

## **Jews By Choice**

### **Converts in the Jewish Community**

Most Americans who consider themselves Jews were “born into” Jewishness through ethnic descent. Some, however, become Jewish through assent, converting into Judaism in a process which usually involves study, immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), and, for men, an actual or symbolic circumcision. For some, the decision to convert into Judaism is linked to dating, living with, or marrying a Jew. For others, the journey into Judaism is unconnected to romantic involvements. After the conversion ceremony is completed, these “Jews by choice,” as they are often called, are considered by Jewish law to be complete members of the Jewish faith and the Jewish community.

Conversion is a topic of intense interest today because more than one-third of American Jews are married to non-Jews, and close to half of recent “Jewish” marriages are mixed marriages between persons of Jewish and non-Jewish descent.<sup>i</sup> Furthermore, four out of five cohabiting Jews are involved in interfaith relationships. However, although numbers of Jews marrying non-Jews have climbed from decade to decade, the proportion of spouses deciding to convert into Judaism has not risen commensurately.<sup>ii</sup> Both the 1990 and the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Surveys indicate that numbers of persons converting into and out of Judaism during recent decades have been about equal.<sup>iii</sup>

Converts into Judaism, often called “Jews by Choice,” help to create households with distinctively more Jewish demographic and ethno-religious profiles than families with one Jewish and one non-Jewish spouse. Conversionary households almost universally aim to raise their children as Jews, according to their own description.<sup>iv</sup>

In contrast, the proportion of intermarried couples hoping to raise children within Judaism and no other religion has remained at about one-third, according to National Jewish Population Surveys conducted by the United Jewish Communities (UJC) in 1990 and 2000-01.<sup>v</sup>

Mixed-marriage families that choose to raise completely Jewish children are sometimes very successful, and have received both popular and scholarly attention. In her article, “Can a Gentile Wife Raise Jewish Kids?” for example, Gabriele Glaser paints a glowing picture of non-Jewish mothers who are “*enjuivee*, infused with Judaism,” who read “Jewish magazines” and prepare Rosh Hashanah brisket and “sumptuous and spiritual Passover seders.”<sup>vi</sup> A most notable example of the Christian parent committed to raising a Jewish child is Prof. Harvey Cox, a Sabbath-and-Jewish-holiday-observing Harvard Divinity School Christian Theologian married to a Jewish woman. Cox has written and spoken articulately and in detail about his attachment to the Jewish cycle of holidays and life cycle events. In perhaps his most passionate mission statement, he challenges Christian parents of Jewish children, “to reassure Jews by words and actions that we are also committed to a future for the Jewish people” by ensuring that there will be a new generation of Jews.<sup>vii</sup>

Statistically, however, such households are unusual, and for the 1.5 million Americans who grew up in mixed-marriage households, having more than one religious tradition often seems both normative and normal.<sup>viii</sup> The 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) revealed that among American Jews ages 25-49 those with two Jewish parents had a 28 percent mixed marriage rate, whereas those with only one Jewish parent had a 77 percent mixed marriage rate.<sup>ix</sup> Thus, rising rates of intermarriage are greatly increased by the second or third generation intermarriage of children who grew up in interfaith families. Conversion into Judaism, in contrast, offers the potential for more Jewishly engaged households.

### **Three Types of Converts**

Converts are not a monolithic group, and their levels of Judaic connections can vary dramatically. Jews by Choice can be divided roughly into three different profiles: Activist, Accommodating, or Ambivalent converts into Judaism. Activist converts have very high levels of Jewish connections, sometimes exceed the Jewishness of their spouses, and statistically raise the Jewish index of the whole cohort of converts. Accommodating converts try to create the level of Jewishness that their partners seem to wish. Ambivalent converts, on the other hand, have mixed feelings about their choices and are the group of converts most likely to incorporate Christian observances into their familial holiday calendar.

About 30 percent of Jews by Choice can be described as Activist converts. This group tends to report stories of powerful spiritual journeys into Judaism, and say they feel part of the Jewish people and Jewish destiny. Many Activists start on the road to conversion before they meet the Jew to whom they will become engaged or married.<sup>x</sup> Others do not investigate formal conversion until they meet a Jew they wish to marry, but are interested in Jews and Judaism from an early age, and once on the road to Judaism they tend to give up other religious observances and to be fully committed to living Jewishly. Converts who join Orthodox or Conservative congregations are disproportionately Activist converts, but Activists are prominent in Reform lay and professional leadership as well.

One segment among the Activist convert population becomes extraordinarily, intensely involved in Jewish life, including taking Jewish leadership roles. This “star” level Activist convert is characterized by three factors: 1) moved toward Jewish identity even before they met their current partner or spouse; 2) involved with or married to a deeply committed Jew, often someone with extensive Jewish education and vital Jewish commitments and interests; and 3)

have found Jewishly committed social networks who reinforce and support their commitments to Judaism.

Very attracted by Jewish holiday celebrations, Activist converts are often particularly fond of Shabbat, and go to great lengths to ensure that Shabbat is marked on a regular basis. Not infrequently, it is the Activist convert—not the Jewish spouse—who initiates these activities. Sometimes the extended families of the Jewish spouse are dismayed by the religious intensity of the Activist convert. Contradicting data that indicates converts relate primarily to Judaism as a religion, rather than to the Jews as a people, Activist converts often relate intensely to Jewish peoplehood. Characteristically, the Activist convert is intensely supportive of Israel and frequently volunteers to take leadership roles in the wider Jewish community.

The majority—but not all—of Activist converts are women. Both jokes and anecdotal stories about such converts often conclude with the astonished born-Jewish husband watching his intensely Jewish-by-Choice wife scurrying around her kosher kitchen, and wailing, “Oh my God, I married my mother!” Activist converts include women who become prominent rabbis and spiritually moving cantors, dynamic synagogue presidents, brilliant Jewish scholars and devoted communal professions. This is no doubt due partially to the fact that the total number of female converts far outstrips male Jews by Choice. It is also partially due to the fact that women in general greatly outnumber men in Jewish adult educational contexts.

Accommodating converts make up the largest segment of Jews by Choice, almost 40 percent. They often remember having warm feelings toward Jews and Judaism during their childhood and adolescence. Although the Accommodating convert typically does not think about conversion until asked to consider it by the romantic partner, spouse, family or rabbi, this convert overcomes any initial reluctance, and acquiesces with some eagerness to the process of classes

and conversion. Unlike the Activist converts who often take the initiative in upgrading the family's Judaic observances, accommodating converts usually let the born-Jewish spouse take the lead in terms of household religious rituals and ceremonies, diligently and sometimes enthusiastically enabling a variety of Jewish connections and practices. Not infrequently, the Accommodating convert joins Jewish organizations, but finds most of his/her Jewish life within the home, extended family, and friendship circles. Accommodating converts are, not surprisingly, very influenced by the Jewish strength—or lack of it—of the Jewish spouse, family and friends.

Ambivalent converts, making up about 30 percent of those who undergo a formal conversion process, have second thoughts about agreeing to become Jews.<sup>xi</sup> A number of Ambivalent converts simply don't care for organized religion and don't think of themselves as "religious" individuals. Sometimes they agree to convert because it seems important to their partner or in-law parents, and sometimes "for the sake of the children." Like other converts, many Ambivalent Jews by Choice have some feelings of warmth toward Jewish social and intellectual styles, but, unlike the enthusiastic Activist or Accommodating converts, they are wary that the household not become "too Jewish" in terms of ritual practice. When asked, Ambivalent converts may identify themselves as Jews, but also express anxiety about failing in their connections to their original faith. Many ambivalent converts dislike the notion of a Jewish "chosen-ness" or special mission. A few think they have mistakenly given up their prior religion. Some worry about endangering their souls.

Moderately Ambivalent converts sometimes initially leave behind aspects of family or personal background willingly. As time passes, however, second thoughts often surface, sometimes triggered by life cycle events, such as a birth or death in the family. Ambivalent

converts sometimes find themselves feeling guilty about neglecting their original cultural heritages. There are also often residual feelings of resentment about having given up Christian beliefs, or, more often, holidays. Depending on the personalities involved some of them exert subtle—or not so subtle—pressure on born-Jewish spouses to retain or resume non-Jewish festivities within their households. Most often, moderately Ambivalent converts feel passively Jewish, but this Jewishness does not affect their lives or thoughts deeply.

### **Historical Jewish Approaches to Conversion**

Looking back at the biblical period, no formal procedure for a non-Israelite joining the Israelite people is described in the Hebrew Bible, although a text in Exodus 12:47-49 lays out the conditions under which a non-Israelite can change his status and participate in sacrifices and other communal activities:

If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country, but no uncircumcised person shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country, but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and the stranger who dwells among you. (Translation: *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*)<sup>xii</sup>

It appears that Israelite behaviors and modes of worship, with their accompanying regulations, including circumcision, could be taken on by male non-Israelite fellow travelers who lived within the geo-political boundaries of Israelite society. Non-Israelite women, on the other hand, were sometimes taken in marriage by Israelite men (such as the non-Israelite wives of Joseph, Moses, and other prominent biblical figures.)<sup>xiii</sup>

“It never occurred to anyone to demand that the foreign woman undergo some ritual to indicate her acceptance of the religion of Israel,” historian Shaye Cohen explains. “The woman was joined to the house of Israel by being joined to her Israelite husband; the act of marriage was

functionally equivalent to the later idea of ‘conversion.’” However, after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E. and the subsequent Babylonian exile, Jews encountered transformed circumstances. No longer living primarily in their own country, they were far more vulnerable to other cultures, and had a new need to establish clear boundaries defining a non-geographically determined identity. As Cohen puts it, “attitudes changed when conditions changed”:

Judaea lost any semblance of political independence, the tribal structure of society was shattered, and the Israelites were scattered among the nations. In these new circumstances marriage with outsiders came to be seen as a threat to Judaeans (Jewish) identity and was widely condemned. The Judaeans sensed that their survival depended upon their ideological (or religious) and social separation from the outside world.<sup>xiv</sup>

No longer able to depend on culture and geography, rabbinic Judaism put procedures into place. Historian Lawrence Shiffman notes, “During the exile, Judaism had been transformed from a nationality which depended on a connection to the land and culture to a religious and ethnic community which depended on descent.”<sup>xv</sup>

During the subsequent Second Temple period (520 B.C.E.-70 C.E.), the Judaeans nation-state was during certain periods quite powerful. At the peak of its power under the Hasmonean kings, attitudes about conversion went through a significant transformation. During this time period there was an upsurge in interest in Jewish proselytizing activity, some of it quite vigorous. The writings of the Jerusalemite historian Josephus Flavius (38-100 C.E.), for example, suggest that during the Hasmonean period in the reign of King Hyrcanus (about 128 B.C.E.) there was a mass conquest and conversion of peoples from the states neighboring Judaea. The Idumaeans and others were given a choice between being expelled from their country or “submitting to circumcision and having their manner of life in all other respects made the same as that of the Judaeans. And from that time on they have continued to be Judaeans.”<sup>xvi</sup> While scholars argue about aspects of reportage by Josephus, two matters are salient to our discussion: (1) at least at the time of Josephus’ writing a process for becoming Jewish and joining the Jewish people

included circumcision and taking on the religious and other laws of the Judaeans; and (2) the Hasmonean kings seemed unambivalent about implementing wholesale conversions.

The actively proselytizing phase of early Judaism was diminished with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., and further limited after the brutal crushing of the Bar Kochva revolt in 135 C.E., followed by the eclipse of the Judaeans nation-state and the dispersal of the Jews throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Near East. The transformation of Jewish identity and the ascendancy of rabbinic Judaism that followed the post-Second Temple period was the setting for the now familiar formal process and ceremony through which a non-Jew becomes a Jew. This process was established by First and Second Century C.E. rabbis, partially in response to the dramatically transformed conditions, and is depicted twice in ancient rabbinic literature, in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yevamot 47a-b, and in the post-talmudic tractate Gerim 1.1.<sup>xvii</sup>

Cohen asserts that “the primary purpose of the ceremony was to introduce a measure of order and verifiability in a situation where previously chaos had reigned.” In its Talmudic descriptions, the conversion ceremony consisted of three sequential actions: (1) First, acceptance of Jewish religious law as a conceptual obligation. Importantly, merely practicing some of the commandments would not satisfy the acceptance aspect of the process. (2) Second, ritual circumcision for males. While there is considerable initial Talmudic discussion about the necessity for circumcision, it becomes a required step in the conversion process. (3) Third, immersion in a *mikveh* or ritual bath is an absolute requirement according to rabbinic law for both men and women. Not least, all three of these actions were to be performed publicly—the witnesses became, in effect, a kind of certificate of authenticity if the actual conversion were ever called into question.<sup>xviii</sup>



According to Talmudic narratives, the conversion process was only entered into after rabbinical authorities were completely convinced of the sincerity of the would-be convert. The Talmud expresses considerable skepticism about persons who wish to convert into Judaism in order to gain something, especially a financial advantage. Lengthy discussion is devoted to the possible advantages that would-be converts might be seeking through conversion into Judaism, and *a priori* a conversion for the purpose of gain (or for any purpose except wishing to serve the Jewish God and join the Jewish people) is considered inappropriate. Talmudic writings express differences of opinion as to whether an insincere conversion can be considered valid after the fact.<sup>xix</sup>

With the rise of Christianity and its establishment as the accepted religion of the Roman Empire, conversions into Judaism became rare—partially, no doubt, because a series of Roman-Christian laws decreed death both for converts and the Jews who converted them. Circumcision of Christians was banned, which made conversion into Judaism close to impossible. At this point, Jewish emphasis on the turning away of proselytes became more pronounced than it had previously been. Thus, proselytes were to be told of the suffering implicit in the practice of Judaism, of the potential persecutions, of the great difficulties of the Judaic lifestyle. If, however, the proselyte persisted, and continued to wish to convert into Judaism, at that point the conversion was allowed by Jewish authorities to proceed, with the assumption that becoming a Jew was a privilege that the proselyte had earned through his determination and devotion.

For the nearly 2000 years of rabbinic Judaism before the dramatic changes wrought by the Emancipation of the Jews, the Enlightenment, and the many transformations of modernity, converts were part of many Jewish societies. Indeed, over the centuries some converts have attained extraordinary status as Jewish rabbinic leaders and thinkers. Rabbinic code books and

responsa literature over the centuries have dealt repeatedly with conversion, its policies, practices, challenges and concerns. While attitudes toward converts into Judaism have varied and continue to vary, most rabbinic writings have followed the lead of Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.) who insisted that once a sincere halakhic formal conversion has taken place Jewish law requires that converts be treated with respect and consideration. A reminder perhaps most familiar to Jews from many backgrounds is found in a passage from the Haggadah, read yearly at the festive Passover seder meal, that even the patriarch Abraham had an idol-worshipping father, and thus every Jew symbolically descends from idol-worshippers who converted into Judaism:

*Mitkhilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu.....*

From the beginning, our forefathers were idolaters. But now, God has drawn us close to worship him. As it is written: And Joshua said to all the people, this is what the God of Israel says: Your forefathers lived across the river [Euphrates], and Terakh, the father of Abraham and Nahor, worshipped pagan gods. Then I took your father Abraham from across the river, and I brought him through the land of Canaan....(author's translation).

### **Contemporary Communal Conversations about Conversion**

Conversion has become a controversial topic because it touches so closely on the existential question of what Jewish identity means in a globalizing, multicultural world. In Diaspora countries, including the United States, Jews comprise a tiny minority of the population, despite extraordinary Jewish educational, occupational, and socioeconomic successes, socio-cultural acceptance, and cultural and political influence. Numbers are part of the motivation for heated discussions about conversion. Although some social scientists argue that absolute numbers of Jews in America have increased, most agree that percentages of persons identifying as Jews in America have drifted downward to about 2.5 percent of the overall population; Christians comprise approximately 80 percent, in comparison.<sup>xx</sup>

Some see a vigorous communal emphasis on conversion as a way of recouping losses. Those who argue that non-Jewish spouses should be treated and counted as Jews without formal conversion are also often concerned about numbers: they assert that insistence on conversion can be off-putting to many non-Jewish spouses, and that interfaith families need to be drawn into Judaism without stressing conversion.

Approaches to conversion in the American community today run a very broad gamut. Pronounced differences exist between the various wings of Judaism, with most Orthodox rabbis articulating stricter, more circumscribed attitudes and Reform rabbis adopting the most liberal approaches, with Conservative rabbis often positioning themselves in the middle, but closer to Orthodox standards than to Reform. The vast majority of intermarried and converting Jews who affiliate join the Reform movement; a considerably smaller group affiliate with the Conservative movement; and a dramatically smaller segment affiliates with the Orthodox movement. Equally important, the children of Reform Jews are statistically far more likely to marry non-Jews—and thus to be put into a situation where they might think about conversion—than the children of Conservative or Orthodox Jews.<sup>xxi</sup>

Thus, Reform temples include the largest group of potential converts, although the movement as a whole has moved away from overt emphasis on conversion and towards an atmosphere of inclusiveness that makes Judaism and Jewish environments feel welcoming to all types of families. In addition, many Reform rabbis have very large congregations with many responsibilities, and report that they have limited time to devote to bringing congregants through the process of conversion. As a result, the potential for conversion in Reform temples is often not actualized to its fullest extent.

Orthodox rabbis are the group of American Jewish clergy who are called upon least often to deal with intermarriage and conversion. Nevertheless, they do confront requests for conversion on a regular basis, and Orthodox rabbinic responses to these requests are arranged along a continuum. Proponents of high boundaries believe conversions should only be performed according to the strictest Orthodox standards, and that potential converts must commit to leading completely ritually observant Jewish lives.<sup>xxii</sup>

Many contemporary American Orthodox rabbinic courts have brought this same strictness to their policies in regard to adopted children: thus, non-Orthodox couples who adopt children and want an Orthodox conversion so that the children they raise will be fully accepted by Jews around the world often experience difficulty in finding an Orthodox *beit din* (rabbinical court) that is willing to convert their adopted children into Judaism. However, more liberal Orthodox Jews encourage sincere conversion, and believe in lowering the boundaries to do so. They base their approach on the many classical rabbinic sources that simply require potential converts to be told about some of the most difficult laws and some of the easiest laws, without requiring promises of completely Orthodox behavior before a conversion. One offering from Tractate Yevamot 47 a-b is influential among liberal segments of the contemporary Orthodox community:

Our masters taught: If, at the present time, a man comes to you seeking to be a proselyte, he should be asked: What makes you wish to be received as a proselyte?...If he says, "I am fully aware [of the suffering of the Jews] but I am scarcely worthy of [the privilege of becoming a Jew]," he is to be received at once and instructed in a few minor and a few major precepts. He should be told of the sin of not giving gleanings, forgotten sheaves, corner crop, an poor man's tithe...[A list of further examples follows.] One should take care not to impose on him too many commandments nor go into fine details about him.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Conservative movement includes divergent opinions on conversion ranging from strict rabbis and lay leaders who urge advocacy for endogamy and stringent halakhic conversion guidelines, to more liberal thinkers who believe that the movement should emphasize *keruv* (a

Hebrew word for drawing a person closer to Judaism) and put less stress on boundary maintenance. Rabbis in both wings of Judaism base their decisions on legal precedents within the corpus of rabbinic legal writings from medieval through modern times.

The extent to which American cultural standards and expectations have changed is most vividly illustrated by looking at Reform Judaism. Thus, as Reform scholar Daniel Schiff points out, in the early decades of the twentieth century the Reform movement displayed near-unanimity in its advocacy for endogamy, and for urging conversion in cases of marriage across religious cultural lines. American Reform leader Kaufman Kohler's 1919 statement against officiating at mixed marriages clearly articulates the expectation that a Jewish home must have only one religion, because "if man and wife belong to two different religions, it will be a house divided against itself. Without harmony of views in a matter so vital to the future, there is no real unity."<sup>xxiv</sup>

By the 1980s, however, intermarriage had become so common in most Western countries that the more liberal elements in each wing of Judaism struggled to find revised standards that could be applied to changing Jewish families. In 1983, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution declaring that "the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people." Later Reform responsa dealt with situations where that identification becomes murky, emphasizing that "patrilineal descent must testify to the child's positive and exclusive Jewish identity." Many rabbis interpret this to mean that any child of one Jewish parent must demonstrate his or her Jewishness by being raised in the Jewish faith and by affirming his or her Jewishness at an appropriate age.<sup>xxv</sup>

The emotionalism evoked by intermarriage and conversion issues in general and by the patrilineal descent decision was exacerbated during the “Who is a Jew?” controversy in Israel. On several successive occasions (1972, 1974, 1977-78, 1983-85), Israeli religious parties attempted to establish consistent, halakhically-based principles for conversions performed in the Diaspora and to incorporate them into the Israeli law of return, which guarantees all Jews citizenship in the Jewish state. Their goal was to only accept as Jews persons who had been converted by an Orthodox *beit din*. American Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis and laypersons alike felt that these stringent new rulings would effectively disenfranchise them. American leaders energetically and ultimately successfully lobbied the Israeli government not to put these standards into law.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In the interim, the Israeli government and communities have recently faced their own “Who is a Jew?” crisis, as thousands of Russian Jews and their non-Jewish family members (and significant others) emigrated to Israel, further complicating attempts to draw clear lines between Jew and non-Jew within Israeli society. At least 300,000 non-halakhic Jews are estimated to have entered Israel under the Law of Return, and many Jewish Israelis—including Israeli women—living or traveling abroad marry non-Jews and give birth to halakhically non-Jewish children. Most recently, Israel’s government has made strides in dealing with increased demands for conversion by creating the Joint Institute for Jewish Studies (informally called by a more accurate name: the Joint Institute for Conversion), which brings together rabbis and leaders from the three wings of Israeli Judaism to work together to instruct potential converts. Partially as a result of this and other efforts, the number of Israelis receiving conversion certificates has escalated from 3,599 in 2004 to a projected 6000 in 2005.

## **Conversion and Jewish Identification**

Conversion into Judaism is almost always a process in the contemporary context. For some, the attraction of Judaism is primarily religious and spiritual. Others are first attracted by Jews, rather than Judaism: they grew up in Jewish neighborhoods or had mostly Jewish friends. Converts often remember perceiving Jewish families as being warm, close, responsible and concerned. Many were attracted to Jewish humor and said that Jewish families were relaxed and funny with each other. Converts also often say they are attracted to Jewish interpersonal styles—verbal, egalitarian, flexible, or to Jewish political styles—feminist, liberal, concern about social justice. Consciously or unconsciously they sought out primarily Jewish friendship circles in high school. For some, this was a deliberate decision. For others, “it just happened.” During college as well they found mostly Jewish friends, and often dated primarily Jewish men and women. Others don’t consider the possibility of converting until they begin seriously dating a Jew, or until their first child is born. However, regardless of when they first started thinking about choosing Judaism and the Jewish people, becoming a Jew was an idea they worked with over a period of time, frequently going back and forth in their own minds. According to their recollections, it took months at the very least, and sometimes years, until some were ready to make a decision to convert into Judaism.

Non-Jewish spouses of Jews who don’t convert before marriage often “live a Jewish life” for several years before they decide to formally convert. Moreover, the notion of a conversion that is not part of an organic process is offensive even for many who eventually chose to convert into Judaism. Conversionary households often continue negotiating holiday and other religious issues with their Christian extended families. Although Christian families are much less likely to try to introduce Christian practices into a family that has chosen to be Jewish than they are in an

interfaith family, testing behavior often continues for decades. Although conversion thus does not erase all tension over holidays between the conversionary household and the non-Jewish extended family, systematic research conducted on intermarried and conversionary households over the past three decades demonstrates that conversion makes a profound difference in individual and family identification, behaviors and attitudes.

Beyond the conscious decisions people make, conversion opens the way for a pro-Jewish drift. Part of the reason for a pro-Jewish trajectory is related to the impact of the norms of social networks: once they have converted, Jews by Choice are more likely to make more Jewish friends and to take a more active role in Jewish organizations. For many, conversion also lessens feelings of conflict about accommodating two religious traditions. After conversion, families typically take on more Jewish religious rituals and holiday celebrations, and the majority decide to confine Christian celebrations to visits to the extended family and friends. Many converts are encouraged by the goal of becoming Jews just like their spouse and their children. “It meant that now we were all one of a kind, rather than Daddy being one thing and Mommy and the kids being another,” as one converted father put it. Many new converts express the belief that they have helped their families have religious integrity.

Despite diverse narratives of Jewish exploration, research shows that conversionary households are, by and large, interested in maintaining and increasing their Jewish connections. Some comment that the Jewish community does not give sufficient thought to the special challenges they sometimes face. In addition to advocacy for endogamy and conversion, synagogues and Jewish communal institutions have been called upon to provide more services and strategies for conversionary families. Jews by Choice must deal with psychosocial and familial complexities not faced by born Jews, and many converts urge the Jewish community to



create a mentoring community for converts and conversionary households. They hope rabbis, families, and community members will support the Jewish identity of Jews by Choice, who bring new dimensions of energy and commitment to contemporary Jewish societies.

---

<sup>i</sup> A more extensive report on this original interview research appears in Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Choosing Jewish: Conversations About Conversion* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> Bernard Lazerwitz, J. Alan Winter, Arnold Dashefsky, and Ephraim Tabory, *Jewish Choices: American Jewish Denominationalism* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 189. Within marriages performed in the two decades from 1970 to 1990, 12 percent of the born non-Jewish wives of Jewish men and 5 percent of the born non-Jewish husbands of Jewish wives converted into Judaism; as of 1990, about 16 percent of intermarriages had resulted in conversion into Judaism. Lazerwitz et al's analysis uses data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations (1990 NJPS).

<sup>iii</sup> Benjamin Phillips and Shaul Kellner, "Reconceptualizing religious change: ethno-apostasy and change in religion among American Jews," forthcoming, *Sociology of Religion*, Special Issue on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, eds. Moshe and Harriet Hartman, pp. 20-26.

<sup>iv</sup> Lazerwitz et al, p. 189. In 1990 data indicated that "98 percent of Jewish-Convert couples report they are raising their children as Jews, and 38 percent of mixed married couples report they are doing so."

<sup>v</sup> *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (Mandell L. Berman Institute-North American Jewish Data Bank, 2003), p. 55. The United Jewish Community's analysis of NJPS 2000-01, a study conducted by the UJC, suggested that 33 percent of the children of intermarriages were being raised as Jews.

<sup>vi</sup> Gabriele Glaser, "Can a Gentile Wife Raise Jewish Kids?" in *Moment* magazine 24, No. 2 (April 1999), pp. 58-61, p. 59.

<sup>vii</sup> Harvey Cox, *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey Through the Jewish Year* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>viii</sup> Phillips and Kellner, *op. cit.*

<sup>ix</sup> NJPS 2000-01 data, analyzed by Benjamin Phillips and Sylvia Barack Fishman. Unless otherwise specified, data cited from NJPS 2000-01 was run by Phillips and Fishman.

<sup>x</sup> B. Forster and J. Tabachnick, *Jews by Choice: A study of converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991). Forster and Tabachnik's

---

Chicago-based study of Jews by Choice also found that 15 percent of their primarily female married conversionary population converted before they met a Jewish partner, out of attraction to Judaism itself.

<sup>xi</sup> Forster and Tabachnik, pp. 81-82.

<sup>xii</sup> *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, The Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (New York and Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

<sup>xiii</sup> See also the prescriptive materials in Deuteronomy 21:10-14 and Numbers 31:17-18).

<sup>xiv</sup> Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, pp. 261-265.

<sup>xv</sup> Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1991), p. 46.

<sup>xvi</sup> Cohen, pp. 110-111.

<sup>xvii</sup> Cohen, pp. 198-211. Cohen puts Tractate Gerim, which describes the process of proselytizing, as “almost certainly” post-talmudic (i.e., post 500 C.E.) and “first attested explicitly about 1300.”

<sup>xviii</sup> Cohen, pp. 211-233.

<sup>xix</sup> Cohen, pp. 211-233.

<sup>xx</sup> “By the Numbers: Understanding American Jewry,” Brandeis University conference launching the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (November 3, 2005). Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, who conducted the *American Religious Identification Survey 2001* (ARIS, New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001) and the *American Jewish Identity Survey 2001* (AJIS, New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001; reissued by The Center for Cultural Judaism, New York, 2003) assert that secularism has grown dramatically among white Americans, and that “the proportion of the population that can be classified as Christian has declined from 86 percent in 1990 to 77 percent in 2001.” (ARIS, p. 10) Kosmin et al also calculate that about 7.7 million Americans report having some Jewish ancestry, and that “nearly 4 percent of America’s 105 million residential households have at least one member who is Jewish by religion or is of Jewish parentage or upbringing or considers him/ herself Jewish.” (AJIS, p. 6)

<sup>xxi</sup> Benjamin Phillips and Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Causes and Consequences of American Jewish Inter-marriage,” forthcoming, *Sociology of Religion*, Special Issue on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, eds. Moshe and Harriet Hartman.

<sup>xxii</sup> One typical example of the high standards characteristic of Orthodox rabbinic authorities in the contemporary period can be found in Rabbi Moses Feinstein’s *Iggrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* Vol 3, # 106 (Tamuz 1969). In this case, Rabbi Feinstein decides to reject a woman who wishes

---

to convert because of marriage but rejects the standards of modesty required of Orthodox women in their clothing and head coverings; Rabbi Feinstein declares the woman to be not motivated “for the sake of heaven.”

<sup>xxiii</sup> Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitsky, trans. William G. Braude, *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 350. *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* was originally published in Hebrew in Odessa, 1908-1911.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Cited by Daniel Schiff, Rappaport Center for the Study of Assimilation, Bar Ilan University, Neve Ilan Conference Center, July 22, 2005; *American Reform Responsa*, Item # 148. Rabbi Officiating at Mixed Marriages (Vol. XXXIX, 1919), pp. 75-76.

<sup>xxv</sup> Schiff, CCAR Responsa, 5759.2, “Baptism and Jewish Status.”

<sup>xxvi</sup> David Landau, *Who Is A Jew? A Case Study of American Jewish Influence on Israeli Policy* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1996).