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# JEWS BY CHOICE:

## A Quiet Revolution

Lawrence J. Epstein

*Lawrence J. Epstein's most recent book is Zion's Call (University Press of America).*

So far it has been a quiet revolution. Each year, by most estimates, at least 10,000 non-Jews choose to convert to Judaism, and the number appears to be increasing rapidly.

Some estimates of the number of converts are even higher. Egon Mayer, one of the few national experts on conversion, suggests that somewhere between 14,000 and 19,000 people become Jews each year. Even using the smaller number and ignoring the projected large increases, the current conversion rate means that at least 150,000 people will choose to convert to Judaism between now and the year 2000. That number, combined with current converts, will form a significant percentage of American Jewry. Most estimates are that there are now about 150,000 converts (or Jews by choice, as many prefer to be called). About one in 35 American Jews is a Jew by choice rather than by birth.

This increase in converts has brought with it a change in Judaism of historic dimensions concerning Jewish attitudes toward converts. It has helped trigger religious confrontations within Jewry that some predict could result in a permanent split between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews.

The change in attitude by American Jewry has been swift and remarkable. Traditionally, rabbis have discouraged would-be converts. Discussions of the hardships imposed by ritualistic obligations, and the legacy and prospect of anti-Semitism mixed with just the

slightest hint of exclusivity, formed the substance of the rabbinic side of dialogues with potential converts.

In Western countries today, however, these concerns are less compelling. In addition, there are other factors that contribute to the resurgence of a proselytizing movement. Specifically in the United States, several factors in the social climate have combined to create an atmosphere congenial to the revival of a Jewish movement to seek converts.

First, the widely noted legitimization of ethnicity as an acceptable organizing principle for defining identity has given Jews the self-confidence to assert their right to put their "product" up for sale in the marketplace of ideas.

Second, although most Jews would probably deny it, it is very possible that the Christian evangelical movement has ironically prompted reaction by imitation. The fundamentalists have made the act of proselytizing well known as a way to win over reluctant Jews. Jewish reaction may in some sense be seen as adopting the tactics of what many view as a religious threat.

Finally, and most important, many Jews favor conversion as a form of demographic self-defense. Most American Jews believe that American Jewry is committing a slow communal suicide. American Jews fear for their future because of a combination of negative population growth (a birth rate below replacement level), intermarriage (frequently cited at 50%), a population that is older than



the average (approximately 40% of American Jews are over 45, as compared to 30% of the whole U.S. population), and as Jews move to the South and West, a population that is less concentrated and thus with diminished religious cohesion and political power.

This vision has spurred a survivalist mentality that has focused on various ways to increase the Jewish population. One of these ways is to increase converts. As American Jews' concerns about the consequences of declining numbers grow, they are more willing to see conversion as a potential source for the replenishing of their population.

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### *Charles Silberman*

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This view of a declining Jewry is widely, but not universally, held. Dissenters include Charles Silberman, author of the recently published book *A Certain People*. Silberman dismisses the notion of a supposedly declining birthrate by pointing to inadequate, incomplete statistics and to a "quirk" in marital behavior during the 1970s.

Similarly, Silberman thinks that intermarriage data is inadequate. He concludes that about one Jew in four marries someone who was born a gentile. Silberman cites the large numbers of Jews by choice and concludes that the net effect of intermarriage is near zero. In his words, there is an "exchange of populations." Silberman does recognize the beneficial demographic and religious effects of conversion. He

devotes an entire section of his book to reporting on the movement, and he reaches the same conclusion as Egon Mayer — that converts are religiously observant and faithful transmitters of the Jewish heritage.

Silberman's book will not put an end to the concern over intermarriage and declining Jewish numbers. The crucial point about it, though, is that, despite differing views of American Jewish survival, both Silberman and those with differing views see the conversion movement as both healthy and likely to continue.

It seems clear that Jews will continue to encourage this trend for significant religious reasons alone, independent of the fluctuating rates of Jewish births and intermarriage. At the same time, most Jews, and most Jewish communal leaders, strongly maintain the belief — nurtured by observation and experience, and by a view that statistical data on Jewish matters are notoriously suspect — that their population is declining, despite Silberman's optimistic counter-evidence. This perception will continue to spur these Jews and their leaders to support those who choose to become Jews.

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### *Community Split*

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The conversion movement's effects have not all been positive. Conversions by Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbis have brought into the Jewish peoplehood members not always recognized as Jews by the Orthodox move-

ment. Along with other problems (such as marriage and divorce procedures, the question of whether the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother should be considered Jewish, and others), conversion has been the focus — both in the United States and Israel — of a battle for religious legitimacy within Judaism. Some Orthodox leaders are warning that within a few decades, many people who think of themselves as Jews will not be considered Jews by the Orthodox. Some observers believe there is a genuine danger of a permanent rupture between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewry.

Despite a 2,000 year rejection of conversionary activity, despite statistics that weaken a central argument of its proponents, despite serious argument within the religious community, the numerically major movements of American Jewry seem determined to progress with their intention to seek converts. Indeed, given these problems, it is an important question to ask why the conversion movement has been so well received by American Jews.

One possible answer to this puzzle lies in the peculiar nature of American Jewry. Its own fundamental character is voluntary. In a sense, all American Jews are Jews by choice. That is, people who are born Jews must choose to remain Jews. There are no legal forces that seek, reward, and support such a voluntary choice to remain a Jew — and

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## **Jews by Choice**

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religious, familial, and cultural forces have become much less powerful. Gentiles who choose to become Jews validate the choice of those born Jewish to remain Jews. The enormous step of conversion makes the smaller step of remaining both easier and more sensible. Jews by choice provide American Jews by birth with a sense of personal legitimacy.

As more Gentile families are affected, as Jews by choice speak out and continue to make major contributions to Jewish life, as the argument over conversion gets sharper in Jewish life, and as Jewish efforts to seek converts get more widely known, this quiet religious revolution will be quiet no more.

That day is near. ■