversion would include her writing essays, meeting with a *beit din*, and immersion in a *mikvah*. She planned to take her daughter with her to the *mikvah* and to continue with her daughter’s Jewish education. She was aware that not all Jewish communities would recognize her daughter as Jewish by patrilineal descent but felt this would only be a problem if her daughter wanted to marry in Israel.

Nancy said that conversion was both a spiritual change and a process of joining a community. However, in her interviews, she emphasized only the community aspect of conversion. When she first filled out the survey, she said she agreed with statements that God existed as a Trinity, that Jesus is God, and that Jesus will return as the messiah. However, on the second survey, she endorsed none of those statements. However, she endorsed few conversion descriptions.

Nancy did not expect to keep kosher and her Shabbat observance seemed limited to lighting candles and “Friday evening Shabbat things that are family friendly and very well attended.” She participated in a Torah study group for mothers, and said that she would say the *shema* with her daughter as she tucked her into bed.

### **Paula**

Paula was a 51-year-old woman who has been married to a Jewish man for about sixteen years. She described him as initially having little or no connection with Judaism as a religion, but he became more religious as he studied along with her toward her conversion to Judaism. Paula was raised in Southeast Asia in a Buddhist culture. She said that she learned very little about Buddhism as a religion and that she had some education in Christianity because she attended a missionary school and went to Sunday school classes for a while. None of her siblings are affiliated with any religious tradition, and Paula said that they were “sort of neutral” about her conversion.

Paula had no contact with Judaism until she moved to the United States about twenty years ago. She learned some about Judaism from her friends and from her husband and said that she had been contemplating conversion for about five years before she contacted a rabbi. As she learned more, she felt that “My soul is screaming for religion” and she could not understand why her husband was not attracted to being a practicing Jew.

Paula chose a Conservative rabbi and congregation largely because she enjoyed the ritual and liturgy. She emphasized her decision to convert as a religious change. “I think that this is something that I chose wholeheartedly, and I chose it because it’s something that I think will fulfill me spiritually.” At the time of her second interview, howev-

er, she spoke more about the role of the congregation as a community. She and her husband were attending services regularly and were going to friends' homes for Shabbat dinners.

At the time of the second interview, about fourteen months later, Paula admitted that she had postponed her formal conversion. She was taking additional classes in Hebrew and was working on the essays for her meeting with a *beit din*. She said that friends kept telling her that she was using learning Hebrew as an excuse, but she also had fairly firm plans to do a formal conversion about three or four months later. However, she also said that as she had been learning more, she was realizing that conversion to Judaism was not a simple process. "It's not conversion as in other religions. It isn't. Judaism is totally different, and learning about it makes me realize, yes, it is indeed special because what it asks of you. What Judaism asks of you is totally unlike any other religion."

At the time of the second interview, Paula said that she and her husband were attending Shabbat services regularly. They were keeping kosher to some degree. She belonged to a Torah study group that met after Shabbat morning services. She did not plan to observe laws of family purity although she noted that she might someday become Orthodox.

### **Robert**

Robert was a 28-year-old man who was engaged to his college girlfriend at the time of the first interview and married her during the year between interviews. Robert was raised in a military family who attended the Protestant service on the military base because they weren't Catholic. He had some irregular Sunday school religious education and went through a Lutheran catechism and confirmation preparation. He said that going

to church was not for him a really religious experience. It was “just what we did,” and he stopped attending services when he went to college.

Robert met his wife during his junior year in college. She was the first Jewish person he got to know. She told him that it would be important to her to marry only someone who was Jewish. Nevertheless, Robert felt that her family “fell in love” with him and over the four or five years that they have been together, the insistence that he be Jewish has diminished. He took an introduction to Judaism class in the first few years that they dated and had been studying with a rabbi for several months before the first interview.

About four months after the first interview, Robert went through a formal conversion. He said he wrote at least one essay for a *beit din* (and mentioned that his female rabbi was a member of the local *beit din*). He was not sure at the first or second interview whether she was affiliated with a Reform or Conservative congregation. The conversion also involved a *hatafat dam brit* (“meeting with a *mohel* with a needle” and saying the *shema*) and a *mikvah*.

Judaism was primarily a matter of finding a community for Robert at the time of the first interview. He said he was not very spiritual and liked that Judaism did not emphasize spirituality. He looked forward to the structure of rituals eventually when they had children. Robert and his wife are not especially observant. They “pick and choose” what aspects of keeping kosher they prefer, and he said that he felt that kosher was more a matter of “paying attention to what you’re eating and being grateful to have it to eat at all.” They light candles for Shabbat, but they feel they cannot be more observant because his wife has to do school work over the weekend. They observe “major holidays.” They

are not currently attending services regularly because the congregation his rabbi was affiliated with is mostly older people; the rabbi suggested they find another congregation they might feel more comfortable with but so far they have not sought one out.

### **Thomas**

Thomas was a 47-year-old gay man, living in a committed relationship with a male partner and their daughter. Although Thomas had been raised in the Lutheran church, attending Sunday school and confirmation class into high school, his family presented an interesting story. Thomas' paternal grandmother was born in the United States after her grandparents immigrated from Puerto Rico; the family traced its roots to Portugal. She regularly lit candles on Friday nights "for luck" and refrained from eating shellfish or mixing meat and dairy in the same meal. She told Thomas and his brother that they were "Jewish but that it was a secret." "She would get the grandchildren together and she would tell us that it was important for us to remember that we were of God's chosen people, but that it was a secret and we couldn't tell anybody." Thomas' father always reminded him after Sunday services that "Christ was a Jew. They're trying to whitewash that out of the story . . . but don't forget that he was a Jew." When Thomas was about sixteen, his father told the two boys that they would no longer be celebrating Christmas since they were old enough not to need presents. In graduate school, Thomas was told by a professor that his family name was one often given to Portuguese Jews who were forced to convert in the fifteenth century.

Thomas became acquainted with Jews through a Jewish high school friend. In graduate school he felt "the need for some type of spirituality" and tried joining a local

Metropolitan Community Church, where he also began to make Jewish friends. The impetus to convert, however, came about after he met his current partner, who is Jewish.

Thomas was in the process of taking classes at the time of the first interview and when interviewed about a year later was preparing his essay for the *beit din*. He expected to go to a *mikvah* and was uncertain whether a *hatafat dam brit* would be required by his Reform rabbi. He had joined the synagogue at the time of the second interview and was editor of the synagogue newsletter. He was working on a “*mitzvah* project” that his rabbi required of converts; he was planning to become a contact person with other *b’nei anousim* (descendants of Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity). He knew that after the formal conversion he would receive a note of congratulations in the synagogue newsletter and some recognition at the next Shabbat service.

At the time of the second interview, Thomas identified as both a convert and as someone who was returning to his roots as a descendant of Jews. He felt that this dual identity had caused some problems, that additional obstacles were placed on his becoming fully recognized as Jewish. Being Jewish was for Thomas both a spiritual matter and a process of joining the Jewish community. He described being overwhelmed by “spiritual part of Judaism, the more and more I feel at home with my own personal journey. The beauty of the services on Yom Kippur . . . I was just absolutely blown away by the beauty of the words and the prayers. It was just stunningly beautiful to me.” He also described a sense of belonging when he saw other Hanukhah menorahs in windows in his neighborhood.

As Reform Jews, Thomas and his partner were not planning on keeping kosher, except for Passover. Thomas had introduced Friday night Shabbat observance – lighting

candles, saying blessings, and having friends over for Shabbat dinner. He was teaching his daughter to say the blessings over food in Hebrew.

### **Yvonne**

Yvonne was a 21-year-old, unmarried college student who had been raised in a fairly irreligious family. Her family was poor, so her father would take them to church after church in search of charity. A grandmother was a staunch Lutheran who insisted that the children go through confirmation. Yvonne felt that the others in her confirmation class were not taking the matter seriously, but by the time she was in early adolescence, she had decided she was not Christian. A family friend was married to a Jewish woman, and Yvonne was attracted to Jewish rituals in their home. “I was always really fascinated by their rituals and their culture, and I can remember when I was really young, thinking, Why can’t we be Jewish? I want to be Jewish too.”

Yvonne did some exploration of Judaism and Islam and read on her own. She decided on conversion to Judaism about two years before the first interview and had been working with a Conservative rabbi. She had affiliated with the Hillel organization on her college campus. She formally converted about six months after the first interview and had been Jewish for about six months when she was interviewed a second time. Her family was “religiously indifferent” and apparently were uninvolved with her conversion ceremony. She wrote an essay for a *beit din* and was immersed in a *mikvah*. She seemed to get a good deal of support from the group with whom she had been studying and who all went to the *mikvah* at the same time.

Yvonne said that she had originally thought of conversion to Judaism as an individual spiritual journey. However as she studied and read, she came to realize that be-



longing to a Jewish community was also very important. “At the beginning I looked it as a very solitary religious thing. I wasn’t really interested in finding a synagogue when I was done. I was more interested in just doing this for my own spiritual benefit.” “I’ve really begun to realize how important it is to be a member of the Jewish community and not just Jewish for the sake of being Jewish, but being a member of a synagogue, and a member of the Jewish community, and I’ve joined my school’s Hillel, and that’s been great.”

Since Yvonne was still a college student, living on limited finances, and sharing cooking and living quarters with other students, she said it was difficult for her to keep kosher. She also felt that her Shabbat observance was not as developed as she would want; she refrained from working at her part-time job on Saturday but usually had to do school work. She often went to Shabbat dinner with a family who had befriended her. She was working on developing a regular prayer routine and was reading Maurice Lamm’s book *To Pray as a Jew* for that purpose. She had been encouraged to go on a Birthright trip to Israel and described Israel as her “spiritual home.”

### **Zoe**

Zoe was a 27-year-old unmarried woman who was involved in conversion classes with a Reform synagogue when she was first interviewed. When interviewed a second time about ten months later, however, she had pretty much dropped out of the conversion process.

Zoe had been raised in a family with little connection to religion. Her mother was Lutheran but not practicing. After her parents divorced when she was about 8 or 9 years old, her father became interested in Tibetan Buddhism. Zoe felt that his life was changed

for the better so she read a great deal and began practicing some chanting. She became more involved in Buddhism and met a number of Jewish friends who were practicing Buddhism. However, when they reached the point of taking vows and were encouraging her to consider taking vows, she backed down.

However, Zoe had found their descriptions of Judaism interesting, and she began reading about Judaism. When she was first interested she had just contacted a Reform rabbi and had started a series of classes leading toward conversion. Several things happened that led to her dropping out. First, a Jewish boyfriend she was dating turned out to be uninterested in her being religious and broke off the relationship. Secondly she felt that the Reform rabbi was critical of her, to the point of making her cry after a meeting. Thirdly, she felt she had no support from a religious community. Zoe said at the first interview that her motivation for conversion was “spirituality, foremost” because she had no experience of living with a religious community. However, the others in the classes she was taking were mostly either Jews who were interested in learning more about Judaism or people who were planning to marry a Jewish spouse. Zoe felt that she had been trying to practice rituals, such as lighting Shabbat candles, and saying prayers that she had only read about and that she did not get real help with doing them or understanding the prayers. She tried going for Shabbat dinners at a “Moishe House,” but again felt like an outsider because most of the others there were young Jews rather than other potential converts.

At the time of the second interview Zoe was unsure whether she would return to studying for conversion. If she met another potential partner who was Jewish, she might convert, but she would not consider restricting her dating to Jewish men.

## Participants who were interviewed only once

### Aaron

Aaron was a 42-year-old unmarried man who was born in Cuba, where he was “ethnically” Roman Catholic. He was baptized in the Catholic church but not confirmed. When he was about 13 years old, influenced by neighbors, he converted to the Latter Day Saints. As a member of the LDS church, he served a mission, married, and was active in the church ministry.

Aaron described himself as someone who was “born to believe.” He read books about religions and watched religious programming on television since childhood. In college he majored in religious studies and pursued a PhD in Hebrew Bible (without completing the dissertation). Although he described conversion to Judaism as “like coming home,” it was not until his marriage ended that he felt he was free to pursue the possibility. Initially, in fact, he said he had not really thought that Judaism was a religion that one could convert to.

When interviewed, Aaron was pursuing conversion with the rabbi of a congregation that he described as “Conserva-dox.” His rabbi encouraged him to live as a Jew, attending services and participating in the community, for a year, when the conversion would be a formality. He said he felt pulled to be “as observant as possible.”

Aaron’s family heritage was Hispanic, and he speculated that he had Jewish ancestry. “At a kind of visceral level, I feel like – and I don’t want to sound too mystical – but I feel like I’m coming home.”

## Barbara

Barbara, who did not give her age, was engaged to a Jewish man when she was interviewed. She had been raised by a Roman Catholic mother and a father who was Lutheran but “not religiously involved.” Barbara had attended afternoon religion classes and participated in all the sacraments – first communion, confession, and confirmation – through adolescence. However, she described herself as a “very questioning teenager” who “didn’t feel like Catholicism worked well for me so I looked around.”

She had little exposure to Jews since she grew up in a sparsely populated state. She learned some from a friend of her mother’s but was prompted to consider conversion when she started dating a Jewish man. Her partner was raised in a Conservative Jewish family; his mother had converted to Judaism herself. When Barbara was interviewed, she said that she expected that she and her partner would be engaged and would marry. She was not sure whether she would continue with the conversion if they did not stay together, but she was sure that they would marry no matter what she did about the conversion. They do plan to raise children as Jewish.

Barbara had taken an introduction to Judaism class at a Reform congregation and started a year-long conversion program there. However, she felt as though she did not get a lot from it, so she joined a group studying for conversion at a Conservative synagogue and was half-way through it when she was interviewed. The program she was working with included classes on the Jewish ritual cycle, Jewish heritage, and Hebrew language. The group attended services together and participated in Shabbat dinners together. Barbara expected that the conversion would involve meeting with all of the rabbis who would be the *beit din* and immersion in a *mikvah*.

Although Barbara felt it would be “a lot to undertake, especially at first,” she was planning to keep kosher. She and her partner were planning to host a Passover *seder* for which they would kosher their kitchen. Shabbat observance included lighting candles, attending services (which she did drive to), not writing or carrying money or making purchases. Barbara felt that becoming Jewish was primarily a process of joining a community. “I really found that as I developed and became close to my Jewish community, it was about deed, it was about action and community and being part of something and that has sort of had a very easy flow for me, and I've adapted quite easily to that.” She seemed uncertain about the religious aspects of being Jewish but appreciated that her “my struggle with God is reflected strongly in Jewish tradition and in the writings and in the Torah and I just see a lot of room for the expression of the kind of soul that I have.”

### **Charles**

Charles was a 51-year-old man, married to a non-Jewish wife (who was not converting), with a daughter living with them. He completed only the first survey and one interview and did not respond to requests for follow-up. He was raised as a Roman Catholic; he described his mother as more religious than his father. He attended a Catholic university.

Charles described his first impulse toward conversion to Judaism as occurring when he was in school and heard that Anne Frank’s father was alive; he had an inexplicable wish to meet him. Later he said he felt that “God was after me,” although he was unsure what God wanted him to do. He concluded that God demands that “You have to treat the Jews well because God’s watching. So even if I don’t become a Jew, I have to

follow the commandment, I have to follow the Sabbath. I have to follow God's laws. I have to do it, so it's like if I was Christian I'd still live like a Jew."

Charles' wife was not converting, and Charles seemed to describe her as ambivalent about his converting. She bought him a Shabbat tablecloth, but Charles added that "I think she's more uncomfortable with the change with me because when I was trying to lose weight, and I did, and I was getting in good shape, going to gym, she was kind of criticizing me."

Charles described becoming Jewish as entirely a religious matter; he did not mention any connection with other Jews, membership in a synagogue, or even that he was working with a specific rabbi. He was even uncertain whether he was going to convert with a Conservative or an Orthodox rabbi. He described himself as planning to be very observant. "Without a doubt! I mean either you go all the way or you don't. I don't understand how can some Jews say, I'll do this but I won't do that? It's like you've got to go all the way. So I would keep kosher, I would follow the commandments." After a formal conversion, he wanted to persuade his wife to go to Israel "for at least six months."

### **Edith**

Edith was a 29-year-old unmarried woman. Her parents were divorced; although her father's Italian family was definitely Catholic, her mother was "cynical" toward religion, and Edith did not have any formal religious education, first communion, or confirmation in the Catholic church. In her late teens or early 20's she said she was dealing with some losses in the family and some degree of depression and began a "spiritual journey." A couple of years before this interview, she dated a Jewish man. She de-

scribed him as secular, but his mother was Orthodox, and Edith was exposed then to some Jewish practices. Edith said she was not close with her mother, whose response to her conversion plans was “Whatever makes you happy.” She expected her father, coming from a religious Italian family, to have problems with her conversion, but she said he seemed to be aware of the spiritual journey she had gone through and was supportive.

At the time of the interview, Edith was preparing for a Conservative conversion, planned in about four months. However, she felt that she would want to be more involved in daily religious practices, and she was also considering an Orthodox (or Modern Orthodox) conversion. She expected to be Shabbat observant and admitted that keeping kosher would be difficult for her since – having been raised Italian – she enjoyed shellfish. In describing her “spiritual journey” Edith emphasized the religious aspect of her decision to convert to Judaism. However, she also felt that the community aspect was important; she found other Jews to be in many ways a replacement for her family.

### **Ethan**

Ethan was a 60-year-old man who had been raised nominally as a Protestant Christian. He recalled being baptized when he was about three years old, but after his parents divorced when he was seven, his mother did not continue with any religious involvement. When he was interviewed, Ethan had been married to a Jewish woman for 24 years, although they were currently separated. Ethan was hopeful that with marriage counseling they would reconcile.

Ethan and his wife had been members of a Reform congregation for many years. They have two children, both young adults now. Their son had gone through a *bar mitz-*

*vah*, but their daughter chose to have a “Sweet 16” party instead. The daughter, who had chosen to minor in Jewish studies in college, was unsure of her Hebrew name.

Although Ethan and his wife raised their children as Jewish, Ethan said that he had postponed any decision about conversion out of respect to his mother. He did not feel free to make the decision until she had died (at 100 years old). Even then he considered the choice for several years. When he was interviewed, it seemed almost as though Ethan’s decision to convert also involved his hope that he and his wife would reconcile. He was studying with the Reform rabbi of the congregation they belonged to, and he hoped that after his conversion and their reconciliation, they would observe Shabbat, holidays, and go to services.

Throughout the interview Ethan emphasized the spiritual aspect of conversion. He said he felt like “I have been in the desert for 40 years without that connection, with my God. In the present situation, I’m separated from my wife. I kind of feel a void.”

### **Frank**

Frank was a 23-year-old man who had been raised by a non-practicing Catholic mother; he had virtually no childhood religious education; he was not even sure that he had been baptized. Although two of his mother’s siblings had married Jewish spouses, they were also non-practicing, so Frank’s exposure to Judaism began when he started dating a Jewish girlfriend in college. She had been raised in Conservative family and was able to teach him much about Judaism. As he learned from her and from attending Jewish religious events, Frank “found myself identifying with, believing, and wanting to be a part of this. I knew this is what I wanted to be a part of because this is how I felt.” How-



ever, as Frank began to study for conversion, she broke off the relationship. Frank felt that she really did not want to marry someone who was Jewish.

When he was interviewed, Frank was studying for conversion with a Conservative rabbi. He felt that he wanted more than what the Reform movement would provide. “I want to convert with a congregation and a movement of Judaism that is closest to my base where I feel comfortable and where I want to be spiritually and communally.”

When he was interviewed, Frank was already becoming as observant as he could while living with non-Jewish roommates. He ate only in kosher restaurants or only vegetarian. He attended Shabbat services regularly (although he was taking a college class that met late on Friday afternoons). For Frank, becoming Jewish was both a spiritual matter and a process of joining a community, a “balance of both, a very spiritual connection and becoming a part of the people of Israel, part of the Jewish community locally and globally and the historical community as well.” He felt that he had a Jewish soul. “When I found Judaism, it was like I was returning. I had this feeling my whole life, but I didn’t understand why I wasn’t connecting.” “This is what I believe, I just never knew about this before. This is what I’m supposed to be.”

### **Laura**

Laura was a 31-year-old woman who was living with a Jewish man when she was interviewed. When she was a child, her father was in the Foreign Service, so she grew up in Africa, surrounded by a Muslim culture. When she was about twelve years old, her family returned to the United States and joined the Episcopal church. Laura was baptized and confirmed in that church. She had no contact with Jews until high school when a she

had a close female friend who was Jewish but rather secular. It was not until college that she met religious Jews.

Laura said that the impetus for her considering conversion was a sense that in the political climate of Obama's run for the presidency, she saw Christianity being used "to reject, to judge, to alienate, and to ostracize." She started dating her Jewish male partner and observed that some conservative Christian friends abandoned them because he was not Christian. Laura's family is supportive of her decision to convert. However, her partner's family have problems with her conversion. Her partner's grandmother's family "sat *shiva*" when the grandmother married a non-Jew, and he grew up in a neighborhood where he encountered considerable anti-semitism. Laura described him as secular and suspicious of organized religion.

Laura chose to study with a Conservative rabbi; she said she was attracted to the ritual in Conservative services, which she missed in Reform services. At the time of her interview she had been studying with a Conservative rabbi for over a year. She was struggling with issues that centered around difficulties with adopting a Jewish identity while maintaining her sense of herself and her connection to her family. "What I've realized in the last three or four months is that really what that meant was that I needed to come to terms with what does it mean to be a Jew without giving up who I am and what my heritage is and what my family is." She felt that her parents would want to be included in her conversion but would have difficulty with a religious service in Hebrew. She felt that adopting a Hebrew name as "*bat Avraham v'Sara*" would mean in some way alienating her parents. "Those aren't my parents' names. I have parents. They have names. Just because I'm converting doesn't mean I'm losing my parents." She also described in

e-mail messages wanting to continue to celebrate Christmas and holidays with her parents and extended family, as these were traditions that meant a lot to her and which she did not feel she wanted to give up.

Laura and her partner had decided not to keep kosher since they felt that doing so would create barriers and would exclude family and friends from being able to eat with them. She was also disturbed that the different “levels” of kosher that others kept would create a sort of “paranoia,” as she felt there would always be questions about who was kosher enough for whom. Laura did observe some Shabbat restrictions; she drove to synagogue because she lived too far away, but she would not use her computer. She was unsure whether she felt it was appropriate to go to a coffee shop, buy a coffee, and read there on Shabbat.

Although Laura endorsed several of the conversion experience descriptions, she objected to the idea of having a “Jewish soul.” She did not want to think of herself as someone who was “born earmarked to be Jewish” but as herself, someone who could “create a Jewish soul” for herself.

Laura did not respond to repeated requests for a follow-up interview, and I wonder if she was unable to resolve her identity issues.

### **Olivia**

Olivia was a woman who said that she was in her 60’s. She was raised as a Roman Catholic and had an extensive religious education since she attended a private parochial school through high school. She is currently married (apparently her second marriage) to a man she describes as a lapsed Episcopalian. He would convert to Judaism as well, but he has Parkinson’s disease and would not have the energy to attend classes with

her. She has two daughters, both of whom have left the Catholic church; they are supportive of her conversion.

Olivia said that she had been familiar with Jews since childhood since many of her father's business colleagues were Jewish. She also suspects that there may have been a Jewish ancestor on her father's side of the family. She thought about converting to Judaism for many years, and when interviewed, she said that she "should have done it a long time ago, and I feel remorse for not having done it," and that she had "been thinking about it for a long time. I just belong there. I know it's very much of a cliché, but I feel I belong there."

When interviewed the first time, Olivia had been attending a Conservative synagogue for some time and felt very welcomed there. For her converting was both a matter of making her religious identity formal and joining a community. She had chosen a Conservative congregation and rabbi over Reform because she enjoyed the liturgy and ritual. She expected that her conversion would involve writing essays, being questioned by a *beit din*, and immersion in a *mikvah*. She expected that she would keep kosher as best as she could, even though she did not think she could kosher her kitchen completely. She was already attending Friday and Saturday Shabbat services regularly. She expected to formally join the synagogue and "see where I can be of service. Some of the members are older, they need help. I'm close by. Certainly there's something I can do." She enjoyed regular daily prayer and expected that she would certainly continue studying with her rabbi even after her conversion.

When Olivia filled out the second survey a year later, she indicated that she had completed her formal conversion.

## Sheila

Sheila was a 50-year-old woman who had converted about a month before the interview. She was raised in a mixed religious setting. Her mother was “into New Age stuff and spiritualism,” and her father was not religious. She attended a Catholic parochial school (for reasons of convenience) until sixth grade. In public school she had several Mormon friends and converted to Mormonism, married, and had three children. In college she majored in religious studies and history. In her mid-30’s she left the marriage and the Mormon church. After that she tried several churches, eventually ending up in a “little Vatican II” Catholic parish. She married her current husband, who is a life-long Catholic, but she felt she could not agree with the Catholic church’s views on gays and women. She started reading books on Judaism, and after reading a book critical of the Catholic church’s antipathy toward Judaism, she felt she could no longer consider herself to be Christian.

Sheila attended a “Taste of Judaism” course, followed by an introduction to Judaism course. She then took a Hebrew course at the Hillel at the university where her husband teaches. She looked for a congregation and began attending services at a Reform congregation. Her conversion included writing essays, a *beit din*, and *mikvah*.

Sheila’s family’s reaction to her conversion is quite mixed. Her daughters are “open-minded” and came to a welcoming ceremony held the day after her formal conversion. Their father is “a very fanatical Mormon.” Her current husband, who was willing to attend an Episcopal church with Sheila while she was searching, remains a “life-long Catholic.” Some of his children are now evangelical Christians; Sheila described one of

his sons as a “super-fundamentalist.” They are concerned about these children’s reaction and have not told them yet that she converted.

For Sheila, becoming Jewish is both a spiritual matter and a matter of joining the Jewish community. She said that she “felt a connection to the Jewish people all my life” and that “this recent path has been the religious, spiritual, learning more about that and realizing that the way I look at religion and the wrestling with God. It was religious things.” She told her *beit din* that “Even if I were to lose my faith in god, I would still consider myself Jewish.”

Shabbat observance and keeping kosher are difficult for Sheila as she is living in a mixed marriage. However, she said her husband participates in Shabbat dinners with her. She compared keeping kosher to the problems she had dealing with preparing meals when one of the daughters had a serious celiac disorder (gluten intolerance) and had to have foods that were uncontaminated, even prepared in pans that had been scoured twice.

The transcription of Sheila’s interview was cut off before the end. I distinctly recall asking her why, since she was married to a man who was not going to convert and all of her children were grown, it was important to her to convert. She replied, simply, “I want to be a Jew.”

### **Vivian**

Vivian was a 29 year-old woman who was raised by a Presbyterian mother and a father who was active as an Episopalian clergy. She attended Sunday school at both churches. She then attended a Catholic parochial high school, where as a Protestant student her religion classes were more of an introduction to world religions. In college she though seriously of joining the Presbyterian clergy, but later she began to question key

tenets of Christian theology. Discussions with a Jewish woman who shared a house with Vivian and several other roommates also encouraged Vivian's questioning of her own beliefs.

In addition, Vivian said she was encouraged to explore Judaism by the man she married shortly after I interviewed her. He is not Jewish, and although he attended some of the classes that Vivian did, he is not considering conversion at this time. When she was interviewed, Vivian was completing a year of attending services at a Reform congregation; she chose a Reform rabbi for conversion because she felt Reform Judaism would be more accepting of her as a woman married to a non-Jewish husband. She expected that her conversion would include a *mikvah* and that she would be "blessed in front of the congregation" at the next Friday evening service.

Vivian's family has come to accept her conversion to Judaism. She said her parents, who are no longer religious, were upset that she and her fiancé chose not to have a religious wedding ceremony. Her father didn't speak to her for three or four months over that issue. However, they are now more supportive. She does have a few "born-again" Christian relatives and waited until she was quite certain of her decision before informing them.

Conversion, for Vivian, began as a primarily spiritual change. However, she felt that over the year of attending services, she came to appreciate how important joining the Jewish people was. "When I originally approached it, I was almost approaching from a Christian perspective, in that I loved the religious and spiritual aspect of it, but I didn't quite understand that I would be joining a Jewish people. I didn't quite understand how

community-oriented Jewish people are.” As a psychologist, she understands the benefits of having “some sense of meaning and community and connection with other people.”

Vivian had joined her synagogue. She observes some limits on Shabbat, primarily in not checking e-mail messages and not turning on electronics. For her the purpose of Shabbat is “turning inward . . . so that I can be a better spiritual person.” She avoids shellfish and pork but finds separating milk and meat dishes difficult. In addition, she has found the rules of kashrut confusing and said she does not get good answers to questions about how to do it.

### **Wanda**

Wanda was a 29-year-old woman, married to a Jewish man. She had decided on conversion before she met him; in fact, part of the process of her early exploration of Judaism was to start dating Jewish men. Wanda grew up in northern Mexico and Texas. She said that her mother’s family were thought to have been Jewish and that all had converted to Catholicism when they immigrated to Mexico in the late 1800’s. Although her father remained Catholic, her mother joined an evangelical Christian church when Wanda was young. When Wanda was ten years old, her mother immigrated to the US and married a Jewish man. Nevertheless, Wanda described her early religious education as limited.

When Wanda went to college, she started to seriously question whether she could identify as Christian. She attended a university with a large number of Jewish students and took classes on Judaism. She read extensively and taught herself to read Hebrew. She started attending a synagogue and observing Shabbat at home. Wanda had some problems finding a rabbi with whom to convert, partly because rabbis at the synagogue



she attended left the synagogue. She eventually studied with a Conservative rabbi, and when she was interviewed, she said she was planning to formally convert in about six months.

Wanda married a Jewish man, although she asserted that she would have converted even if they were not married. When she was interviewed, she said they were observing Shabbat by lighting candles and having a Shabbat dinner together. She was concerned that not being observant would be hypocritical. She attended synagogue services “pretty regularly” and mentioned that she tries to dress “conservatively.”

Wanda said that the initial impetus for converting to Judaism was based in realizing that her own beliefs were compatible with Judaism. She felt, however, that one could share Jewish beliefs without converting and that the aspect of joining a religious community was also very important for her. “I could live a spiritual life and be content with that. For me it was more that I believed that it’s a very important to have a community and to have a religious community that’s kind of helping you out with those moral dilemmas but that spiritual part of life, but that’s the community itself.”

### **Participant who was interviewed once, after completing a second survey**

#### **Gladys**

Gladys was a 26-year-old woman who had responded to the first survey but was not interviewed until after she had completed the second survey. When she was interviewed she had been waiting for a “*mikvah* date” in one or two months. Gladys had been raised by Roman Catholic parents; she described them as “liberal in their interpretation” of Catholic doctrine. She had a thorough Catholic religious education, attending Catholic schools from kindergarten through college, and she “had all the sacraments,” including

confirmation. Nevertheless, she said that she had not believed in Jesus since early adolescence.

Gladys became acquainted with Judaism initially when she took world religion classes in college and when she worked with Jewish clients as a home health aide. Then she began dating a Jewish boyfriend, and they discussed the possibility of marriage and how they would raise children. She started going to services and celebrating Jewish holidays and found “that I really liked Judaism.” Therefore she began studying for conversion to “see if it was something that fit me.” She had studied with a Conservative rabbi and was attending a Conservative congregation. However, she said she might consider pursuing an Orthodox conversion. She expected to meet with a *beit din* and to go to a *mikvah*. The group she was studying with expected to have a “naming ceremony” after those formalities. She had already joined the synagogue choir and a social justice group in the congregation.

When Gladys was interviewed, she said she was unsure about her relationship with her boyfriend, who had been raised in an Orthodox family but was “not kosher now.” She mentioned briefly that his mother had problems with her being a convert. Even if they did not marry, she was certain that she would convert. Asked if she had encountered any other discrimination for being a convert, Gladys recalled attending a Shabbat afternoon meal at the synagogue when a woman pointed out that another woman in the congregation was “not really Jewish” because she was converting.

Gladys described herself as “moving toward being kosher” and “taking it slowly.” She attended services on Friday and Saturday and said she was “lenient” about some Shabbat observance, such as using electricity. Gladys described sometimes feeling that

she “couldn’t ever really be a part of the community because I wasn’t born Jewish.” However, she also described herself as feeling “connected to God through Judaism.” The spiritual aspect of being Jewish was important to her. She recalled finding herself saying Jewish prayers while she was sitting with her dying grandmother in a hospice. She felt that the classes she was taking for conversion were lacking because they emphasized “rules and history” over spirituality and the “emotional component,” and she had mentioned this problem to her rabbi.

## Chapter 6

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

The participants in the interviews and surveys that are the basis of this research comprise a diverse group. They may not be fully representative of all of those who seek to convert to Judaism since the sample is biased in a few ways that make it impossible to construct a full typology of potential converts. Nevertheless the very diversity in this sample suggests that converts to Judaism come with a range of motivations and in a variety of ways.

The first major bias is geographic. Many of the participants were recruited with the help of the Sandra Caplan Community Bet Din of Southern California and are from the West Coast, ranging from southern California to Washington state. Others come from the Chicago area, Toronto, Oklahoma, and New York City, none of which locales are as well represented as the west coast. Secondly, there is a bias toward liberal Judaism; all of the participants, with one exception (a woman who had gone through a Conservative conversion and was in the process of obtaining an Orthodox conversion in order to move to Israel with her husband), are associated with Reform or Conservative rabbis and congregations, and there is a great deal of variation in their commitment to Jewish observances, such as keeping kosher or observing Shabbat restrictions. Those seeking Orthodox conversions may differ significantly from this group since those would likely be people who are willing to make a commitment to much more strict degrees of observance.

In addition, all of the participants were volunteers. Although I contacted a few of them directly, most were informed of the study by rabbis with whom they were studying.

There may be a number of motivations for volunteering. It was noticeable, too, that none of the volunteers were preparing to convert primarily in order to marry a Jewish spouse. A few of the participants mentioned that they knew of some such potential converts, but no one who was converting in order to marry a Jewish spouse volunteered to participate. It may be that such potential converts differ in many ways from those who did volunteer to participate. It may also be possible that there is some difference between participants who were interviewed twice and those who completed an initial survey and were interviewed once but who did not respond to requests to complete a second survey and interview.

Ideally, it would have been useful to interview participants very early in the process of conversion and follow them until after they had formally converted. However, because the rabbis who were actively involved in instructing potential converts were the most fruitful source of participants, almost all of the participants referred to me were well into the process of conversion.<sup>29</sup> Only a few participants had decided to pursue conversion only shortly before their initial interviews; these were recruited through personal contacts. In addition, it was not possible to follow every participant through the complete process. Even with follow-up about a year after the first interviews, a few of the participants had not completed the conversion process for varying reasons, and two seemed to

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<sup>29</sup> According to the stage model proposed by Bockian and her colleagues (Bockian, 2001; Bockian, Glenwick, and Bernstein, 2005), almost all of my participants would be considered to be in the “contemplation” or “preparation” stages of conversion. At follow-up, most of them were in the “action” or “maintenance” states. It was impossible to recruit participants in the “precontemplation” or “contemplation” stages. In addition, participants seemed at times to have difficulty understanding that part of the survey, and it turned out to be much easier to simply ask them individually what they were doing and when they expected (or had) completed the formalities of conversion. Thus, Bockian’s Stages of Change Questionnaire (which constituted the second section of my surveys) was not of much use in assigning participants to a particular stage of the process.

have dropped out of the process entirely. For a more complete view of how people develop a new Jewish identity and how they negotiate questions about observance and belonging to a new religious community, it would also have been useful to follow the potential converts not only through to formal conversion but also to talk with them a year or two after the formality of conversion. Such a very long-term longitudinal study would have practical limitations.

More of the participants were women than men. Of the participants who completed both surveys and both interviews, eighteen were women and six were men, three of whom identified themselves as gay. None of the women identified themselves as lesbian. Of the participants who were interviewed only once, six were women and four were men. One woman was interviewed once, after completing the second survey<sup>30</sup>. Of the participants who completed at least one survey but were not interviewed, four were men, and eleven were women. The preponderance of women is in agreement with the common view that more women convert to Judaism than men.

There was a large age range. Of the women who were interviewed at least once, the youngest was 21 and the oldest in her 60's. Eleven women were in their 20's and eight in their 30's. Two were in their early 50's, and one described herself as in her 60's. One woman did not give her age. Of the men who were interviewed, the youngest was 23 and the oldest 60. Four were in their 20's, one in his 30's, and two in their 40's. One was 51 and one 60 years old. Of the participants who completed at least one survey but were not interviewed, seven were in their 20's, six in their 30's, two in their 40's, and two in their 50's.

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<sup>30</sup> She had not been able to schedule an interview after doing the first survey but when contacted later, she completed a second survey and was able to arrange an interview.

Clearly conversion to Judaism is not an adolescent phenomenon. None of the participants were adolescents at the time of this study, and most likely a rabbi confronted with an adolescent inquiring about conversion would recommend that such a potential convert wait until he or she is living independently from their parents. Nevertheless, a few of the interviewees described their decision to convert to Judaism as developing while they were in college. For example, Doris, who was thirty years old when interviewed, had begun to seriously consider conversion while in college and had started attending events at a local synagogue although she postponed formal conversion for several years both because she was afraid her parents would be hurt and because she was not sure she believed in God. Henry had decided to convert to Judaism while in high school but postponed any action on that decision because his mother asked him to wait until his grandparents died as they would be too upset. Jennifer decided to convert to Judaism while in college and attended Shabbat services and classes at her university's Hillel house; she did not pursue formal conversion until she graduated and moved to a city where she could easily walk to a synagogue. Yvonne had been fascinated by the rituals in a family friend's home and decided on conversion while in college; she had affiliated with a local Hillel organization and converted while still in college. Frank began studying about Judaism when he was in college and had started to date a Jewish woman who broke off their relationship when he decided to convert.

That men and women in their 50's and 60's were pursuing conversion to Judaism was surprising. Their trajectory toward conversion and their motivations were quite mixed. Paula was 51 years old when first interviewed; she had been living with a non-observant Jewish husband for about sixteen years. Having been raised in a predominant-

ly Buddhist country, Paula had no encounter with Judaism until she came to the United States about twenty years ago. She said that as she learned about Judaism, she realized that “My soul is screaming for religion.” Charles, who was 51 when interviewed, said he was converting because he felt that “God was after me” and demanded of him that “You have to treat the Jews well because God’s watching.” Ethan, who was 64 years old, had been married to a Jewish woman for 24 years but was separated from her when he was interviewed. He, his wife, and two adult children had been members of a Reform congregation for many years, and his decision to convert at this time seemed to be based in some hope that doing so would contribute to a reconciliation with his wife. Olivia was in her 60’s when interviewed; although raised as a Catholic, Olivia said she had thought about converting for many years and “should have done it a long time ago.” She had been attending a Conservative synagogue for some time and felt welcomed there. Olivia’s husband was not converting, primarily because he was too ill to undertake attending classes with her. Sheila was a 50-year-old woman who had been raised in a mixed religious family and had joined the LDS church in her 30’s; after her marriage ended, she had gone to a Catholic church for a while but decided on converting to Judaism after taking a “Taste of Judaism” class and a Hebrew class at the Hillel house at the university where her husband teaches. Sheila’s husband was not planning to convert. I recall asking her why conversion was important to her at her age, with a Catholic husband and grown children; her reply was stark: “I just want to be a Jew.”

### **The process of conversion**

Following the framework developed by Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (1999; Rambo, 1993), I describe the experiences of the interviews as they experienced



the process of conversion in terms of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.

### **Context**

Rambo and Farhadian break the initial “stage” of context into three “interconnected spheres:” macro-, meso-, and microcontexts. The macrocontext includes the large-scale aspects of the convert’s society. The microcontext includes the convert’s personal world, family, friends, career, and such. The mesocontext, the convert’s local social setting and local religious institutions, mediates between these two. It is important to note that the macrocontext for all the participants in my research is what has been called the American religious marketplace. In this social setting, there is little to prohibit a person from moving from one religious identity to another. People move rather freely among various Protestant churches; even Catholics may join non-denominational or evangelical Protestant churches. Jews may cross boundaries between Reform and Conservative congregations or join congregations that do not identify with any denomination of Judaism. In addition, American Jews are a prominent aspect of the American religious scene; when it is necessary socially for a group to present itself as ecumenical, attendance by a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a rabbi is essential. (Recently having an imam also participate is becoming routine as well.) None of the participants who were interviewed seemed to feel that they would experience any social discrimination for choosing to be Jewish. It may be that the ease with which Christians in America can and do move among denominations has created the impression that becoming Jewish is a possibility whereas in another social setting or if the ethnic aspect of Judaism were emphasized, conversion to Judaism might not seem so possible.

Participants' microcontexts included the religious orientation of their families of origin and the extent to which they received any sort of religious education. Appendix G shows the religions of origin and the extent of their childhood religious education for the participants who were interviewed at least once. Appendix H lists the religion of origin endorsed by those who completed at least one survey but were not interviewed.

Many of the interviewees seem to have had little religious education in childhood, and most of them had very little religious education during adolescence. Nevertheless, an intense childhood Christian religious education did not seem to preclude the possibility of conversion to Judaism. In fact, several of the participants said that despite such childhood religious education, they had decided in adolescence to reject their family's religious beliefs. For instance, Abigail attended Episcopalian services with her mother, Sunday school classes, and a Christian summer camp and was confirmed in the Episcopalian church. However, when interviewed, she said that there were "just fundamental things about Christianity that never really struck a chord with me." Doris described her parents as very active in a liberal Presbyterian church so she attended Sunday school classes and church activities regularly; nevertheless she refused to go through confirmation when she was fifteen as she had decided by then that she was not a believing Christian. Felice received a thorough religious education, including Sunday school classes; she also attended parochial schools through elementary grades. She received her first communion and confirmation in the Episcopalian church but quit going to church as soon as she "had the freedom and action to do so." Barbara was raised by a Roman Catholic mother, attended afternoon religious classes, and participated in "all the sacraments" including first communion, confession, and confirmation. However, she described herself

as a “very questioning teenager” who “didn’t feel like Catholicism worked well for me so I looked around.” Yvonne took confirmation classes in the Lutheran church at her grandmother’s insistence but felt that the others in the class were not taking the matter seriously; by the time she was in early adolescence, she had decided she was not Christian

### **Crisis**

Rambo and Farhadian describe the “crisis stage” of conversion as including “disordering and disrupting experiences that call into question a person’s or group’s taken-for-granted world” (1999, p. 25). On an individual level such crises would include “mystical or near-death experiences, illness, existential questions about the purpose of life, desire for transcendence, altered states of consciousness, pathology, or apostasy” (p. 26). For Rambo and Farhadian, the crisis triggers potential converts into leaving their original religious identity and to searching for a new one. Only one of my participants described an abrupt loss of faith in their original religion; Edith began a “spiritual journey” after dealing with deaths in her family and some degree of depression. A few described their decision to convert to Judaism as triggered by such crises. Abigail described a “life-altering spiritual event” that occurred a year before our first interview; she seemed reluctant to go into detail about this event as she felt it would take too long to describe what had happened. Felice had been thinking of conversion for some time and made the decision to go ahead with contacting a rabbi after she was confronted in a store by a woman who gave her a pamphlet that was headed “The Lord Kills, Repent;” the woman told Felice that God hates, judges, and kills sinners, even babies. Felice startled herself when she told the woman, “I’m sorry, I’m Jewish.”

Two participants described their decision to convert as triggered by a sort of direct revelatory experience. Charles felt that he first felt an impulse to become Jewish when he was in school and learned that Anne Frank's father was alive; he suddenly had an inexplicable wish to meet this man and felt that "God was after me." Joyce described receiving some sort of "revelation from God" telling her that she was going to marry a Jewish spouse and that she should go to Israel and become a rabbi.

Bernard Spilka and his co-authors (2003) divide the academic study of religious conversion into two eras, dominated by two different paradigms. Initially psychological study of conversion focused on a model based on the epiphany experienced by St. Paul on the road to Damascus. In this paradigm religious conversion occurs suddenly, the person is fundamentally transformed, and new behavior follows the conversion experience. Protestant Christianity has frequently emphasized Pauline conversions. The alternative paradigm, which is based on St. Augustine's description of his becoming Christian, is of a gradual transformation, in which behavioral changes precede the decision to formally adopt a new religious identity and fundamental personality change is not expected

I chose two of the statements in the last section of the survey to reflect a Pauline conversion experience: "My decision to convert was sudden and seemed to make a dramatic change in my whole heart, life, and soul, and "When I decided to convert, I began to feel strange, it was though I was suffocating from the inside. There was a violent rushing wind that filled the room. My whole body was filled with this powerful but gentle wind. The suffocating stopped and I could breathe properly again."<sup>31</sup> Of the completed surveys, only a few endorsed either of these statements. In contrast, one statement de-

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<sup>31</sup> These statements were modified slightly from descriptions in William James' chapters on religious conversion in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

scribed a more Augustinian conversion experience: “I am glad that conversion to Judaism takes some time. I have to think over my decision because I need to know that becoming Jewish is something I can be proud of and acknowledge before everyone without hesitation, and I need to know that I can live with this decision for the rest of my life.” This description was more strongly endorsed. Table 1 shows the numbers of surveys endorsing these three statements. Clearly the abrupt, Pauline experience is rare for converts to Judaism.

### **Quest**

Although Rambo and Farhadian describe the “quest” stage of a conversion as the convert’s response to the crisis, due to the rarity of clear-cut crises among the participants in this study, it would seem more appropriate to ask whether any of these potential converts had engaged in some sort of search for a religious home. Of the descriptions of the conversion experience in the third part of the survey, the statement that “I have learned a lot about a variety of religious traditions, and Judaism seems to make the most sense to me,” most closely suggested a spiritual search before the decision to convert to Judaism. On the first survey, 53 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and none disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. On the second survey, 28 agreed or strongly agreed with it, and no one disagreed or strongly disagreed with it. These numbers suggest that most converts to Judaism follow a more Augustinian conversion paradigm.

Some of the interviewees described themselves as having considered other religions than the one they were raised in, but only a few actually described themselves as spiritual seekers before deciding on conversion to Judaism. Doris, who refused to be confirmed in the Presbyterian church as an adolescent, said that after she decided she was

Table 1

*Participants' Agreement with Pauline Conversion Statements*

| <b>Statement</b>                                     | <b>Strongly agree or Agree</b>                                | <b>Disagree or Strongly disagree</b>                          |
|--|---|---|
| "My decision to convert was sudden . . . ."          | First survey – 3/55 (5.4%)<br>Second survey – 4/31 (13.0%)    | First survey – 36/55 (65.5%)<br>Second survey – 21/31 (70.0%) |
| "When I decided to convert, I began to feel . . . ." | First survey – 5/54 (9.3%)<br>Second survey – 3/31 (9.70%)    | First survey – 34/55 (66.9%)<br>Second survey – 22/31 (71.0%) |
| "I am glad that conversion to Judaism takes . . . ." | First survey – 52/56 (92.9%)<br>Second survey – 28/31 (90.4%) | First survey – 2/56 (3.6%)<br>Second survey – 1/31 (3.2%)     |

not a “believing Christian,” she had started learning about a variety of religions and that by the time she was in college she was seriously considering converting to Judaism. Grace, who was raised Roman Catholic but had little formal religious education, said she had been attracted to Hinduism, kabbalah, and astrology. Yvonne, who was raised in the Lutheran church at her grandmother’s insistence, explored Judaism and Islam after she decided in early adolescence that she was not a Christian. Zoe had been attracted to Tibetan Buddhism after her father began that practice; she said she had practiced chanting but dropped out before taking any formal vows in that tradition. Edith was raised with little religious education despite her father’s family being Italian Catholic; in her late teens or early 20’s, while dealing with some losses in her family, she said she began a “spiritual journey.”

Two of the participants came to Judaism after first converting to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). Aaron described himself as having been “born to believe” and recalled watching a variety of religious programming since childhood. In college he majored in religious studies and pursued a graduate degree in Hebrew Bible. He had been raised as Roman Catholic and had converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; as a member of that church he served a mission, married, and was active in church ministry before deciding to convert to Judaism after a divorce. Likewise, Sheila converted from Roman Catholicism to LDS and majored in college in religious studies; she tried several churches after leaving the LDS church, including a “little Vatican II” Catholic parish. She rejected Christianity after reading more about Christian history.

## **Encounter**

For many of the interviewees, Rambo and Farhadian's stage of "quest" collapses into the stage they label as "encounter," the ways in which the potential convert comes to know about Judaism and the possibility of conversion. In my first interview with each of the participants, I asked how they first came to know about Judaism and what prompted their decision to convert.

For some participants, their "encounter" with Judaism came about when they took college religion courses. Abigail took a course on the Holocaust and began to ask her non-religious Jewish father more about Judaism. Brenda's first acquaintance with Judaism was in religious studies classes in college; these classes led to her reading literature about Judaism and stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jennifer first became interested in Judaism when she wrote a paper on Judaism for a college sociology course; her conversion then followed her marriage to an Israeli Jewish man. Gladys reported that her first contact with Judaism was a college world religions class. Jennifer first became interested in Judaism when she wrote a paper on Judaism for a college sociology class. Wanda attended a university with many Jewish students and took classes on Judaism. She then read extensively and taught herself to read Hebrew; she had already decided on converting before she met her Jewish husband. Abigail, who was raised by an Episcopalian mother and a non-religious Jewish father, began to ask her father questions about Judaism after she took a college course on the Holocaust.

Some of the interviewees said that they learned about Judaism through friends or family, a situation that reflects the fact that, except for some of the most Orthodox sects, most American Jews do not live in exclusive enclaves. Potential converts may have been



exposed to Jews in school or simply as neighbors. For instance, Curt described himself as having grown up in what he called “a suburb of Israel,” a community with a large Jewish population. An uncle had married a Jewish woman, so Curt had attended Passover *seders* with those family members. Doris had grown up with many Jewish friends from childhood. Felice became acquainted with Jewish friends in school as a young adolescent and then read books about Jews and Judaism. Grace had known Jews as friends and neighbors and became active in what she called “Jewish leadership groups” and “creative projects.” Irene had Jewish friends in school.

Planning to marry a Jewish spouse has been frequently thought of as the most frequent motivation for conversion. However, about half of the participants in the survey were not converting in connection with a planned marriage. Of the participants who completed the first survey, 29 indicated that they were already married or in a committed relationships with a Jewish partner; 37 said they were not in such a relationship. Of those who completed the second survey, thirteen were in a committed relationship with a Jewish partner, and seventeen were not.

Some of the participants who were interviewed were contemplating a possible marriage to a boyfriend or girlfriend who was Jewish. However, most of them emphasized that they would convert even if the marriage did not occur. Michelle said she was “possibly headed for engagement” to a Jewish man but was insistent that she was not converting in order to be married. She said that she would need to convert if they did marry, but she did not feel obligated. “I never once felt pressured to learn; everything that I did was on my own. I guess it’s just one of those things where you discover certain things and you want to keep learning more.” However, when she was interviewed a sec-

ond time about a year later, she did not mention being in a committed relationship. Robert met his Jewish fiancée (and wife by the time of the second interview) in college; she was the first Jewish person he had really known, and she told him that it would be important to her to marry only someone who was Jewish. As her family came to know him, however, that insistence diminished. He had decided on conversion after taking an introduction to Judaism class while they were dating. Gladys began learning about Judaism while she was dating a Jewish man; when she was interviewed she was unsure whether they would marry, but she was certain that she would convert even if they did not.

Some of these engaged participants were unsure about whether they would convert if the proposed marriage did not occur. For instance, Barbara was engaged to a Jewish man, and when she was interviewed, she was taking a series of classes for converts at a Reform congregation. She was fairly certain they would marry even if she did not convert, but she was not sure whether she would continue with conversion if they did not marry. Curt became interested in learning more about Judaism when he became engaged to an Israeli woman who had been raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. They took some classes together initially so that Curt could understand more about her religion since they agreed to raise their children as Jewish. In that process he became more interested and decided to pursue formal conversion. When first interviewed he said that their plans to marry were not dependent on his converting, but if they were not to marry, he was not sure whether he would pursue the formality. When Curt was interviewed about a year later, he had formally converted.

A few of the participants had been married to a Jewish spouse for some time before deciding to convert to Judaism. At the suggestion of a family friend who was a rab-

bi, Nancy and her Jewish husband attended a group for interfaith families after they had been married. When their daughter was born, Nancy decided that it made more sense for her to “support Judaism” for the children’s sake. Paula had been raised in a predominantly Buddhist country and had no contact with Judaism until she moved to the United States about twenty years before her first interview; she had been married to a non-religious Jewish man for about sixteen years. As she was studying in preparation for conversion, she said he was becoming more religious along with her. Ethan had been married to a Jewish woman for 24 years and had raised their children as Jewish in a Reform congregation. Darlene married her Jewish husband two years before her first interview; they had been together for about ten years. She had just recently completed a Reform conversion when she was first interviewed. Irene had been married to a Jewish husband for about a year before she was interviewed. She had been raised as a Roman Catholic and had tried to arrange an interfaith wedding but was discouraged when her Catholic priest did not respond to her inquiries about that possibility. She had been adamant about maintaining her Catholic identity after the marriage but gradually began to feel that it would be difficult to raise children in a mixed-faith home. Therefore, she took an introduction to Judaism class with her husband and began to consider conversion.

Several of the participants were not involved in committed relationships with Jewish partners. These “singletons” seemed to have been attracted to Judaism in a variety of ways and to have followed a gradual path towards conversion, emphasizing both the spiritual aspect and a connection to a Jewish community. For instance, Frank had begun to learn about Judaism when he dated a Jewish girlfriend in college. As he attended Jewish religious events with her, he “found myself identifying with, believing, and wanting

to be a part of this. I knew this is what I wanted to be a part of because this is how I felt.” However, as Frank began to study for conversion, his girlfriend broke off the relationship. Frank felt that she really did not want to marry someone who was Jewish. Doris and Yvonne had both begun attending events at a Hillel organization or a local synagogue while in college. Doris emphasized in her interviews that she identified with the Jewish community she had essentially joined some years before formally converting. For Yvonne, what had begun as an individual spiritual journey became an attachment to the Jewish community. Felice surprised herself when she identified herself as Jewish to a Christian proselytizer; she had read about Judaism for some time but had not decided on conversion until that experience. Grace converted after being involved in Jewish social action and creative groups for some time. Edith also emphasized her individual spiritual journey to Judaism; however, she also found that the community of other Jews was in many ways a replacement for her family who seemed somewhat unconnected.

### **Interaction**

For Rambo and Farhadian, encounter leads to interaction for the potential convert. In this stage, the convert is actively engaging with members of the new religious community and is forming new relationships while learning about new beliefs, new practices, and in many cases, new ways to talk about their religious life. Each religious tradition has a rhetoric, ways of talking about their new religious identity and the course of their conversion, words and phrases that have specific meanings within that tradition. Different religious traditions teach converts in different ways, some more formally than others. Most rabbis require potential converts to study Jewish traditions, beliefs, and practices for some time.

Some of the interviewees seemed to be studying individually with a rabbi. Irene said that she was working individually with a Reform rabbi who gave her books to read. They met fairly regularly for intense discussions. Keith had also studied individually with a Reform rabbi. Aaron described the rabbi he was studying with as “Conserva-dox.” This rabbi encouraged him to live as a Jew, attending services and participating in the community for a year before formally converting.

Many of the interviewees mentioned seeking structured programs, most of which seemed to be connected with Conservative synagogues. For these converts, learning about being Jewish in depth and in a structured manner was important. Abigail was in a group that took classes together with a Conservative rabbi; she had chosen this group because she found information about it on the Internet. The program seemed well organized, and the rabbi seemed responsive. Likewise Curt chose a conversion program at a Conservative synagogue because it was “more structured and thought out” than others. Doris also participated in a fairly intensive course of study at a Conservative congregation. Howard had started studying with a Reform congregation but moved to a more structured program at a Conservative synagogue. Barbara had taken an introduction to Judaism course at a Reform synagogue and started a conversion class there; however, when she was interviewed, she said she was halfway through a program with a group at a Conservative synagogue. This program included classes on the Jewish ritual cycle and heritage and Hebrew. The group also attended services together and participated in Shabbat dinners together.

The rhetoric of conversion to Judaism included the theme that was identified in the liberal Jewish conversion narrative literature, the sense that the converts perceived

themselves as in some sense “coming home”<sup>32</sup> to being Jewish. This theme was expressed in several ways, as a sense that “I knew I was Jewish,” a “familiar feeling,” a sense that conversion was not “chosen” by the convert but something that “chose me,” a sense of having been “on the path to Judaism all my life,” etc. Since these conversion narratives were all written well after the converts had completed the process of conversion, it was unclear whether this theme reflected a rhetoric that had been learned or was an aspect of what draws converts to Judaism.

The third part of the survey was designed to investigate that question. For that section I modified some of the statements taken from conversion narratives that reflected the “coming home” theme. Since this theme was expressed in a variety of ways in the conversion narrative literature, I chose several statements that reflected various aspects of this theme. These statements included:

1) Conversion to Judaism is what I need and want. It is like coming home. I feel that I have been on the path to Judaism throughout my life. Judaism provides a context and structure that allows me to be myself. In becoming a Jew, I have found my heart, my soul, my life.

2) I feel that I have been on the path to Judaism throughout my life. Judaism provides a context and structure that allows me to be myself. In becoming a Jew, I have found my heart, my soul, my life.

3) Through most of my life I have felt some cultural or ethnic bond to the Jewish people. Becoming Jewish is returning to a part of my heritage that has been denied to me.

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<sup>32</sup> Few of the participants in this study used the phrase “coming home,” and only a few of the writers of conversion narratives discussed in the previous chapter used it specifically. However, labeling the theme as “coming home” to being Jewish captures the essence of this particular rhetoric.

4) I feel I have a Jewish soul. Since I was young, I was in a constant struggle to understand God and where I fit in the universe. I was always questioning and trying to understand. Now I feel at peace.

5) The more I have learned about Judaism, the more I have confirmed what I knew intuitively about myself, that I was meant to be a Jew.

6) I didn't feel my conversion was something that I chose. It was like it chose me. It just feels right.

7) Experiencing Judaism has had a very familiar feeling to me, like when you meet someone and it's as if you've always known them or you go some place and it seems like you've been there before. I feel at home.

A large number of the survey participants endorsed these statements, both on the first and second surveys. Table Two shows the number expressing strong agreement or agreement or disagreement/strong disagreement with each of these statements.

Among the participants who responded to both the first and second survey, there was little variation in how they responded to these questions between the first and second surveys. It was unfortunate that I was unable to recruit participants very early in the process of deciding to convert to Judaism, since the lack of any perceptible change in the participants' attitudes could be explained by the fact that most of them were well along in the process of converting when they were recruited into the study. In one case, Curt acknowledged that the sense of "coming home" to being Jewish had grown in him over the course of the classes he took in preparing for conversion.

Table 2

*Participants' Agreement with "Coming Home" Theme Statements*

| <b>Statement</b>   | <b>First survey</b>          |                                    | <b>Second survey</b>         |                                    |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|  | <b>Strongly agree/ Agree</b> | <b>Disagree/ Strongly disagree</b> | <b>Strongly agree/ Agree</b> | <b>Disagree/ Strongly disagree</b> |
| Conversion to Judaism is what I need and want. . . .   | 50/56<br>89.2%               | 0/56<br>0%                         | 27/31<br>87.1%               | 0<br>0%                            |
| I feel that I have been on the path to Judaism throughout my life. . . .                     | 43/54<br>79.7%               | 4/54<br>9.3%                       | 26/31<br>83.9%               | 2/31<br>6.5%                       |
| Through most of my life I have felt some cultural or ethnic bond to the Jewish people. . . . | 33/54<br>61.1%               | 12/54<br>22.3%                     | 21/31<br>66.8%               | 4/31<br>12.9%                      |
| I feel I have a Jewish soul. . . .   | 39/55<br>70.9%               | 11/55<br>20.0%                     | 19/31<br>61.3%               | 4/31<br>12.9%                      |
| . . . I was meant to be a Jew.   | 46/55<br>83.7%               | 3/55<br>5.5%                       | 23/31<br>74.2%               | 1/31<br>3.2%                       |
| I didn't feel my conversion was something that I chose. . . .                                | 34/54<br>62.9%               | 6/54<br>11.2%                      | 22/31<br>71%                 | 1/31<br>3.2%                       |
| Experiencing Judaism has had a very familiar feeling to me, . . .                            | 47/55<br>85.5%               | 3/55<br>5.5%                       | 23/31<br>77.47%              | 2/31<br>6.5%                       |



In the interviews a few participants spontaneously described a sense of “coming home” to being Jewish. Doris said, “I do have this sense, perhaps it's irrational, but I do have this sense that I am somehow more comfortable and at home and more connected or something, with the Jewish community. I feel like by formally converting, I will be making official something that I have felt for an incredible long time.” Frank said that he felt he had a Jewish soul. “When I found Judaism, it was like I was returning. I had this feeling my whole life, but I didn't understand why I wasn't connecting.” “This is what I believe, I just never knew about this before. This is what I'm supposed to be.”

Three of the participants felt that their family histories included Jewish ancestry so that by converting they were “coming home” in a genetic sense. When Agatha, who described herself as a “religious seeker,” was eighteen and dating a Jewish man when she learned that her maternal grandfather had been Jewish. Howard had done some genealogical research since his grandparents had emigrated from Europe; some of that information suggested that his ancestry may have been at least partially Jewish. Aaron's family heritage was Hispanic, and he speculated that he might have Jewish ancestry. He said, “At a kind of visceral level, I feel like – and I don't want to sound too mystical – but I feel like I'm coming home.” Thomas's story was more striking; his family traced its roots through Puerto Rico to Portugal. His paternal grandmother lit candles on Friday nights “for luck” and refrained from eating shellfish or mixing meat and dairy products in the same meal. She told Thomas and his brother that they were Jewish “but it was a secret.” Thomas was also told that his family name was one often given to Portuguese Jews who were forced to convert in the fifteenth century. As a “mitzvah project” in connection with his conversion, Thomas had begun to be a contact person for others who

may have similar family histories. When interviewed a second time, Joyce said she had begun to suspect that some of her ancestry was Jewish.

Two of the participants who were interviewed endorsed only two statements: “I am glad that conversion to Judaism takes some time. I have to think over my decision because I need to know that becoming Jewish is something I can be proud of and acknowledge before everyone without hesitation and I need to know that I can live with this decision for the rest of my life,” and “I have learned a lot about a variety of religious traditions, and Judaism seems to make the most sense to me.” For these two, the spiritual aspects of Judaism seemed of minimal importance. Irene had decided to convert after her marriage to a Jewish husband primarily because it seemed difficult to raise children in a mixed-faith home; in addition maintaining a Catholic identity, including holiday preparations was burdensome. She also described the purpose of conversion primarily as making a unified family for herself and her eventual children and as sharing a connection with her husband. Robert was married to a Jewish woman, who was the first Jewish person he had ever gotten to know. Initially she and her family had been insistent that she would only marry another Jew; however, Robert said that some of that pressure diminished as the family got to know him. He felt that becoming Jewish was primarily a matter of joining a community since he was “not very spiritual,” and he saw Judaism as not emphasizing spirituality. When he was interviewed a second time, he additionally endorsed the statement that “The more I have learned about Judaism, the more I have confirmed what I knew intuitively about myself, that I was meant to be a Jew.” However, even though he had completed a formal conversion, Robert and his wife had not joined a congregation and were only minimally observant.

Of all the participants, Laura seemed to have the most difficulty establishing a Jewish identity for herself. She endorsed several of the “coming home” theme statements on the survey, but she qualified that endorsement by explaining that she was intellectually attracted to Judaism rather than Christianity and felt that in the current social climate she was somehow meant to be Jewish. Nevertheless, in her one interview and in e-mail messages that she sent me after the interview, she struggled with what it meant to construct a Jewish identity without rejecting her family and its heritage. After having studied with a Conservative rabbi for over a year, Laura was still uncertain about converting. She said that “What I’ve realized in the last three or four months is that . . . I needed to come to terms with what does it mean to be a Jew without giving up who I am and what my heritage is and what my family is.” In her e-mail messages she described how important celebrating family holiday traditions was and disclosed that she planned to spend time with her family in December and to do all the family Christmas rituals, because these were familiar to her and gave her a felt connection to her family. In addition, even though she described her fiancé as “secular” and said that he came from an interfaith family, his family was not supportive of her conversion. Laura did not respond to requests for her to complete a second survey and a second interview a year later, and I have wondered if she was able to resolve these conflicts.

### **Commitment**

Rambo and Farhadian describe the stage of commitment as the point at which a decision has been made; there is often some sort of public demonstration of the convert’s change in religious and social status. For converts to Judaism the traditional formality of conversion has included approval by a *beit din*, immersion in a *mikvah*, and circumcision

for men (or *hatafat dam brit* for those who are already circumcised). Although Reform Judaism dispensed with those ritual formalities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it seems from the interviews that most Reform rabbis have re-introduced them.

Although my recruitment material stated that I was looking for participants who were in the process of considering conversion to Judaism, two of the participants who were interviewed had already completed a formal conversion by the time they were interviewed. Agatha had converted with a Conservative rabbi before her first interview. However, her husband had become more religious, and since they were planning to live in Israel permanently, she was in the process of converting with a modern Orthodox rabbi in order to be more accepted in Israel. When she was interviewed a second time, she had completed that conversion and had remarried her husband; the Orthodox conversion rituals included meeting with a *beit din* and immersion in a *mikvah*. Darlene, on the other hand, had just completed her conversion with a Reform rabbi when she was first interviewed. The formalities of the conversion were minimal, a small ceremony in her husband's family's home. There was no *beit din* or *mikvah* involved, and Darlene's rabbi preferred to describe the process as an "affirmation" of Judaism rather than a conversion.

Darlene's rabbi was clearly an exception, since all of the other participants who had completed their conversions between the first and second interviews had gone through the formalities of meeting with a *beit din* (often after writing essays), immersion, and for the men some sort of circumcision. For a few these formalities were followed by some sort of public acknowledgment in the synagogue they were attending. Abigail and Curt, who had apparently studied with a group of converts, mentioned a celebration with the families and friends of the group members afterwards. Felice, who converted with a

Reform rabbi, said that her rabbi mentioned her new status at the next Friday service, and some of her friends brought her a cake. Howard, who also converted with a Reform rabbi, described a sort of “naming ceremony” held by the group he had been studying with. Jennifer’s Conservative rabbi mentioned her conversion at the next Shabbat service. Keith’s Reform rabbi gave him an *aliyah* at the next Shabbat service and mentioned that he had converted. Michelle completed a Conservative conversion and was given an *aliyah* at the next Shabbat service.

Several of the participants who were interviewed twice had not completed a formal conversion within the year after their first interview. Some of these participants had extended their study beyond what was required; they seemed to want to know more, not in order to decide whether they wanted to convert but to be sure they were well prepared to be Jewish. Henry had started to pursue conversion with the rabbi of a congregation that he came to feel was too liberal and had started studying with another Reform rabbi. When he was interviewed a second time, Henry said he felt he did not know enough or was not observant enough to formally convert yet. These were his feelings, not the demands of the rabbi he was working with. Howard, who converted with a Conservative rabbi, continued after the formal conversion to study Hebrew and to take classes with an adult bar mitzvah group as well as with another Jewish study group. Paula, who had been raised in a Buddhist culture, was postponing her formal conversion when she was interviewed a second time; she was taking additional classes in Hebrew and carefully writing essays to present to a *beit din*. She said she had realized that converting to Judaism was not a simple process. Irene had worked with a Reform rabbi over the year between interviews and said she was postponing her formal conversion because she wanted to study

further. She continued to read books suggested by her rabbi and to meet with him fairly regularly for intense discussions.

Two of the participants said at their second interview that they were no longer working toward conversion to Judaism. In one case the failure of a relationship with a Jewish partner seems to have contributed to the potential convert's failure to follow through on plans to convert. When first interviewed Zoe was dating a Jewish man; she had contacted a Reform rabbi and started a series of classes toward conversion but dropped out. The young man she was dating turned out to be uninterested in religion, and they were no longer dating when she was interviewed for a second time. Zoe felt that the rabbi she was studying with had been critical of her and that there was little support from the congregation for her as a potential convert. Most of the people in the classes she was taking were born Jewish or were planning to marry a Jewish spouse. When interviewed a second time, Zoe was unsure whether she would pursue conversion unless she met a potential partner who was Jewish.

The other participant who seemed to have dropped out of the conversion process cited problems with the Conservative congregation she was affiliated with. After reading about Judaism and taking religious studies classes in college and thinking over the possibility of conversion for a few years, Brenda "got up the guts" to call a synagogue and inquire about conversion. She began working with the rabbi who told her she would be expected to observe Jewish holidays, attend services regularly, and keep kosher. She did not feel he was supportive. During the year between her interviews, the rabbi left that congregation, and while there was no rabbi, Brenda felt there was no organized program that would lead to formal conversion. In addition she felt there was little community

support. She said she was told she should attend only Friday evening services because the Saturday morning services would be too long and uninteresting for her. Brenda was planning to move to another state to pursue a graduate degree program, and she said that she thought she might consider connecting with another rabbi and synagogue there. Several months later, she contacted me and asked for advice about resuming a conversion program; she was uncertain that she would be received by a new rabbi since she had dropped out at first.

### **Consequences**

Rambo and Farhadian point out that the consequences of conversion depend largely on what aspects of the convert's life are affected, including "affective, intellectual, ethical, religious, and social/political domains" (p. 32). Outward changes also may reflect inward spiritual changes. In current American society, converts to Judaism may experience little social discrimination – certainly less than medieval European converts who faced execution. Only Laura observed that some of her Christian friends had dropped away from her when she started dating a Jewish man and was considering conversion.

I asked each participant in the initial interview how their families were reacting to their conversion. I expected some reports of conflict, especially for converts who came from religious families since a devout believing Christian might despair that a child who becomes Jewish would be placing his or her soul at risk of damnation. Two participants did report some degree of conflict with their families. Henry had been raised in the Catholic church, and his mother asked him to postpone his conversion to Judaism until after his grandparents died as she was concerned that they would be upset. Sheila, a fifty-

year-old woman, was dealing with considerable discord in her family over her conversion. She had grown daughters with a former husband, whom she described as a “very fanatical Mormon;” the daughters, however, were “open-minded” and came to a celebration after her conversion. She described her current husband as a “life-long Catholic” who had been willing to attend an Episcopal church with her at one time. Some of his children by a previous marriage had become evangelical Christians, one of them a “super-fundamentalist.” She was concerned about these step-children’s reaction and had not told them at the time of her interview.

However, very few of the participants in this study reported any such reaction on the part of their families, and most of them used the word “supportive” to describe their parents’ attitude toward their conversion. Darlene’s parents were devout Lutherans, but she said that they were supportive of her decision to become Jewish. Doris’ parents were active in a liberal Presbyterian church, and she postponed acting on her decision to convert to Judaism for several years because she was afraid it would be hurtful to them. However, they were supportive. Felice’s Episcopalian family seem to be glad that she has found a spiritual home she is happy with, especially since others of their children have simply dropped out of their church. Jennifer had been raised in a non-denominational Christian church and had considered herself to be “saved” as an adolescent. Her mother, who was not very religious, supported her conversion; her father, who was more religious, had been unhappy about the decision but “over the years” had come to accept it. Michelle was hesitant to tell her Methodist parents that she was converting because she was concerned that they would oppose her decision because they would think that she was doing so only because she was in a relationship with a Jewish man.



Edith's mother's response to her conversion was, "Whatever makes you happy." She expected that her father, who came from a religious Italian family, to have some problems with her decision; however, he seemed to be supportive.

Being Jewish is both a matter of religious belief and spirituality and a matter of belonging to the Jewish people and to a community of other Jews. I asked participants in the interviews how they viewed their developing identity as Jews, as primarily a spiritual change or as primarily becoming a member of a community of Jews. It was not an easy question to phrase or an easy one to answer, and several of the participants had difficulty articulating the difference for themselves.

For some participants, becoming Jewish was primarily a spiritual matter. Abigail had begun to consider conversion after some sort of "life-altering" spiritual event; in the course of preparing for conversion she said she was learning that "Judaism is more than just a religion" and involved becoming connected to the Jewish community. Nevertheless, when she was interviewed a second time she seemed to be more involved with her own personal spiritual event than with a Jewish community. She was not keeping kosher and felt that her irregular synagogue attendance was mostly "a social experience."

Agatha, who was going through a second, Orthodox conversion and immigrating to Israel, felt that her motives were primarily spiritual. She and her husband had both become more religious and observant since her initial Conservative conversion, and she said she had a hard time understanding why "born Jews who are secular don't embrace their Judaism." Charles, who said that he was converting because "God was after me," described becoming Jewish as entirely a religious matter; he did not mention any connec-

tion with other Jews or membership in a synagogue. Joyce attributed her wish to convert to Judaism as prompted by a “revelation from God.”

For other participants, being Jewish was primarily a matter of joining the Jewish community. For Irene, converting to Judaism was primarily a matter of making a unified family for her children. She wanted the children to have a “strong foundation in some religion,” and “being Jewish is about sharing that connection with my husband.” She felt that attending Friday evening services was important, and she was active in her synagogue with a team who visited people in hospitals or nursing homes. Robert described becoming Jewish as primarily a matter of finding a community to belong to along with his wife. He described himself as not very spiritually oriented and liked that Judaism did not emphasize spirituality. Barbara said that becoming Jewish was for her primarily a matter of joining a community. “I really found that as I developed and became close to my Jewish community, it was about deed, it was about action and community and being part of something.” She was uncertain about the religious aspects of being Jewish but felt that her own personal “struggle with God” was consonant with Jewish tradition.

For most of the participants, both the community aspect and the spiritual or religious aspect of Judaism were important. Although Grace described herself as a spiritual seeker, she seemed in her interviews to emphasize the community aspect of being Jewish, saying, “Being Jewish is not necessarily how you identify religiously; it’s more how you live actively in the world.” Jennifer had first been attracted to Judaism in college for spiritual reasons and had moved to a location where she could easily walk to synagogue. After her conversion, Jennifer and her husband were going to move to Hong Kong in connection with his work; she had made inquiries and was pleased to find out that there

was an active Jewish community in Hong Kong. Thomas, whose family may well have had a *converso* background, experienced becoming formally Jewish as both a spiritual change and as a sense of belonging. He described being overwhelmed by “the spiritual part of Judaism,” including being “blown away” by the beauty of Yom Kippur services. He also described a sense of belonging at Hanukkah when he saw other menorahs in windows in his neighborhood. Yvonne said she had originally thought of conversion to Judaism as an individual spiritual journey, but as she studied and read, she came to realize that belonging to the Jewish community was also very important to her. She said, “I’ve really begun to realize how important it is to be a member of the Jewish community and not just Jewish for the sake of being Jewish but being a member of a synagogue, and a member of the Jewish community.” Edith emphasized the religious aspect of her decision to convert was the result of a “spiritual journey;” however, she said she also felt that her connection to other Jews was a replacement for her family from whom she was somewhat distant.

A significant consequence of conversion to Judaism is the establishment of a Jewish identity, which would include identifying not only with Jewish beliefs and participating in Jewish rituals but also identifying with the Jewish people and with Jewish values. Statements in the second part of the survey taken from Bockian’s Survey of Attitudes, Beliefs and Customs (Bockian, 2001) can be divided into those that pertain most to identification with the Jewish community and those that pertain most to identification with

Jewish religious beliefs and practices. The participants' responses to these statements are summarized in Appendix I.<sup>33</sup>

In general there was little change in these attitudes and beliefs from the first to the second survey. Individually, also, there was little change in which statements the participants endorsed. It would seem then that these participants have become Jewish or are in the process of doing so but do not see themselves as dis-identifying with the rest of society or as joining any sort of social enclave. For these participants, being one of the Jewish people does not mean that they are no longer members of a wider community. The statements about Jewish culture that were agreed with by almost all participants in both surveys included:

I am interested in Jewish literature, art and music, and other Jewish cultural forms. (98.4%; 100%)<sup>34</sup>

It is important to me that there always be a Jewish people. (96.8%; 96.8%)

I feel a strong commitment toward Jewish people. (90.6%; 96.8%)

My feeling of commitment toward Jewish people has increased as an adult.  
(96.1%; 96.7%)

I derive comfort from Jewish customs and observances. (93.5%; 93.3%)

I feel that I have a special obligation as a Jew to engage in activities that promote the "healing" or betterment of humankind. (88.7%; 83.9%)

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that the second survey results include two participants who had essentially dropped out of the process of conversion. Some slight increases in the percentages of "Disagree/Strongly Disagree" may be attributed to those two participants, especially since the total number of participants responding to the second survey is about half of the number responding to the first survey.

<sup>34</sup> Percentages are those in the first and second surveys.

Being Jewish is very important to me. (93.5%; 90.3%)

These statements, although reflecting a connection to the Jewish people, do not describe that connection as to Jewish people exclusively. In contrast, statements that reflect identification with the Jewish people as special in some sense were not highly endorsed. These include:

It is important to me that my neighborhood have a very Jewish character (e.g., kosher bakery, butcher, Jewish bookstore and synagogues). (38.4%; 43.3%)

I date strictly within the Jewish faith (or did so when I was single and dating). (23.8%; 34.5%)

When it comes to a crisis, Jews can only depend on other Jews. (9.6%; 10.0%)

The participants also did not highly endorse statements about Jewish rituals and beliefs. Only about half of the participants endorsed statements reflecting a special religious status for Judaism.

I carry out mitzvot because God so commanded. (61.7%; 60.0%)

God chose to establish a special covenant with the people of Israel through Moses which is still in effect. (67.8%; 66.7%)

The Hebrew Bible is the revealed word of God. (56.4%; 58.1%)

Few of the participants endorsed statements about Jewish observance. Few were maintaining separate dairy and meat dishes (24.2%; 19.4%), buying kosher meat (36.1%; 33.3%), wearing *tefillin* (23%; 10.0%), or refraining from handling money on Shabbat (31.7%; 33.3%). More observed Jewish holidays, including attending Passover seders (95.0%; 93.5%), lighting Shabbat candles (77.1%; 77.4%) or Chanukah candles (95.1%; 96.8%), and fasting on Yom Kippur (76.6%; 80.7%).

During the second interview I asked participants about Shabbat observance and whether they kept – or planned to keep – kosher. Vegetarians, such as Howard and Grace, had little difficulty with keeping kosher. Some of the participants described various reasons for not keeping kosher or strictly observing Shabbat restrictions. Yvonne, a college student, refrained from her paid work on Shabbat but usually had to do school work. She was living in shared quarters so could not keep kosher. Curt and his fiancé kept some minimal kosher restrictions at home but found it difficult to light candles or go to services on Fridays because of work demands. Doris said she would be more observant if she had a family and children, but she kept “some degree of kosher” and tried to spend Shabbat reading religious texts; she also went to Saturday services about three times a month. Felice had to deal with ballet performances and rehearsals on Saturdays; she did manage most of the time to get time off for Jewish holidays, however. Edith wanted to be fully observant but admitted that her Italian upbringing did mean that she enjoyed shellfish.

Some of the participants expected to be more observant eventually. Henry, who had postponed his formal conversion to study beyond what his rabbi required, was keeping kosher, observing Shabbat “incrementally,” and expected to be more observant over time. Michelle said that keeping kosher was difficult, but it was “One of those things for me that will probably grow more into being, as far as kosher goes, probably more getting there is a step by step process.” Barbara and her husband were preparing to host a Passover seder, so they were koshering their kitchen; they lit Shabbat candles, attended services, and refrained from writing or carrying money on Shabbat. Keith had converted with a Reform rabbi but sometimes attended services with a local Chabad congregation.

His wife was also preparing to convert, and he kept kosher by eating only vegetables, fish, and dairy; he was also covering his head and wearing tzitzit. He and his wife were starting to observe menstrual sexual restrictions.

Some of the participants who had converted with Reform rabbis interpreted issues about observance in their own ways. Nancy, who had converted with a Reform rabbi, did not expect to keep kosher, and her Shabbat observance seemed limited to lighting candles and doing “Friday evening Shabbat things that are family friendly and very well attended.” Robert said that he and his wife would “pick and choose” the aspects of keeping kosher that they preferred since kosher was mostly a matter of “paying attention to what you’re eating and being grateful to have it to eat at all.”

A few participants expected themselves to be fully observant eventually. Agatha, who went through a second, Orthodox conversion, expected herself to be strictly observant – “100 percent *shomer Shabbat*” and fully kosher. She also covered her hair and was learning to follow menstrual restrictions on contact with her husband. Jennifer, who was engaged to an Israeli, was abstaining from sexual relations during her menses but not regularly going to a *mikvah*. She and her fiancé made Shabbat at home and went to Friday evening and Saturday services. Although she and her fiancé were moving to Hong Kong, she hoped that the Jewish community there would support her continued observance and study.

One aspect of developing a Jewish identity is leaving behind beliefs and practices of a previous religious identity. A few of the items in the Survey of Attitudes, Beliefs and Customs referenced Christian beliefs. Table 3 lists those statements and the responses to them.

Table 3

*Participants' Endorsement of Christian Beliefs and Practices*

| Statement   | First Survey          |                            | Second Survey  |                            |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|
|   | Strongly agree/ Agree | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Strongly Agree | Disagree/Strongly disagree |
| I get a Christmas tree for my own home.                         | 8/61<br>12.1%         | 46/61<br>75.4%             | 2/29<br>6.9%   | 23/29<br>79.3%             |
| I believe that Jesus is God.                                    | 2/62<br>3.2%          | 55/62<br>88.7%             | 0/30<br>0%     | 29/30<br>96.6%             |
| Jesus will return to the earth someday as the promised Messiah. | 2/62<br>3.2%          | 55/62<br>88.7%             | 0/30<br>0%     | 27/29<br>90.0%             |
| God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.                      | 0/61<br>0%            | 52/61<br>85.3%             | 0/31<br>0%     | 20/31<br>96.8%             |
| I believe it is important to have my child baptized.            | 3/61<br>4/9%          | 53/61<br>92.9%             | 2/30<br>6.6%   | 27/30<br>90.07%            |
| I attend Christian religious services.                          | 3/61<br>4.8%          | 56/62<br>90.3%             | 2/31<br>6.4%   | 29/31<br>93.6%             |



In some cases, participants who endorsed these beliefs or practices said they were confused about Jewish beliefs and later did not endorse them. For instance, in her initial interview Brenda seemed confused about what it meant to have a child baptized and said she was uncertain about whether Jesus would return as the Messiah or whether the Messiah would be Jesus. She said she would put up a Christmas tree because she was still living with her Lutheran mother. Except for that practice, she endorsed none of the Christian beliefs on her second survey even though she had not proceeded with formal conversion.

A few participants described difficulty giving up Christian views. Darlene endorsed most of the Christian belief and practice items on both surveys. She converted with a Reform rabbi and with minimal formalities; her rabbi preferred to call the process an “affirmation of Judaism.” Darlene also described feeling little connection to the synagogue she and her husband belonged to; she said that being Jewish was “Frankly, like Hillel quoted, Do not do unto others, as you would not do unto yourself. That’s really the way I see it.” When she was interviewed a second time, her Jewish identity seemed to center around cooking and holidays, and she explained her endorsing the Christian beliefs and practices items as her being “liberal.” “To be truthful again I just began being liberal minded. I see things fairly open ended; none of us really frankly knows. That is just the way I feel. I feel like the open endless in me is okay. Basically I don’t know.” Laura, who completed only one survey and one interview, seemed to have the most difficulty constructing a Jewish identity for herself. She objected to giving up long-held family traditions, including celebrating Christmas, and to adopting a Hebrew name as the daughter of Abraham and Sarah since she felt that doing so would mean denying her connec-

tion to her parents. Joyce initially stated that although she felt she was called by God to be Jewish, she would continue to believe that Jesus was a God and would return as the Messiah. When she was interviewed a second time, she no longer endorsed any of these statements; she said that as she had been studying Hebrew at a local community college, she had learned that Christianity misinterpreted the original biblical texts and she now rejected those beliefs.

Jonathan Sarna (1995) has expressed concern that some converts, especially Reform converts and those in interfaith marriages, would be “one-generation” Jews who would not transmit a Jewish identity to their children. If Judaism is a choice, is it one that is transmitted to one’s children? I asked each of the participants whether they would want their children (or possible children) to have a Jewish education; almost all of them said that it would be important to them to have their children brought up and educated as Jews. On the survey most participants endorsed statements that “It is important for Jewish boys to be circumcised,” (87.3%; 80.7%) and that “It is important for Jewish children to have a bar or bat mitzvah, (92%; 87.1%). However, very few endorsed the statements that “If my child were considering marrying a non-Jewish person, I would oppose the marriage,” (12.9%; 10.0%) or that “Jewish parents should make every effort to make sure their children do not marry non-Jews, (31.7%; 29.0%). When I also asked the interview participants whether they would want their children to marry only Jews, several of them observed that they would want their children to have the same freedom of choice as they had. Only one participant, Ethan, described having raised children who now seem detached from their Jewish identity.

### **Is there a psychological or sociological description of conversion to Judaism?**

There have been some attempts to construct psychological or sociological theories of religious conversion, but it is not clear that these theoretical constructs apply to conversion to Judaism. Most of the models of religious conversion have been drawn primarily from Christian conversion experiences or from conversions to “new religious movements” or cults. Thus few of the psychological theories may be directly applicable to conversion to Judaism<sup>35</sup> There has been little such research focused on converts to Judaism, and what has been written about Jewish converts has focused on those who come to Judaism in the context of marriage to a Jewish spouse, primarily because intermarriage has been a focus of attention.

There are considerable differences between conversion in a Christian context and conversion to Judaism. In a Christian context, conversion can refer to a process of becoming a Christian but may also refer to a usually sudden intensification of one’s religious experience, becoming in a sense more Christian without necessarily changing one’s Christian identity or affiliation to a specific denomination<sup>36</sup>. Conversion to Judaism, in contrast, always refers to the process of becoming Jewish, after having had another religious identity. For both Roman Catholicism and Judaism, conversion requires a period of study and a ritualized process, but many of the Protestant denominations of Christiani-

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<sup>35</sup> In a review and critique of psychological research on religious conversion, Shinn (1993) notes the predominance of Christian conversion experiences and the focus on “brainwashing” as an aspect of conversion to cults in most of the psychological study of religious conversion.

<sup>36</sup> The Jewish experience of the *ba’al teshuvah* is not the equivalent of this sort of Christian conversion experience. Although the *ba’al teshuvah* may experience a spiritual change, it is rarely a sudden epiphany, and the emphasis for the *ba’al teshuvah* is on much more on behavioral change, becoming more observant, than on the inner religious experience.

ty emphasize the personal spiritual experience of conversion over formalities and ritual. More than most forms of Christianity, conversion to Judaism emphasizes behavioral changes (e.g., Shabbat observance, keeping kosher). In addition, in a culture where Christianity is often the assumed identity, becoming Jewish may imply more of a change of identity than becoming Christian would.

William James set the tone of psychological research into religious conversion. The two chapters on conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* include several vignettes illustrating James' understanding of conversion. Most of these portray sudden epiphanies in a Christian context. Not all of them include a change of religious identity; instead the examples James cites are mostly sudden awakenings to a new Christian life, a type of conversion that James labeled as "self-surrender" (p. 172). Although James acknowledges that some religious conversions are more gradual and "volitional" than these abrupt changes, he finds the former more interesting because in those cases the "the subconscious effects are more abundant and often startling" (p. 173). James explains conversion as occurring when subconscious ideas erupt into consciousness, and such eruption is more visible in the conversional epiphanies.<sup>37</sup> In addition, James cites the work of his student James Starbuck suggesting that such eruptions of subconscious thinking occur naturally in the course of adolescent maturation: "Conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child's small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity" (p. 167). Thus religious

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<sup>37</sup> James uses the term "subconscious" and holds that some sort of thinking goes on normally on the subconscious level. His notions of the subconscious differ from Freud's more theoretically developed notion of a dynamic unconscious.

conversion is frequently an aspect of adolescent development.<sup>38</sup> However, conversion to Judaism does not seem to be an adolescent phenomenon. Participants in this research tended to be young adults, although several were converting as older adults, even a few over fifty years old.

In addition, for James, religious conversion seems to occur mostly in those he characterizes as “sick souls,” people who are fundamentally dissatisfied and find the wrongness in the world, at times to the extent of going through a “dark night of the soul.” There must be dissatisfaction to motivate religious change, but for James the dissatisfaction is pervasive in those who experience a conversion. Although James does not consider the “sick soul” pathological, the notion that some sort of psychological conflict underlies religious conversions has persisted in much of the psychological literature.

Freud, in his one case report of a religious conversion, attributed a young physician’s epiphany to the eruption of unresolved oedipal conflicts (Freud, 1928). Chana Ullman (1989) has asserted that converts are not so much seeking new religious beliefs as they are seeking new relationships and that the attraction of a new religion is based in the convert’s need for a new father figure. Ullman interviewed forty converts to Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Hare Krishna Hinduism, and Baha’i. Most of the converts she interviewed reported conflict with their families of origin predating their religious quest. She asserted that these converts found new authority figures in their new religious communities, replacing dysfunctional parental relationships. A few of the subjects in her

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<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, most rabbis would advise adolescents seeking conversion to Judaism to defer the decision until they are living as independent adults. It would be difficult for an adolescent living in the non-Jewish parental home to live a Jewish life, and the sort of conversion experience that James and Starbuck describe as an adolescent phenomenon would be if anything at all only the start to becoming Jewish.

study converted to Judaism. Two of them were *ba'alei teshuvot* who were described in detail; they were raised in Jewish homes and became more intensely observant. She mentions others as converts to Judaism but does not describe them in detail.

Almost none of the participants in this research described the sort of family conflict that Ullman found in her participants. The word most often used by my participants in describing their families' reaction to their conversion was "supportive." In addition, most of the liberal Jewish congregations do not emphasize the sort of authority attributed to the rabbi of an ultra-Orthodox community that Ullman's two *ba'alei teshuvot* described. I was not able to do the sort of in-depth psychological interviewing that Ullman did with her participants. Nevertheless, only two of the participants in this study reported any conflict with their families over their conversion.

Attempts have been made to construct universal psychological or sociological typologies of converts and models of the process of conversion. Some of these may be applicable to conversion to Judaism. John Lofland and Norman Skonovd (1981) describe conversion "motifs," which they defined as "key, critical, orienting, defining, or 'motif' experiences as they vary across conversions . . . an effort to attend to accounts of conversion which describe the subjective perceptions of the convert" as well as "the 'objective ways in which the social organizational aspects of the process differ" (p 374). Lofland and Skonovd identify six such motifs – intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. The intellectual motif, which they describe as rare, is characterized by the individual's searching for information and new beliefs with little or no social interaction with a religious group and minimal emotional content. In these cases "a reasonably high level of belief occurs prior to actual participation in the religion's ritual and

organizational activities” before formal conversion (p. 376). The “mystical” motif corresponds fairly well with the Pauline paradigm. The “experimental” motif is typified by tentative and gradual change in belief and behavior over a period of time, with curiosity as the most prominent affective content. The affectional motif of conversion is one in which interpersonal bonds are the fundamental aspect of the process; the convert joins a new religious group as he or she comes to accept the beliefs of friends. This motif may fit both many of Ullmann’s subjects and the effects of recruitment by new religious movements. Lofland and Skonovd describe “revivalist” conversions as those that “occur within the context of an emotionally aroused crowd; they feel these are declining in frequency and are most likely to be mild rather than as profound as revivalist preachers would want to portray them. “Coercive” conversions are described with terms such as “brainwashing,” “thought control,” and “programming;” Lofland and Skonovd discuss these in terms of state-controlled compulsion.

In these terms, the converts I interviewed seem to fit mostly into the motif of affectional conversions. These are conversions in which interpersonal bonds are the fundamental aspect of the process and in which converts join the new religious group as they come to accept the beliefs of their friends. Almost all of the participants in this study had developed some degree of interaction with Jews – including marriage to a Jewish spouse in several cases – before making the decision to convert. That conversion to Judaism requires a period of study and usually of living among other Jews before formally converting implies that converts to Judaism will have developed a network of relationships with Jews. However, it is not clear that conversion to Judaism is as motivated by the wish to adopt the beliefs of such friends as Lofland and Skonovd’s affectional motif suggests.

With a few exceptions, belonging to a Jewish community seemed to develop after the decision to convert is made rather than as a consequence of the associations. Since conversion to Judaism requires a period of study before formal conversion, converts to Judaism might be classified among Lofland and Skonovod's intellectual motif. Lofland and Skonovod regard this motif as rare, possibly because they characterize this motif as requiring study and change in belief as occurring in isolation from the religious community. The study required for conversion to Judaism, however, occurs while the potential convert is also participating in Jewish communal religious activities.

Much of the research on religious conversion in general has focused on the effects of social pressures on conversion. Henri Gooren (2007, 2010) has critiqued these studies, noting that most of the sociological study of religious conversion has been based on work with new religious movements such as the Unification Church, movements that are fervently missionary and which actively recruit members. Even though some Reform Jewish authorities have called for "outreach," active recruitment of proselytes is not been characteristic of contemporary American Judaism. Gooren defines religious conversion as necessarily involving a "comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity (2010, p. 3). He tries to integrate psychological, sociological, and institutional aspects of the process into what he calls the "conversion career." In the process of such a "career, the convert moves between levels of religious activity or from states of "disaffiliation" or "pre-affiliation" to states of "conversion" and/or "confession" (also from "affiliation" to "disaffiliation"). In a number of conversion narrative texts he identified the following typical conversion careers: (1) A "parental religion" conversion career describes persons whose "conversion" involves increased involvement in the religious tradi-



tion they were raised in. These persons may not be considered “converts” in most studies as they do not formally change their religious affiliation, although in other ways their religious worldview and self-identity may change. (2) Religious seekers and shoppers are those converts who have actively searched the contemporary religious marketplace and have affiliated with a religious community. Gooren notes that these seem to come mostly from families that provided little or no religious involvement and that seeking and shopping requires that an “easily accessible supply of competing religions” (p. 85) be available to them. (3) Committed converts are those who seem most dedicated to telling the stories of their conversions, often in order to convince others also to join religious community; these tended to have come from families with a high level of religious commitment, and their conversions tended to have involved some degree of deeply moving mystical experience. (4) Gooren found that narratives of what he called “confessing leaders” were difficult to find and the few he did describe had difficulty maintaining this high level of involvement. These are converts who not only change their religious affiliation but also manifest a “high level of participation inside the new religious group and a strong missionary attitude toward nonmembers of the group” (p. 4). Gooren’s paradigmatic example of this conversion career is a young English man who was raised in a Muslim family, became devout and even radical, began to participate in a fundamentalist terrorist organization, and made a “second 180 degree turn,” (p. 101), becoming someone who now actively argues for discussion of the role of violence in Islam. (5) Disillusioned disaffiliates are those who actively leave one religious affiliation and disaffiliate entirely from any religious community. These tended to be persons with a higher degree of education, some of whom developed intellectual doubts about religion.

None of Gooren's examples of typical conversion careers are of converts to Judaism, and his own focus is on the application of his model to conversions from and to Pentecostal, Mormon, and Catholic churches in Latin America. Some of the participants in this study would be described as following a "conversion career" of spiritual seekers and shoppers although in most cases there was little real "shopping," and the participants seem to have connected with Judaism soon after feeling disaffiliated with their childhood religious orientation. The large number of the participants in this study who had fairly extensive religious education in childhood and adolescence would suggest that familial religious involvement may not prevent spiritual seeking/shopping, and certainly current American society does provide ready access to a variety of religious options.

### **Is there a typical convert to Judaism?**

Until recently it has been mostly assumed that most conversions to Judaism are "motivated by marriage" (a motivation that is halakhically suspect), and what study there has been of converts to Judaism has focused on those who convert in the context of marriage to a Jewish partner. Egon Mayer and Amy Avgar (1987) interviewed both converted and non-converted spouses married to Jews, focusing on the question of why some convert and others do not. They concluded that "Taking the personal, familial, and social characteristics of respondents into account, it appears that conversion is the outcome of a series of relative influences that simultaneously 'pull' the individual toward Judaism or away from the religious background of the family of origin" (p. 34). In addition, they concluded that conversion tended to strengthen family ties, "which ultimately enhance the social fabric of the family as a unit and as a context for a stable Jewish life."

Sylvia Fishman (2006) conducted 94 interviews with intermarried couples. Of these couples 37 of the non-Jewish spouses had converted, some had definitely decided not to convert, and some were undecided at the time. She classified these converts as “Activist,” “Accommodating,” or “Ambivalent,” based on their felt connection with Judaism. About ten to fifteen percent of the converts had become “extraordinarily involved Jews . . . passionate Zionists and public advocates for Israel and for Jews around the world” (p. 15). Another ten to fifteen percent were “regretful converts who long for the culture they left behind and participate in few Jewish activities” (p. 15). Fishman concluded that advocating for conversion in cases of intermarriage increased the chances that the non-Jewish spouse would convert, especially if the non-Jewish spouse had an earlier attraction to Judaism. The converts she interviewed cited aspects of Judaism that they preferred over Christian cultural characteristics, including openness to questions and discussion of ideas, lack of dogma, emphasis on family life, lack of emphasis on salvation, and some specific Jewish observances such as Shabbat and holidays. Male converts in these intermarriages reported dissatisfaction with Christianity beginning in adolescence, and men and women equally reported spiritual reasons for their conversions

In 1973 because of increasing concern about intermarriage a course for potential converts had been organized in Chicago by Reform and Conservative rabbis. Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik (1993) sent a survey to former students of this course. Most of these converts had been in marriages to Jewish spouses or were contemplating such a marriage; fewer than ten percent converted before meeting a Jewish partner. Forster and Tabachnik identified factors that “pushed” potential converts toward Judaism and noted that the converts generally came from families that were fairly religiously ac-

tive and most had several years of religious education in their family's religion but expressed dissatisfaction with the family's religion. Many of them had accepted a belief in Jesus as divine in adolescence but had questioned that belief later in life. Forster and Tabachnik concluded that these converts had not been pushed out of their family's religion by negative parental relationships (contrary to Ullman). Nevertheless, most of these converts described their relationships with their Jewish in-laws (or prospective in-laws) as closer than their relationships with their own families. In three-quarters of the converts, a strong factor pulling them toward conversion to Judaism was the spouse's or the prospective spouse's strong Jewish identity. In only a few cases was there conflict with the convert's family over the conversion. Although in many ways these converts had adopted a Jewish identity, Forster and Tabachnik found that they were not very concerned about the Jewish identity of their children and were reluctant to restrict their children's freedom to choose a religion of their own.

In her PhD dissertation Diane Centolella (2001), a social worker and herself a convert to Reform Judaism, interviewed ten "Jews by Choice" in her community. The focus of her research was on constructing a six-stage process of conversion to Judaism. These "stages" began with the convert's lack of connection to a childhood religion, a period of questioning beliefs, discovery and exploration of Judaism, commitment to conversion (including the formal conversion process), and adjustment to life as a Jew. All of her interviewees converted to Reform Judaism, thus biasing her observations toward the most liberal wing of American Judaism. Five of her interviewees were married or engaged to a Jewish spouse at the time of their conversion. However; two were in marriages to non-Jewish spouses who did not convert, and two were African-American. Centolla

did not focus on distinctions between the converts who were married to Jewish spouses and those who were either single or married to non-Jewish spouses, and her sample size may be too small to draw conclusions from.

Only a few things can be said in general about the converts I interviewed, and it is not clear that a typical convert can be defined from this study. Not only are there geographic and denominational biases in the sample, but the sample size may not be large enough to describe typical “conversion careers” for contemporary converts to Judaism. Some generalizations, however, can be made.

Frequently the decision to convert to Judaism seems to be made in early adulthood by a person who may or may not have had intensive religious instruction in childhood and adolescence. Frequently, a potential convert had begun to learn about Judaism in college, even though he or she may have had some contact with Jews before then. Some of the participants mentioned taking college courses on Judaism. Abigail started asking her father about Judaism after she took a course on the Holocaust. Brenda’s college minor in religious studies introduced her to Judaism. Jennifer wrote a paper on Judaism for a college sociology class and then began to attend Shabbat services and classes at the university’s Hillel house. After deciding to convert to Judaism, Yvonne also affiliated with her college’s Hillel organization.

The converts I interviewed did not make their decisions to convert lightly. In addition, most of them seemed to seek a well-structured program toward conversion, involving some serious study – a few even beyond what was required. Almost all of the participants described writing essays and discussing their decision with a *beit din* and going through the formal rituals of conversion – circumcision or *hatafat dam brit* and im-

mersion in a *mikvah*. A few participants made it clear that they were continuing to study about Judaism either after their formal conversion or in order to satisfy themselves that they were fully ready to convert.

Marriage may no longer be a significant motivation for conversion to Judaism; however, being married to a Jewish spouse may lead to conversion. Recently it has been noted that a significant number of converts are not engaged or married to a Jewish spouse and are motivated more by individual religious concerns (personal communication, M. Wasserman, October 2010) A rabbi in Los Angeles who conducts a number of introduction to Judaism classes for potential converts has also noted this trend (personal communication, N. Weinberg, November 2010). That several of the potential converts I interviewed were unmarried and not in a committed relationship with a Jewish partner suggests that the ten percent of unmarried converts that Forster and Tabachnik found may be increasing. Several of the participants in my study were already married to Jewish spouses and were considering conversion to Judaism after some years of marriage. Although a few of the participants I interviewed mentioned knowing others who were taking conversion classes, none of the interviewees were themselves converting in order to marry a Jewish spouse. The new pattern seems to be marriage first, conversion (possibly) later.

A few of these converts seemed to have been what once would have been referred to as “god-fearers,” people who associated with a Jewish community for a time before deciding to convert formally. For instance, Ethan had been married to a Jewish woman for many years and had raised Jewish children who are now adults. He and his wife belonged to a Reform congregation, but he said he had postponed converting until his

mother had died (aged 100!). Olivia, also an older convert, had been associated with a Conservative congregation for a few years before proceeding to conversion.

Belonging to a Jewish community seems to be important for most of the participants; both of those who had essentially dropped out of the process over the year cited a lack of support from the Jewish community they associated with as one of the reasons for their not proceeding with conversion. Although many of the participants were studying individually with their rabbis, several of them mentioned that they were taking a course with other potential converts. Some of these participants said that they were going to the *mikvah* as a group, and for some of them, having some sort of recognition afterwards in their congregation was also important.

Although it is commonly thought that converts to Judaism (as to other religions) are more religiously observant than those who are raised in the religious tradition, most of the participants described themselves as less observant than most Orthodox rabbis would have required of a convert. Few of the participants described themselves as taking on strict levels of keeping kosher or Shabbat restrictions. Nevertheless, many of them predicted that they might be more observant as their circumstances changed or as they became more comfortable with doing so. It seemed that keeping kosher was something that most of the interview participants aspired to, perhaps eventually, but few of them expected to have to keep maintain any degree of observance in order to be Jewish. Both keeping kosher and observing Shabbat restrictions were something that the interview participants seemed to negotiate. Since converts would acquire their attitudes toward observance not only from the rabbis who were their teachers but also from the congregations they associate with, it would be interesting to compare the level of observance of

these converts to the level of observance of other members of the congregations they associated with. It would also be interesting to be able to inquire a few years later whether the converts had become more or less observant.

I thought of some of the participants as “outliers,” converts whose stories were in some sense out of the usual. One participant described conversion to Judaism as part of reforming his entire lifestyle. Keith, who described himself as someone who “hung out with Mexicans and Black guys” and had a tattoo of the “ram of Satan” on his chest, said that “The way that they're telling you to act with people just made a difference in the way I felt, the way I started treating people; my attitude on life has just changed hugely just because of this idea that Jews put forth about compassion and kindness to other people and what you don't want done to you, you don't do to someone else.” His wife was converting as well. He was keeping kosher, wearing *tzitzit*, and covering his head and was drawn to attending services at a Chabad synagogue, even though he knew that they would consider him only a “righteous gentile.” This degree of shift in personal meaning system<sup>39</sup> seemed to be unusual in this sample.

Laura was another sort of outlier; she seemed to have the most difficulty adopting a Jewish identity. She described being Jewish as different from being Christian because she saw Christianity as rejecting, judging, alienating, and ostracizing others. However, she also resisted taking on a Jewish identity, including a Hebrew name, as she felt doing so would alienate herself from her family and its traditions. She also planned not to

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<sup>39</sup> Raymond Paloutzian (2005) defines the personal meaning system as including cognitive structures such as “conceptions about an ultimate concern such as the nature of the sacred being (e.g., the attributes of God) and its relation to people, the self, other aspects of this world, and whatever there may be beyond this world” and “strong conscious and unconscious emotions.” (p. 332)



change many behaviors that would make a distinction between herself and her non-Jewish family; for instance, she would not keep kosher because she felt that doing so would mean she could not share meals with friends and family.

A few of the participants mentioned speculation that they may have had some Jewish ancestry. This sort of returning to one's familial roots was most evident in the case of Thomas. He was a 47-year-old gay man who considered conversion first because he and his partner wanted to raise the partner's daughter as Jewish. As he made that decision he also recognized that his family had very likely come from a Portuguese converso background. His grandmother lit candles on Friday "for luck" and told him and his brother that it was a secret that they were really Jews. A professor in graduate school confirmed for him that his family name was one often given to Portuguese Jews who were forced to convert in the fifteenth century. At the time of his second interview Thomas identified himself as both a Jew and a member of the *b'nei anusim*, descendants of forced converts from Judaism.

The older participants were also outliers in different ways. Paula, at 51 years old, had come from a Buddhist background and had been married to a Jewish husband for about sixteen years; as she studied for conversion, she said he was also becoming more religious. She considered converting for about five years and began to feel that "My soul is screaming for religion," and to realize that "What Judaism asks of you is totally unlike any other religion." Olivia, who was converting in her sixties, felt welcomed in the Conservative congregation she had attended for some time. She felt that converting was a matter of making her religious identity formal, and she was looking forward to joining in some of the synagogue's social service activities. Only his debilitating illness kept her

husband from converting along with her. Sheila, at fifty years old, was determined to “be a Jew” even though her Catholic husband was not converting and some of her step-children disapproved. Charles, who was converting in his fifties because he felt that “God was after me,” was unusual in his emphasis that he was converting because he felt compelled to do so. He also felt compelled to be observant: “Without a doubt! I mean either you go all the way or you don’t. I still don’t understand how can some Jews say, I’ll do this but I won’t do that? It’s like you’ve got to go all the way. So I would keep kosher, I would follow the commandments.”

### **Summary**

The results of this study are in no way conclusive, except perhaps to say that there is no typical convert to Judaism. Some comments, however, can be made, especially about conversion and marriage, Jewish observances, and the importance of the Jewish community for converts.

Planning to marry a Jewish spouse does not seem to be a dominant motivation any longer; instead the acceptance of intermarriage seems in many cases eventually to lead to conversion to Judaism. However, we have no information as to how many intermarriages lead to loss of a Jewish identity for the Jewish spouse or even to conversion out of Judaism. The number of people converting to Judaism who are not married to or contemplating marriage to a Jewish spouse does seem to be increasing.

The converts I interviewed seemed largely to be ambivalent about Jewish observances such as keeping kosher or Shabbat restrictions. Thus, none of these participants would have been accepted by the most Orthodox rabbis who require a sincere and complete commitment to living an observant lifestyle. Popular opinion, however, is that mar-

riage to a convert leads a Jewish spouse to be more observant since the converted spouse tends to become more observant over time. Thus, I wonder if the participants in this study may become more observant as they live as Jews over time. If so, it may be important to look at conversion to Judaism as a process that continues past the formalities of circumcision and immersion.

Belonging to a Jewish community seems to be important for potential converts. The two participants who essentially dropped out of the process cited lack of support from their community as a significant factor in their loss of interest in pursuing conversion. Belonging to the Jewish people seemed to be as important as religious belief or spiritual experiences for potential converts. It may be, too, that converts take their cues about observance and lifestyle from the Jewish communities they are joining. Since none of the participants in this study were working with Orthodox (or even modern Orthodox) rabbis, it is not clear what the effect would be of joining a more observant congregation.

The goal of qualitative research, especially this sort of grounded theory research, is not to prove anything but to address questions and to suggest further research. Thus, it is not a failure that there are questions remaining from this study. The only clear conclusion, however, is that conversion to Judaism is still a significant occurrence, even in the open and secular American society.

## Chapter 7

### CONCLUSIONS

Clearly Jewish attitudes and toward converts and halakhic decisions about them have changed over the centuries and continue to change as the relationship between Judaism and American society changes. The openness of American society has raised questions about who is a Jew and what are the boundaries around being Jewish. Some of these questions are involved in the issues around conversion to Judaism, and just as in the nineteenth century, there are liberal and stringent responses to these problems. The participants in my research illustrate some of these issues.

In medieval Europe it was clear to all who was a Jew since Jews lived largely separately from the surrounding society; nevertheless even then, some Christians sought to become Jews and had to separate themselves completely from the Christian community to do so. Beginning in the nineteenth century with the breakdown of the ghettos in Europe, Jews mingled with the majority society, still mostly Christian, in new ways, and at that time intermarriage became a concern. Converts to Judaism involved in these mixed marriages did not have to leave the larger society, even though European society was in many ways antisemitic. At that time rabbinic authorities debated whether to accept non-Jews who wanted to marry – or had already civilly married – Jewish spouses. There were debates over the sincerity of these converts and the effect of accepting them on the Jewish community, with some Orthodox authorities ruling stringently and others leniently; both sides advanced valid halakhic arguments. The development of Reform Judaism at that time provided an alternative for increasingly secular Jews and those who wanted to intermarry; for Reform Judaism *halakha* was not the basis for their decisions.

In the United States, beginning in the twentieth century the social stigma of being Jewish gradually was greatly reduced, and by the middle of the twentieth century Judaism had become an accepted American religion. William Herberg's discussion of the sociology of American religion, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, in 1955, defined Judaism as one of America's three "religious melting pots." From the middle of the twentieth century Reform Jewish rabbis emphasized Judaism's "universal religious values" and urged outreach not only to non-Jewish spouses in intermarriages but also to all people who might be attracted to those values. Reform Judaism dropped ritual requirements for conversion to Judaism, effectively changing the religious meaning of conversion into the convert's "affirmation" of Judaism.

Data from the 1990 Jewish Population Survey showed that the intermarriage rate nearly quadrupled between 1971 and 1990, approaching fifty percent of marriages by Jews. Both Reform and Conservative rabbis sought to attract the conversions of non-Jewish spouses in these marriages. Most of such converts were to Reform Judaism; they were observed to be "as religious as Jewish-born Reform adherents" but to lack the "ethnic traits" of Jewish-born Reform Jews (Lazerwitz, 1995).

At the same time, as Samuel Heilman (2006) observed, Orthodox Judaism began to "slide to the right," becoming more stringent about observance, dress, and behavior within the larger society. Heilman contends that for Orthodox Judaism, the more stringent ultra-Orthodox came to define what was "really" Jewish. This movement to define Orthodox Judaism as distinct from the larger American society was in many ways a reaction to a sense that the boundaries between Jews and the majority society were becoming blurred. Those who designated themselves as "Modern Orthodox" took a centrist

position, straddling the boundary and sometimes coming into conflict with the more conservative Orthodox authorities.

Sylvia Fishman (2000) discussed the blurring of that boundary, using data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey along with focus group interviews and analysis of Jewish images in popular culture. She observed that Judaism has adapted to the majority American culture in two ways, which she labeled compartmentalization and coalescence. Compartmentalization occurs when a person lives in two cultures with differing values and attitudes by living by the rules of each culture in separate areas of one's life. For instance, a Jewish man who considers himself observant may wear a kippah when he is "being Jewish" – attending services or visiting with other Jewish friends – but not while he is at work. Orthodox Jews living in suburban locations some distance from a synagogue may drive on the Sabbath to within a short distance and walk the remaining blocks but will not drive directly to the synagogue parking lot.

Coalescence occurs when the attitudes and values of the two cultures blend into each other so that some of the attitudes and values of the majority culture are adopted into the minority culture and may even be seen as belonging to the minority culture. Coalescence is probably inevitable when two cultures live together for a time, and historically Judaism has been influenced by the majority cultures it has lived among. With time coalesced values may even become "traditional; for instance, the *streimel*, a fur hat that was worn by 18<sup>th</sup>-century Polish nobility is now the badge of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man. Currently some aspects of coalescence are resisted. Within liberal Jewish congregations, Jewish women adopted the values of American feminism, so that *bat mitzvah* celebrations, women wearing *tallit* at prayer services and the ordination of women as rabbis

were not only accepted but were interpreted as reflecting Jewish views of the equality of men and women. A recent series of popular novels about the daughters of the medieval rabbi, Rashi, portrayed these women as studying Talmud and acting as a community *mo-hel* and supported the adoption of feminist values; if these medieval Jewish women could do all this, then women have always had those roles open to them. Another example of coalescence is the development of the concept of “eco-kosher.” Mainstream American focus on ecologic concerns is becoming for some Jews as much an aspect of what it means for foods to be kosher as the details of ritual slaughter have always been.

Coalescence then threatens to blur the boundaries between what is Jewish and what is American. For much of liberal American Judaism, this blurring is acceptable, and the American values become part of what is labeled as Jewish concern with social justice and other universal values. However, coalescence can also mean changing what it means to be Jewish, and the reaction among many Orthodox rabbis has been to define the boundaries more definitely, “boundary sealing.” Thus, although it has become more accepted for Orthodox Jewish women to study Talmudic texts previously reserved for men, some Orthodox authorities have reacted with horror to a feminist development among observant Jewish women, the formation of women’s prayer groups. The normative practice for observant Jewish women had always been to pray individually, often at home rather than in the synagogue. As these observant women began to identify with American feminism, they formed “*tefillah* groups” that sometimes even included reading from the Torah by women among women. Most of these groups acknowledged that they were not *minyans* in the Jewish legal sense of ten men praying together and therefore omitted parts of the liturgy that could be said only in a *minyan* of men. Although some Orthodox con-

gregations have allowed space for these women's prayer groups, other Orthodox rabbis asserted that if women were allowed to pray in a group (especially to read the Torah together), they would be mocking "real" Jewish practice and that the prayer groups would lead to other forbidden practices. For these rabbis, a change that might be permissible was forbidden because it might be contaminated by non-Jewish values. Even though there might be a strong halakhic argument permitting women's prayer groups, that they represented an intrusion of majority American cultural values into Judaism seems to be the reason that they provoked a strong negative, boundary-sealing reaction.

American individualism is another value with which Orthodox Judaism may be resisting coalescence. Wade Clark Roof (1987, 1999) identified the "baby boomers" born between the middle of the 1940s and the early 1960s as a population that has formed a "quest culture," in which spirituality has become a matter for self-conscious reflection and individualism. Within this culture, many define themselves even now as "spiritual but not religious," and the boundaries between traditional religious communities are broken down and redrawn. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, done by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life<sup>40</sup> in 2008 revealed that religious affiliation in America continues to be "both very diverse and extremely fluid." The Landscape Survey found that more than a quarter of American adults had left their original childhood religious affiliation and either joined another religious group or declared themselves as having no religious affiliation. Switching among Protestant Christian denominations was very frequent, and all religious affiliations were found to be both losing and gaining adherents.

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<sup>40</sup> <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>



In their study of a group that they labeled “moderately affiliated” American Jews, Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen (2000) found that for large numbers of Jews identity as Jews was based in a profound sense of individualism, a very American value. These Jews understood their Judaism as something that was both their birthright and a freely chosen religious identity. Their sense of affiliation as Jews was based not on a sense of “obligations to the Jewish group (though some felt these obligations), or from the historical destiny of the Jewish group . . . or the need to insure Jewish survival” (p. 35) but in their sense of individual autonomy. These Jews tended to believe in God but mostly as “a force or spirit that is present in the world rather than as a personal being endowed with consciousness and purpose” (p. 157); they found God in private spirituality rather than in Jewish liturgy and texts.

This very American sense of individuality and of religion as something that one chooses freely is also reflected in the common assertion that nowadays “All Jews are Jews by Choice.” If Judaism in America is something that is chosen, then an American Jewish identity includes a diversity of what it means to be Jewish. For instance, in addition to what could be called “core Jews” identifiable by traditional religious and cultural criteria, American Judaism now includes many the Orthodox would not accept as Jewish – secular Jews, non-Jews who like Greco-Roman “god fearers” participate in Jewish congregational life, intermarried Jews who also participate in non-Jewish religious activities, halakhic Jews who do not consider themselves Jewish, “half-Jewish” children of intermarried couples, non-Jews who consider themselves Jewish by ancestry, and Jewish children by patrilineal descent. Boundaries between Jewish movements are blurred; some

congregations are identified informally as “Conserva-dox” or “Reform-ative,” and Jews move freely across denominational lines.

The very openness of American religious culture may also be contributing to the number of converts to Judaism as well as to the increasing diversity about what it means to be Jewish. This open religious marketplace may suggest to some people that conversion to Judaism is as available to them as joining another Christian church. Personal spirituality played a role in the narratives of several of the converts I interviewed, especially those whose conversions seem to have been triggered by some sort of personal revelation. Abigail cited a life-altering spiritual experience as the impetus for her conversion to Judaism. Joyce also described personal revelation as the reason for her conversion. Keith seemed to have totally reformed his life along with his conversion. Charles said that “God was after me,” after finding himself compelled to try to meet Ann Frank’s father.

The Orthodox Jewish reaction to the effect of an open society by boundary sealing reflects an anxiety that somehow the essence of Judaism will be lost if contamination by outside cultures is allowed to happen. Zalmen Slesinger, who was associated with the Orthodox American Association for Jewish Education, observed that “The Jew’s continuous exposure to, and confrontation with, challenging alternatives to his ethnic way of perceiving, believing and behaving . . . tend to make him self-conscious and insecure about this ethnic difference, and . . . undermine his confidence in the legitimacy of his heritage and its relevancy in the contemporary world” (p. 227). Requiring converts to commit to a totally observant lifestyle and raising the possibility of annulling conversions (which has been more emphasized by the religious right in Israel than in America) is one

of the ways that Orthodoxy polices the boundaries between being American and being Jewish, boundaries that may be threatened by converts who bring their American (or even Christian) values and attitudes along with them.

The converts I interviewed certainly illustrate the coalescence that liberally allowing conversion to Judaism brings with it. At the most liberal end, Reform converts such as Darlene affirm their Judaism without traditional ritual. Darlene's Jewish identity seemed to center around cooking foods identified with Jewish holidays. She put up a Christmas tree in her home in order to be able to share the holiday with non-Jewish relatives. She identified Jewish beliefs with Hillel's "negative Golden Rule" – to refrain from doing to others what you would not want done to yourself. She was unsure about differences between Jewish and Christian beliefs and justified her uncertainty about the divinity of Jesus by claiming to be open-minded. "I see things fairly open ended; none of us really frankly knows. That is just the way I feel. I feel like the open endless in me is okay. Basically I don't know."

American society is increasingly accepting of homosexuality; a number of states now allow gay men and lesbians to marry legally. However, Orthodox Judaism continues to view homosexuality as problematic. Three of the converts I interviewed, Henry, Howard, and Thomas, were openly gay men, who knew that they would have difficulty being accepted by Orthodox rabbis. Therefore they chose to work with Reform rabbis. Thomas also identified himself as the descendent of *conversos* and apparently now has formed a Jewish identity based on his ancestry.

Observance, for the Jews that Cohen and Eisen described, was also a matter of personal choice rather than commandment; their attitude was that "one need not take on

any ritual with which one is uncomfortable” (2000, p. 36). Most of the converts I interviewed – just as most American Jews – felt that observance was a matter of choice and convenience. Michelle described keeping kosher as difficult but as “One of those things for me that will probably grow more into being. As far as kosher goes, probably more getting there is a step by step process.” Robert and his wife said that they would “pick and choose” which aspects of keeping kosher they preferred, since keeping kosher was a matter of “paying attention to what you’re eating and being grateful to have it to eat at all.” They light candles on Friday night for Shabbat but feel that they cannot observe Shabbat restrictions because his wife has to do school work over weekends. Their work makes it difficult for Curt and Felice to attend Shabbat services. Frank would go to Friday night services, but he is taking college classes that meet late on Friday afternoons. Yvonne is still in college with limited finances; she has to share cooking facilities and living quarters with other students so that keeping kosher is difficult and she has to do school work on weekends.

However, converts to liberal Judaism can become more observant. Agatha described herself as a religious seeker who had been “taking on elements of Judaism in my life” and practicing as a Reform Jew for a few years before she met her husband, who was Jewish but not religious. After her conversion with a Conservative rabbi in Israel, Agatha and her husband became more than ordinarily observant, and Agatha then pursued an Orthodox conversion in order to be accepted by her community of friends in Israel, where they planned to live. Halakhic stringency regarding a Jewish man’s marrying his non-Jewish civilly married wife seems to have been set aside in this case.

As things are now, almost all of the converts I interviewed would not have met the standards of the Orthodox authorities such as rabbis Herbert Bomzer (1996) and Moshe Feinstein, who require complete commitment to an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. Modern Orthodox authorities, including rabbis Maurice Lamm (1991) and Mark Angel (2005) are more accepting and somewhat lenient. Both of them recognize that converts can change. Angel in fact urges some acceptance of non-Orthodox converts, holding out the prospect that converts often do become more observant.

Coalescence and converts are facts of life in an open society, and Orthodox Jewish authorities will only create problems if they continue to demand complete observance from converts as one way of sealing the boundaries between being Jewish and being American, they will only create problems. Zvi Zahor (2008) described the complexities that could result if allowing conversions to be annulled years later, even after a convert's children may have married or become rabbis. A born Jew can become more observant and start living and worshiping with an Orthodox congregation, but can a convert move freely into a more observant lifestyle without being asked, like Agatha, to convert again? Consider the possibility that the granddaughter of a Reform convert such as Darlene may become more observant. Will she have to convert – after living her entire life as a Jew – in order to marry an Orthodox husband?

Angel (2005) suggests that conversion to Judaism could be viewed as a process, with the ritual formalities occurring at some point along the way. As converts join Jewish communities, they can be expected to develop more commitment to living the lifestyle of their communities. If the boundaries between Orthodox and liberal Jewish communities are fluid and permeable, and if Orthodoxy can present viable rationales for ob-

servance to both born Jews and converts, then it is entirely possible that being an observant Jew can be compatible with being an American Jew. If not, Orthodox Judaism may become more and more isolated from American Judaism.

The converts I interviewed probably do not represent a complete picture of conversion to Judaism in contemporary America. Their experiences, however, do provide some glimpse into the process as it is being enacted now. They also raise questions for further research. What sorts of Jewish identities do converts construct over a longer time than I was able to assess? Do converts – as is said popularly – lead their spouses to be more observant? What role do the Jewish community and synagogues play in maintaining the convert's commitment to being Jewish? What role do converts play in the process of coalescence as American values and religious concepts become Jewish values and concepts? The conversion narrative literature and my research try to address some of these questions, but more longitudinal research would more thoroughly address these questions.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT CARD SENT TO RABBIS

## Are you considering conversion to Judaism?

*Would you participate in a study of how individuals experience the process of conversion to Judaism?*

See information on reverse



I am a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at Arizona State University, currently beginning my dissertation research. I am interested in understanding how people who are formally converting to Judaism experience the process of becoming Jewish.

I have set up an online survey, and if you are considering conversion to Judaism -- even as a possibility -- I would very much appreciate your participation. It should take about 30 minutes to complete, and all responses will be kept confidential.

The website address is  
<http://www.surveymk.com/s/jewishconversionstudy>

In addition to the online survey, you will have the opportunity to contact me directly for a more in-depth interview (if you agree). Your participation in this project will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you,  
Marian Cohen  
[marian.cohen@asu.edu](mailto:marian.cohen@asu.edu)

Note: Participants in this study must be 18 years or older



APPENDIX B  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

The following is the text of the online survey that participants were asked to respond to.

Hello, I am Mariam Cohen, a PhD candidate graduate student, working under the direction of Professor Joel Gereboff, PhD, who is the Director of the Division of Religious Studies in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

This survey is being done in connection with my dissertation research for a PhD in Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

I am interested in understanding the experiences of persons who are considering converting to Judaism as they go through that process. I would appreciate your participation in this survey, which should take about 30 minutes to complete. You must complete the survey at one time as you cannot return to it once you have closed the survey.

At the end of the survey you will also be asked if I may contact you about a year from now and have you complete the survey again in order to see what developments there have been for you in this time.

In addition, at the end of the survey you will be asked whether you would agree to participate in a follow-up telephone interview in order to expand on your responses to this survey.

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You may skip questions if you wish. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time. Your participation in the follow-up survey and/or a telephone interview is also entirely voluntary, and you may participate in the survey without agreeing to the follow-up survey or telephone interview.

You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study.

The purpose of this research is to enlarge our understanding of how converts to Judaism are led to that decision and how they experience the process of becoming Jewish. Although there is no benefit to individuals participating in this research, your responses will contribute to our understanding of this important decision in your and others' lives.

**Confidentiality:** Responses to this survey are confidential. If you chose to participate in the follow-up survey and/or interview, all identifying information will be kept confidential by me and used only in order to contact you in person. Your name and/or contact information will be kept in a way that only I can access, and all contact information will be destroyed after all data collection for this research is finished. The results of this study may become a part of my dissertation and may be used in other reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used in any way.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact me at [mariam.cohen@asu.edu](mailto:mariam.cohen@asu.edu) or my research director, Dr. Gereboff at [joel.gereboff@asu.edu](mailto:joel.gereboff@asu.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 480-965-6788.

Your responses to the questions on this website will be considered as your consent to participate.

Even if you are not certain, do you think that there may be some possibility that you would consider formally converting to Judaism?     Yes     No

(A “No” response linked to a page thanking the person for their interest but explaining that the survey is limited to those people who are considering conversion.)

First, some questions about you

Gender\_\_\_\_\_

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Would you describe your childhood religious affiliation as

\_\_\_\_Protestant Christian

\_\_\_\_Evangelical Christian

\_\_\_\_Roman Catholic Christian

\_\_\_\_Orthodox Christian

\_\_\_\_Muslim

\_\_\_\_Buddhist

\_\_\_\_Hindu

\_\_\_\_Atheist

\_\_\_\_None

\_\_\_\_Other (Please specify)

Are you married to, engaged to, or in a seriously committed relationship with a partner

who is Jewish? \_\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_No

If (or when) you convert to Judaism, what sort of congregation would you find most suitable?

\_\_\_\_Reform

\_\_\_\_Conservative

\_\_\_\_Orthodox

\_\_\_\_Modern Orthodox

\_\_\_\_Reconstructionist

\_\_\_\_Other (Please specify)

How did you learn about this survey?

The statements below describe some attitudes, customs, and beliefs associated with Judaism.

Please rate each statement as it pertains to you today.

1 strongly disagree

2 disagree

3 uncertain

4 agree

5 strongly agree

I am interested in Jewish literature, art and music, and other Jewish cultural forms.

It is important to me that there always be a Jewish people.

I take personal pride in the accomplishments of other Jews who have made it big (e.g., Steven Spielberg, Leonard Bernstein).

Jewish parents should make every effort to make sure their children do not marry non-Jews.

I feel a strong commitment toward Jewish people.

I have a positive attitude towards Jewish converts.

My feeling of commitment toward Jewish people has increased as an adult.

The teachings of Judaism can enrich the life of any Jew.

My feeling of commitment toward Jewish people has increased as an adult.

I engage in formal study of Judaism.

It is important for Jewish boys to be circumcised.

It is important for Jewish children to have a bar or bat mitzvah.

My household uses separate dishes for meat and dairy products.

I (or my partner) use tefillin.

I refrain from handling money on the Sabbath.

The problems of the Jewish community are directly relevant to my life.

I date strictly within the Jewish faith (or did so when I was single and dating).

I get a Christmas tree for my own home.

If my child were considering marrying a non-Jewish person, I would oppose the marriage.

It is important to me that my neighborhood have a very Jewish character (e.g., kosher bakery, butcher, Jewish bookstore and synagogues).

I derive comfort from Jewish customs and observances.

When it comes to a crisis, Jews can only depend on other Jews.

I carry out mitzvot because God so commanded.

God chose to establish a special covenant with the people of Israel through Moses which is still in effect.

I buy kosher meat.

I believe it is important to have my child baptized.

It is important for me to provide a Jewish education for my children.

I believe that Jesus is God.

Jesus will return to the earth someday as the promised Messiah.



God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I feel most at home among Jewish people.

I feel that I have a special obligation as a Jew to engage in activities that promote the  
“healing” or betterment of humankind.

I believe it is important to have my child baptized.

I attend Christian religious services.

I attend Passover Seders.

I light Chanukah candles.

I (or my partner) light Shabbat candles.

I feel well accepted in the Jewish community.

I would go to a rabbi to get a ruling on Jewish law.

I have a lot of involvement with Jewish people.

I have belonged to a synagogue for at least a year.

I feel well accepted in the Jewish community.

I fast on Yom Kippur.

Being Jewish is very important to me.

The Hebrew Bible is the revealed word of God.

These statements pertain to your progress toward formal conversion to Judaism.

Please rate each statement as:

True of me in the past – meaning, This is a stage that I have completed or moved  
through.

True now -- meaning, This is a stage that I am currently working at.

Will be true soon -- meaning, This is a stage that I am currently planning to start soon.

Not true now – meaning, This statement does not describe my progress toward Judaism at this time.

Never will be true of me – meaning, This statement does not describe my progress toward Judaism and probably never will.

I found a rabbi who has made a commitment to help me convert.

Instead of talking about conversion to Judaism, I'm actually doing it.

It's still hard to follow through on Jewish law and observance, even though I converted a long time ago.

I think I might be ready to learn more about Judaism.

It might be worthwhile to convert to Judaism.

I am finally in the process of converting.

My new rabbi gave me a lot to read about conversion.

I have been thinking that I might want to become Jewish.

The rabbi who just agreed to help me convert gave me a list of books to read.

I just got the books my new rabbi recommended I read for conversion.

I am actively working on becoming Jewish.

For several months I've been actively learning about becoming Jewish, and I've taken on more Jewish activities.

I recently met with my partner's rabbi to talk about conversion.

I was nervous about making an appointment with a rabbi to talk about conversion, but now that we've finished talking I realize he'll really be able to help me.

I'm not very religious, but neither is the next guy. Why spend time thinking about it?

Now that a rabbi has agreed to help me convert, I have to start some Jewish classes.

Although I'm in love with someone Jewish, it would be insincere for me to convert.

All this talk about religion is boring. Why can't people forget about it?

I'm having some religious conflicts and I think really becoming Jewish would resolve them.

I guess I'm not satisfied with my religion, but there's no real need to change it.

Learning about Judaism is pretty much a waste of time for me because it does not have anything to do with me.

I would rather cope with my religious conflicts than try to change them.

I may have a religious conflict, but it's not really important.

I thought being a Jew would be easy once I converted, but now I realize it is a life-long process.

As far as I am concerned, there is no reason to become Jewish.

Even though it's been years since I converted, I still enjoy the emphasis on Jewish learning.

I converted to Judaism over 6 months ago.

There is no good reason for me to convert to Judaism.

Now that I'm engaged to someone Jewish, I think it makes sense for me to convert.

My rabbi and I just set a date for my conversion.

My Jewish conversion was over a year ago, but I still need the support of the community.

I've been Jewish so long now, sometimes I forget that I wasn't born Jewish.

I'm thinking about contacting a rabbi in order to convert.

I'd like to convert, but I don't know a rabbi.

Converting to Judaism was a challenge sometimes but the best thing I could have done for myself.

I wish I had more information on how to become Jewish.

Please rate each statement as reflects your own attitudes, beliefs, or thoughts about becoming Jewish.

1 strongly disagree

2 disagree

3 does not apply

4 agree

5 strongly agree

Conversion to Judaism is what I need and want. It is like coming home.

I am glad that conversion to Judaism takes some time. I have to think over my decision because I need to know that becoming Jewish is something I can be proud of and acknowledge before everyone without hesitation and I need to know that I can live with this decision for the rest of my life.

I have learned a lot about a variety of religious traditions, and Judaism seems to make the most sense to me.

My decision to convert was sudden and seemed to make a dramatic change in my whole heart, life, and soul.

I feel that I have been on the path to Judaism throughout my life. Judaism provides a context and structure that allows me to be myself. In becoming a Jew, I have found my heart, my soul, my life.

Through most of my life I have felt some cultural or ethnic bond to the Jewish people. Becoming Jewish is returning to a part of my ancestry that has been denied to me.

When I decided to convert, I began to feel strange, it was though I was suffocating from the inside. There was a violent rushing wind that filled the room. My whole body was filled with this powerful but gentle wind. The suffocating stopped and I could breathe properly again.

I feel I have a Jewish soul. Since I was young, I was in a constant struggle to understand God and where I fit in the universe. I was always questioning and trying to understand. Now I feel at peace.

The more I have learned about Judaism, the more I have confirmed what I knew intuitively about myself, that I was meant to be a Jew.

Since my decision to convert to Judaism I have felt like an entirely different person.

I didn't feel my conversion was something that I chose. It was like it chose me. It just feels right.

Most religious traditions are very similar at the core. I would choose to be Jewish in order to fit in most with the people around me – family, friends, spouse.

Experiencing Judaism has had a very familiar feeling to me, like when you meet someone and it's as if you've always known them or you go some place and it seems like you've been there before. I feel at home.

Thank you for completing this survey. All the information so far is anonymous and confidential.

Since I am focusing on how individuals experience the process of conversion to Judaism, I would like to be able to have you complete this survey again after a period of time.

The following information will be kept confidential. I will not release any contact information to any other party.

Would you be willing to have me contact you again?  Yes  No

What would be the best way to contact you?

Telephone

E-mail

US Mail

In addition to this survey, I am interested in obtaining more in-depth information about how the process of conversion to Judaism. Would you be willing for me to contact you for a telephone interview (30 to 45 minutes)?  Yes  No

If so, would you please e-mail me at [mariam.cohen@asu.edu](mailto:mariam.cohen@asu.edu) and let me know how to contact you.

Thank you.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW CONSENT DOCUMENT

This script was read to each participant before they were interviewed.

I am Mariam Cohen, and I am a PhD candidate in Religious Studies, working under the direction of Professor Joel Gereboff, PhD, who is the Director of the Division of Religious Studies in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University. This interview is being conducted in connection with my dissertation research for a PhD in Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions and in you withdraw from the interview at any time.

I am interested in understanding the experiences of persons who are considering converting to Judaism as they go through that process. The purpose of this research is to enlarge our understanding of how converts to Judaism are led to that decision and how they experience the process of becoming Jewish. Although there is no benefit to individuals participating in this research, your responses will contribute to our understanding of this important decision in your and others' lives.

This interview is being recorded and will be transcribed. However, the contact information you gave me will be kept confidential and used only to contact you in the future for any follow-up. Your name and/or contact information will be kept in a way that only I can access, and all contact information will be destroyed after all data collection for this research is finished. The transcript of this interview will be linked to the survey you completed only by a code that I will assign. In order to maintain this confidentiality, I would ask you not to name any other people you may discuss. Simply refer to their relationship to you, e.g., "my mother," "my rabbi," "my friend," etc.



The results of this study may become a part of my dissertation and may be used in other reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used in any way.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, please contact me at [mariam.cohen@asu.edu](mailto:mariam.cohen@asu.edu) or my research director, Dr. Gereboff at [joel.gereboff@asu.edu](mailto:joel.gereboff@asu.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU office of Research Integrity and Assurance at 480-965-6788.

May I have your verbal consent to participate in this interview?

APPENDIX D  
INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following are the questions that were asked when participants were interviewed for the first time. Additional questions were asked in order to help participants elaborate on their responses.

Please describe your childhood religious orientation and education? (Parents' religious orientation. Religious development (baptism, "saved," etc.)

When did you first encounter Jews and learn about Judaism?

Can you describe how you came to decide to convert to Judaism?

How do you feel your conversion to Judaism will affect your relationship with your original family?

How do you understand the process of becoming Jewish? Is this primarily a religious/spiritual process or one of joining a community?

What are your plans over the next year or so in terms of progressing toward formal conversion?

Will you convert with a Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or other rabbi?

Have you thought about how observant a Jew you will be? Keeping kosher? Family purity rules? Shabbat observance?

If you have children, will it be important to you that they (a) are Jewish themselves, (b) get a Jewish education, (c) marry someone who is also Jewish?

How do you understand your relationship with Israel?

May I get in touch with you in about a year's time to see how this process has proceeded? If so, what would be the best way to contact you?

APPENDIX E  
SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following are the questions that were asked when participants were interviewed a second time. Additional questions were asked in order to help participants elaborate on their responses.

How has your progress toward conversion changed since we last talked (or you first did the survey)?

If you have formally converted, what was the process like? Was a *beit din* involved? Did you write essays? Was there a circumcision or a *hatafat brit dam*? Did you go to a *mikvah*? Was there any recognition or celebration in your synagogue afterwards?

Do you feel well accepted by other Jews?

Have you encountered any sort of discrimination from other Jews because you are a convert?

How would you compare your knowledge of Jewish beliefs, practices, people with that of other Jews? Do you read Hebrew at all?

Has your relationship with Israel changed during or since your conversion?

Have you visited Israel or would you want to (plan to) in the future?

Do you think you would ever make *aliyah*, immigrate to Israel?

How observant are you finding it comfortable to be? Keeping kosher? Shabbat? Holidays? Regular prayer? Regular Torah study? Laws of family purity?

Do you have any comments about the process of converting to Judaism that I have not asked about?

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF A PARTICIPANT'S INTERVIEWS

*Darlene: A Sample Analysis of a Participant's Interviews*

| Category                        | Summary  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Name assigned                   | Darlene  |
| Dates Interviewed               | First interview: 11/17/2010<br>Second interview: 11/12/2011  |
| Status at second interview      | Had just completed "conversion ceremony" immediately before first interview  |
| Age at first interview          | 30 years old   |
| Marital status                  | Married to Jewish husband for two years, "together" for ten years  |
| Religion of origin              | Lutheran   |
| Childhood religious education   | Attended Sunday school, church camp and youth activities. Parents taught Sunday school. Involved with church social action activities  |
| Initial connection with Judaism | "I had some interaction with Judaism as a child. My parents are very open. We went to a fairly liberal church. There would be cross-denomination type activities that were available within Christianity. There was an opportunity to go to other churches, a Catholic church for instance. They also occasionally would have an opportunity to go to a mosque or to a temple. I had some very limited interaction as a young person, before I was eighteen. It wasn't until I went to college that I was interacting with people who were Jewish."                                      |
| Impetus to conversion           | "I felt like it was the right time for me. I've been living as a Jew as far as observing holidays and other Jewish traditions, cooking, volunteerism, things that are sort of the tenets of Judaism, my husband and I have been in a relationship for about 10 years, and married for the past two. I did not feel comfortable converting as a lot of women in the process of their engagement. I didn't feel comfortable with that. We had an interfaith ceremony where we actually had a rabbi and a Lutheran minister officiate at our wedding. It wasn't really until maybe a couple |

of months ago that I came to the realization that this was something that was really important to me. It felt very right.”

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Denominational affiliation             | Reform. Husband and in-laws all Reform Jews  |
| Conversion rituals                     | Affirmation only (Reform), no <i>beit din</i> , no <i>mikvah</i> Ceremony held at in-law’s home. “It was very small, intimate gathering of just close family. The ceremony started off by my rabbi speaking to everyone about his faith and how he sees the process of conversion: He actually doesn’t call it a conversion. He calls it a Jewish affirmation.”  |
| Synagogue recognition                  | None mentioned   |
| Expectation re observance              |  |
| Kosher                                 | No   |
| Shabbat                                | None except for holidays   |
| Individual vs community                | <p>“For me, Judaism is both a cultural and religious prospective. Family is very important to me, and it’s from my perspective a tenet of the faith. It’s not like Christianity where in Catholicism, you have the Pope or . . . . We are members of temple, but we don’t necessarily have that kind of connection that I had as a child to my church. My connection to Judaism is mostly through our family, through my husband’s family!”</p> <p>But describes theology of Reform Judaism as: “We have a very close relationship with our rabbi who I’m very much in line with his faith. He sees Judaism as frankly, like Hillel quoted. Do not do unto others, as you would not do unto yourself. That’s really the way I see it.”</p> |
| Continued involvement after conversion |  |
| Synagogue membership                   | Yes  |
| Regular study                          | No   |
| Regular prayer                         | No   |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| Attends services                       | Not regularly  |
| Other observations                     | Has a Christmas tree – to share holiday with her family (even putting it up early to include relatives who could not come later). Unsure about belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: “To be truthful again I just began being liberal minded. I see things fairly open ended; none of us really frankly knows. That is just the way I feel. I feel like the open endless in me is okay. Basically I don’t know.” Unsure response to “Jesus will return. . . ,” “Jesus is God” questions |
| Agreement with conversion descriptions | First survey: 1,2,3,9,11<br>Second survey: 1,2,3,5,9,10,11,13  |

APPENDIX G  
PARTICIPANT'S RELIGION OF ORIGIN

| Family religion (# of participants) | Participants   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Roman Catholic (9)                  | <p>Grace – little formal religious education</p> <p>Irene – baptized, 1<sup>st</sup> communion, but not confirmed</p> <p>Nancy – confirmed and practicing until marriage</p> <p>Gladys – attended Catholic schools through college</p> <p>Henry – religious education ended with 1<sup>st</sup> communion</p> <p>Barbara – mother RC, father Lutheran, baptized, 1<sup>st</sup> communion, and confirmation in RC</p> <p>Charles – raised in RC church and attended Catholic university</p> <p>Edith – father’s family RC, mother not; no formal religious education or sacraments</p> <p>Olivia – extensive religious education, parochial school through high school</p> |
| Byzantine Catholic (1)              | Howard – observant family, parochial school through 11 <sup>th</sup> grade   |
| Episcopal (3)                       | <p>Felice – 1<sup>st</sup> communion and confirmation; parochial schools through middle school</p> <p>Laura – raised in Muslim countries, baptized and confirmed in Episcopal church as adolescent</p> <p>Abigail – Mother Episcopalian, father Jewish. Attended Sunday school and church summer camp and confirmed</p>  |
| Methodist (1)                       | Michelle – baptized but religious education ended before finishing elementary school   |
| Lutheran (5)                        | <p>Brenda – baptized but minimal religious education</p> <p>Darlene – parents devout and active, active in church through adolescence</p> <p>Thomas – attended Sunday school and confirmation into high school</p> <p>Yvonne – grandmother insisted that children go through confirmation</p> <p>Robert – catechism and confirmation preparation but irregular Sunday school attendance</p>  |
| Presbyterian (1)                    | Doris – Parents active in church, attended Sunday school but refused to go through confirmation  |
| LDS (2, both adult)                 | Aaron – Baptized but not confirmed in RC church. Adult   |

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| converts to LDS)          | <p>convert to LDS, served mission and active in church ministry as adult</p> <p>Sheila – Father not religious; mother “spiritual.” Attended RC parochial school until 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Converted to LDS as adult and married LDS husband (now divorced)</p>  |
| Evangelical Christian (2) | <p>Agatha – baptized but minimal religious education after age 10</p> <p>Keith – Strict evangelical family, baptized as adolescent but never considered self as “saved”</p>   |
| Non-denominational (2)    | <p>Jennifer – baptized as adolescent when “saved,” active in church groups</p> <p>Ethan – nominal Christian family but no religious involvement after age 7</p>   |
| Buddhist (2)              | <p>Paula – raised in SE Asia, attended Christian missionary school but not baptized, little Buddhist education</p> <p>Zoe – mother non-practicing Lutheran, father converted to Tibetan Buddhism and Zoe studied Buddhism but did not take vows</p>   |
| Mixed (3)                 | <p>Joyce – Father’s family RC; mother Protestant. Attended Sunday school irregularly</p> <p>Wanda – Father RC; mother evangelical Christian. Limited religious education</p> <p>Vivian – Father Episcopalian clergy; mother Presbyterian. Attended both Sunday schools and Catholic parochial high school</p> |
| None (2)                  | <p>Curt – No religious affiliation or instruction, unsure if baptized</p> <p>Frank – non-practicing RC mother; no childhood religious education; unsure if baptized</p>   |

APPENDIX H

RELIGION OF ORIGIN OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WHO WERE NOT  
INTERVIEWED

| Religion of origin                | Number who completed survey but were not interviewed |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Roman Catholic                    | 5  |
| Roman Catholic<br>& Protestant    | 1  |
| Protestant                        | 5  |
| None                              | 5  |
| “Protestant/Buddhist<br>/atheist” | 1  |
| Roman Catholic/Muslim             | 1  |
| Evangelical Christian             | 1  |

APPENDIX I

PARTICIPANTS' IDENTIFICATION WITH JEWISH PEOPLE, CULTURE, BELIEFS

AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

| Statement  | First survey         |                            | Second survey        |                            |
|--|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
|  | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/Strongly disagree | Strongly agree/agree | Disagree/Strongly disagree |
| I am interested in Jewish literature, art and music, and other Jewish cultural forms.  | 63/64<br>98.4%       | 0/64                       | 31/31<br>100%        | 0<br>0%                    |
| I take personal pride in the accomplishments of other Jews who have made it big (e.g., Steven Spielberg, Leonard Bernstein).             | 44/64<br>68.8%       | 2/64<br>3.1%               | 23/31<br>74.2%       | 0<br>0%                    |
| It is important to me that my neighborhood have a very Jewish character (e.g., kosher bakery, butcher, Jewish bookstore and synagogues). | 23/60<br>38.4%       | 9/60<br>15.0%              | 13/30<br>43.3%       | 6/30<br>20.0%              |
| It is important to me that there always be a Jewish people.  | 61/63<br>96.8%       | 1/63<br>1.6%               | 30/31<br>96.8%       | 0<br>0%                    |
| I feel a strong commitment toward Jewish people.   | 58/64<br>90.6%       | 1/64<br>1.6%               | 30/31<br>96.8%       | 1/30<br>3.2%               |
| My feeling of commitment toward Jewish people has increased as an adult.   | 59/62<br>96.1%       | 0<br>0%                    | 29/31<br>96.7%       | 0<br>0%                    |
| The problems of the Jewish community are directly relevant to my life.   | 40/61<br>65.6%       | 2/61<br>3.3%               | 20/30<br>66.7%       | 2/30<br>6.7%               |
| I date strictly within the Jewish faith (or did so when I was single and dating).  | 14/59<br>23.8%       | 31/59<br>52.6%             | 10/29<br>31.5%       | 17/29<br>58.6%             |
| I derive comfort from Jewish customs and observances.  | 58/61<br>93.5%       | 2/61<br>3.2%               | 28/30<br>93.3%       | 0<br>0%                    |
| When it comes to a crisis, Jews can only depend on other Jews.   | 6/62<br>9.6%         | 40/62<br>64.5%             | 3/30<br>10.0%        | 21/30<br>70.0%             |
| I feel most at home among Jewish people.   | 40/61<br>65.6%       | 2/61<br>3.3%               | 22/31<br>70.9%       | 4/31<br>12.9%              |

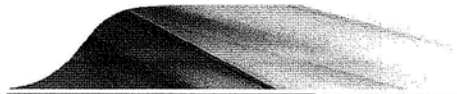


|   |                |                |                |                |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| I feel that I have a special obligation as a Jew to engage in activities that promote the “healing” or betterment of humankind. | 55/62<br>88.7% | 0<br>0%        | 26/31<br>83.9% | 1/31<br>3.2%   |
| I feel well accepted in the Jewish community.   | 45/62<br>72.5% | 4/62<br>6.5%   | 24/31<br>77.4% | 1/31<br>3.2%   |
| I have a lot of involvement with Jewish people.   | 48/61<br>62.1% | 1/61<br>1.6%   | 28/31<br>90.3% | 1/31<br>3.2%   |
| I have belonged to a synagogue for at least a year.   | 23/59<br>38.9% | 24/61<br>40.7% | 21/31<br>67.7% | 8/31<br>25.8%  |
| Being Jewish is very important to me.   | 57/61<br>93.5% | 0<br>0%        | 28/31<br>90.3% | 1/31<br>3.2%   |
| I engage in formal study of Judaism.  | 60/64<br>93.7% | 0              | 26/31<br>83.9% | 2/31<br>6.4%   |
| The teachings of Judaism can enrich the life of any Jew.  | 62/64<br>96.9% | 0              | 31/31<br>100%  | 0/31<br>0%     |
| It is important for Jewish boys to be circumcised.  | 55/63<br>87.3% | 2/63<br>3.2%   | 25/31<br>80.7% | 1/31<br>3.2%   |
| It is important for Jewish children to have a bar or bat mitzvah.   | 58/63<br>92%   | 1/63<br>1.6%   | 27/31<br>87.1% | 0/31<br>0%     |
| My household uses separate dishes for meat and dairy products.  | 15/63<br>24.2% | 36/63<br>57.1% | 6/31<br>19.4%  | 21/31<br>77.7% |
| I (or my partner) use tefillin.   | 14/61<br>23%   | 32/61<br>52.5  | 3/30<br>10.0%  | 22/30<br>73.3% |
| I refrain from handling money on the Sabbath.   | 19/60<br>31.7% | 21/60<br>35%   | 10/30<br>33.3% | 19/30<br>63.4% |
| I carry out mitzvot because God so commanded.   | 37/60<br>61.7% | 9/60<br>15.0%  | 18/30<br>60.0% | 8/30<br>26.7%  |
| God chose to establish a special covenant with the people of Israel through Moses which is still in effect.                     | 40/59<br>67.8% | 4/59<br>30.5%  | 20/30<br>66.7% | 3/30<br>10.0%  |

|  |                |                |                |                |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| I buy kosher meat.                                   | 22/61<br>36.1% | 21/61<br>34.5% | 10/30<br>33.3% | 10/30<br>33.3% |
| I attend Passover Seders.                            | 58/61<br>95.0% | 1/61<br>1.6%   | 29/31<br>93.5% | 2/31<br>6.5%   |
| I light Chanukah candles.                            | 58/61<br>95.1% | 2/61<br>3.3%   | 30/31<br>96.8% | 1/30<br>3.2%   |
| I (or my partner) light Shabbat candles.             | 47/61<br>77.1% | 6/61<br>8.2%   | 24/31<br>77.4% | 2/31<br>6.5%   |
| I would go to a rabbi to get a ruling on Jewish law. | 46/60<br>76.7% | 2/60<br>3.3%   | 24/31<br>73.4% | 3/31<br>9.7%   |
| I fast on Yom Kippur.                                | 46/60<br>76.6% | 5/60<br>8.3%   | 25/31<br>80.7% | 4/31<br>12.9%  |
| The Hebrew Bible is the revealed word of God.        | 35/62<br>56.4% | 5/62<br>8.0%   | 18/31<br>58.1% | 5/31<br>16.1%  |

APPENDIX J

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD NOTICE OF EXEMPTION



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Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

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**To:** Joel Gereboff  
ECA

*for* **From:** Mark Roosa, Chair *sm*  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 09/08/2010

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 09/08/2010

**IRB Protocol #:** 1008005444

**Study Title:** Survey of Attitudes of Converts to Jadaism

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.