

We extend our appreciation to The Samuel Bronfman Foundation for its generous support of this issue.

Inside Conversion

<i>Lydia Kukoff</i> Choosing Judaism, Redux . . .	1
<i>Edgar M. Bronfman & Beth Zasloff</i> Abraham & Sarah's Tent . . .	3
<i>Sarah Luria</i> Ruth from a Convert's Point of View	4
<i>Monica Rodriguez</i> Two Peoples	5
<i>James Morgan</i> The Reluctant Rebbitzin . . .	6
<i>Toby Kovacs</i> Families and Conversion . . .	7
<i>Abigail Auer</i> Living Jewish without Converting	8
<i>Kerry Olitzky</i> Lowering the Barriers and Raising the Meaning	9
<i>Janet Shafner</i> NiSh'ma	10
<i>Jeremy Kalmanofsky</i> A Spiritual Citizenship . . .	12
<i>Jess Olson</i> Power & Consequences . . .	13
<i>Seth Farber</i> Controversy & Chaos in Israeli Conversion Courts	14
<i>David Ellenson</i> "For the Sake of Heaven" . .	16
<i>Zvi Zohar</i> Birth and Conversion	17
<i>Jason Kimelman-Block</i> Sh'ma Ethics	20

To subscribe:
877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com

Conversion is in the news. This is the case in Israel, where the Great Rabbinical Court recently retroactively disqualified thousands of Orthodox conversions performed by Israeli rabbinical courts. This is also the case in North America, where (in response to a possible disqualification by the Israeli rabbinate) the Rabbinical Council of America has restructured the supervision of the conversions conducted by Orthodox congregational rabbis — thus capitulating to what Jess Olson calls “a new kind of religious imperialism.”

As the shape of the Jewish People is determined, now more than ever, by Jews not born Jewish, and as conversion emerges as a contentious issue, it seems crucial to better understand what it means “to become Jewish,” what, as Jeremy Kalmanofsky writes, “carries a person over the boundary.” This understanding must encompass both the texts of the tradition — and the perceptions and experiences of those embracing Judaism. How do they see themselves, and how do they experience their relationship with the Jewish community — and with the family and community to which they belonged before becoming Jewish? Today, as we acknowledge that human identity is fluid, multifaceted, and complex — that each of us is made of many, often conflicting, aspects — is it right to expect that when an individual chooses Judaism, this should include excision of their past? Clearly, Judaism expects religious allegiance from its converts, but does this mean that they are required to totally abandon who they were — or to somehow integrate significant parts of what they have always been into what they are becoming? — SB

Choosing Judaism, Redux

Lydia Kukoff

The year 2008 marks the 30th anniversary of Rabbi Alexander Schindler’s landmark speech that called upon North American Jews to remove the “not wanted” signs from their hearts and reach out to converts (the term “Jews-by-Choice” had not been created yet) and to intermarried families. Having chosen Judaism fourteen years earlier, I had experienced the communal silence that then existed. In fact, it was because of that experience, as well as the experiences of others, that I began to develop pilot programs for potential and recent converts. As one who was involved in “outreach” (before it even had a name), I am a witness to a trajectory of assumptions about, and policies geared toward, converts.

On the personal level, we have learned a great deal about what it feels like to become a Jew. While Jews-by-Choice may officially become members of the Jewish people, they can’t immediately acquire a personal Jewish past; they lack their own Jewish memory bank. And they will always be members of their families of origin. To those who are choosing Judaism, we still need to reach out *neshama b’neshama*; for each Jew-by-Choice, the journey into Judaism is new. For new Jews-by-Choice, the Jewish world still starts out by being *terra incognita*, no matter how strong and sincere their desire to make their place in it.

On the communal level, we are becoming more educated and sensitized, more welcoming and inclusive. And while much has changed over the past 30 years, the work — of making conversion a fully educational, experiential, psychosocial, and cognitive experience — is still in progress. Creating change is both linear and cyclical. While we continue to move forward, we must also continue to educate and sensitize each new congregant, new rabbi, new educator, new agency head, and new lay and professional leaders. Courses and practica for rabbinic, cantorial, education, and communal service students, which give them the knowledge and the experience to

engage constructively with issues relating to conversion, intermarriage, and the changing demography of the North American Jewish community, should be required in our seminaries. While such courses could provide a solid grounding in text and theory, they could also address the real challenges — on the individual and communal level — that students will encounter when they become Jewish professionals: how to guide a Jew-by-Choice through the process of conversion; how to guide the congregation through assessing and developing policies regarding the

our arguments are *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven. We found ways to address anxieties, concerns, feelings that had never been publicly articulated, some of which caused helpful, powerful, and sometimes painful public conversations: People can convert, but can “the other” really become “us”? Are all these people with no Jewish backgrounds going to “water down” Judaism? Does the outreach program give a *hekhsher* to intermarriage?

I am proud that we found ways to speak honestly about a topic that had been unmentionable; we made it part of the communal dialogue. Now, it's time for the Outreach vs. Inreach debate to cease. It is a false dichotomy and, as such, it is completely unproductive. It is in reaching out to the other that we see ourselves most clearly. It is in knowing the heart of the stranger that we know our own heart most dearly. Our tradition teaches that the converts of each generation serve as witnesses for that generation, so each time a born-Jew asks me why I converted I become that witness through my response — a witness to the beauty and the value of Judaism. Jews-by-Choice remind our communities that being a Jew does not have to be solely an accident of birth; it can also be an act of choice and, moreover, that choice is one that is made by any Jew today who is living a Jewish life. It's just that some of us had Jewish parents and some didn't.

It's time for the Outreach vs. Inreach debate to cease. It is a false dichotomy. It is in reaching out to the other that we see ourselves most clearly.

role of the non-Jew in the synagogue or participation of non-Jewish family members in lifecycle ceremonies; how to create an inclusive community while articulating boundaries. These courses must extend beyond the walls of the seminaries into supervised fieldwork.

Above all, Jewish communities must be diligent in their efforts to reach out to those who choose to become Jews and to intermarried families. Federations, community centers, and religious movements can play a role in this sacred task. In the wake of the 1991 National Jewish Population Study, “continuity” became the watchword and communal resources were directed toward outreach programs. Many of these programs no longer exist, supplanted by other, newer concerns. Maybe, on this 30th anniversary of Schindler's visionary speech, it's time to reaffirm our commitment by developing a systems approach to this challenge. Can our leaders collaborate, so that each segment of the community has a task that it is uniquely suited to do, so that there is a road map and a division of labor? Such an approach would create clarity and unity (while respecting diversity), avoid wasteful duplication of efforts and turf wars, and enable the community and those new to it to benefit from all that we've learned thus far.

One of the first tasks articulated some 30 years ago, was to create a way for Jews to engage in constructive discourse about intermarriage and conversion; to find the words and spirit that created light, not heat, about this emotional issue; and to find ways to agree to disagree when necessary, remembering that

Lydia Kukoff, author of Choosing Judaism, was the first director of the URJ's outreach program. Currently, she consults on synagogue change.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. How does our understanding of Judaism — as a people, an ethnicity, a religion — impact the process of conversion?
2. Can Judaism be more solicitous of the hyphenated identity of Jews-by-Choice?
3. Is the “doorway into Judaism” a welcoming experience? How so, or if not, why not?