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S H M A . C O M

Radical Choices: Conversion and Leadership

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What happens when the “other” becomes “us”? I asked this question at the Reform movement’s biennial gathering in the early 1980s — a time when the issue of conversion was in the Jewish closet, a time of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

In the ensuing years, we have seen a dramatic shift. Outreach programs have helped to create a climate of increased openness and acceptance, one in which the stigma once attached to conversion has been largely erased. Many thousands of men and women who were born into different faith traditions have become part of the Jewish community. And while the education and integration of those who choose to become Jews will continue to be important and sacred communal work, it is work we now know how to do.

In 2013, the ante has been upped. Not only have many who were the “other” become “us,” they have become our rabbis, our educators, our synagogue presidents, and other communal leaders. Their presence in these leadership roles has communal implications. Because they are more visible, some issues and questions that have been implicit have become more explicit. As the numbers of Jews by choice grow, will our community move in new and different ways?

ultimately came to an end, not because it wasn’t successful (it was), but because of political pressure that was brought to bear.

Do we have spiritual leaders today who are willing to act bravely, *l’shem shamayim* (for the sake of heaven), and for the good of the Jewish people — leaders who will come together to address, and resolve, the “Who is a Jew?” question that has been with us far too long and that fails to serve us? How can we teach about *Klal Yisrael* when this divisive and painful issue endures?

Ethnicity

We can no longer identify Jews by name or appearance. We are witnessing a period of widespread hybrid identity, and our spiritual and communal leaders are among those who are changing the “face” of Judaism. How does this change inform our understanding of Jewish identity and authenticity? How might Jewish leaders who come from non-Jewish backgrounds, and who may have a different relationship to Jewish ethnicity, influence contemporary Jewish life? Is there still a small voice within the Jewish collective unconscious that is uncomfortable with this diversity — that rails against converts as “inauthentic outsiders”? Will these questions remain pertinent when the immigrant experience becomes history? Studies — such as Steven M. Cohen’s “Changes in American Jewish Identities” — point to attenuated connections to ethnicity in younger generations of Jews: What might a new understanding of Jewish authenticity look like?

Jews by choice create their Jewish identity as adults. That process begins with study, but it continues with experience — living a Jewish life, and creating and adding to a Jewish “memory bank.” Maybe that is also a good plan for those born Jews who have very little experience with Judaism. Certain questions — What does it mean to live a Jewish life in the 21st century? How do I make a personal connection to the Jewish past? How do I come to own Judaism? — would become even more relevant if they become part of a shared exploration. Together, can we create a new and renewed context for experiencing Judaism? Can we reinvigorate the value of community, so basic to Judaism, less valued today when we “belong”

Numbers & Definitions

Determining even an approximate number of “Jews by choice” in the population of American Jews is extremely difficult. Respected sociologists comment that any estimate is unreliable, as some convert through rabbinic-led programs and others become Jewish through personal means, by coming to identify as Jewish or “partially Jewish” after many years. With all these caveats and qualifications, projections from local Jewish population studies suggest about 400,000 to 600,000 people who identify as Jews but who had no Jewish parents — probably the most expansive definition of “Jews by choice.”

Who Is a Jew?

Isn’t it time to resolve the “Who is a Jew?” question? Today, ironically, some men and women who are recognized as Jewish leaders are not recognized as Jews according to Orthodox authorities. Can we find a way — do we have the communal will — to work toward a universal standard for conversion, at least in this country?

There have been experiments, most notably in Denver in the 1980s, in which the community’s Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis came together to develop a common set of standards and a course of study that allowed each movement to prepare its own candidates for conversion, and for candidates who successfully completed the program to receive a certificate of conversion acceptable to all. That experiment

to virtual communities?

The Impact of Radical Choice

Our tradition teaches that the converts of the generation are the witnesses of/to the generation.


Jews by choice who hold leadership positions in the Jewish community have made two radical life choices: They have chosen Judaism, and they have chosen to become Jewish leaders. Their choices challenge those of us who were born Jewish, some of whom see Judaism as merely an accident of birth. The presence of Jews by choice in leadership positions that, through their choices, witness the value and values of Judaism, serve to reinvigorate Jewish commitment. The prominent presence of those who started with no Jewish knowledge or experience, but who learned Judaism as adults, may empower born Jews with little Jewish knowledge or experience to become more literate.

While conversion ceremonies are usually private, a welcoming ceremony — during which the new Jew by choice speaks about his or her experience — can be moving, powerful, and transformative to those who witness it. How can we benefit from the unique perspective of Jews by choice — who can see us as we cannot always see ourselves — and have that perspective serve as a means of Jewish renewal? As one step toward that vision of a reinvigorated Judaism, I propose creating a communal dialogue

between Jews who are finding their way back to Judaism, whether through traditional or nontraditional settings, and Jews who came to Judaism through conversion. Let's create a shared narrative — where we tell the stories that describe the paths that have led us closer or farther away from Judaism, stories that validate our processes of becoming who we are.

Are We Ready to Reach Beyond?

In 1978, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the Reform movement's Union of American Hebrew Congregations (forerunner to the Union for Reform Judaism) delivered a speech calling on the Jewish community to reach out to Jews by choice and intermarried families and welcome them into our midst. Since then, we have seen his words become fact. Also in that speech, he asked us to reach out to the "unchurched." That controversial suggestion was never acted upon.

Has its time come? One doesn't have to be born a Jew to become a Jew and to be a Jewish leader. Are we ready to create a thoughtful campaign that welcomes non-Jews who profess no religion and encourage them to explore Judaism? The midrash teaches that Abraham and Sarah opened all four corners of their tent to welcome the stranger. Sarah converted the women and Abraham converted the men. How open are we? 



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Choosing Twice

SARAH IMHOFF

Jewish communal leaders have always been "Jews by choice." They have chosen to make their Jewishness a central part of their public lives. Rabbis, synagogue presidents, educators, and nonprofit leaders have been more than simply "Jews by birth." They have chosen publicly Jewish lifestyles and careers. They have opted for professions in which their Jewishness occupies a central and visible role.

In recent years, the "Jews by choice" in leadership positions have increasingly come to include Jews who have doubly chosen. First, they have chosen Judaism for themselves as individuals: They have converted from another religion (or no religion) to Judaism. (Jews by choice are a notable minority in many Jewish communities. And this notability vastly exceeds mere numbers. According to the Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011, 2 percent

of those who identified as Jewish had converted.¹) Second, they have chosen to become not only leaders within this minority, but public voices of the larger Jewish community as well. For many, these two choices are not simply coincidental.

The leaders who have made this double choice exemplify what Sylvia Barack Fishman has called "activist" converts, as opposed to those whom she terms "accommodationist" and "ambivalent" converts. That is, these "activist converts" deeply identify with Judaism and Jewish peoplehood, and therefore they seek to support, enliven, and even create Jewish institutions. Fishman's 2006 study, *Choosing Jewish: Conversations About Conversion*, which frames conversion to Judaism in the context of marriage and family, estimates that

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¹ Steven M. Cohen, Jacob B. Ukeles, and Ron Miller, "Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011" (New York: Jewish Policy and Action Research, commissioned by the UJA-Federation of New York.)

² Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Choosing Jewish: Conversations About Conversion*, American Jewish Committee (2006).