

# Are You Considering Conversion to Judaism?

by Rabbi Alan Silverstein

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Perhaps you are considering conversion to Judaism. This interest may stem from reading Jewish books or courses at college, from contact with Jewish friends, a love relationship with a Jew, from an unfulfilled spiritual quest, an awareness of Jewish parentage or ancestry, or a positive image of Jewish religion conveyed by films and the media. You may be wondering - what are the benefits and challenges of entering the Jewish faith? Have others who have chosen Judaism faced the same concerns and questions that you do?

This pamphlet presents a series of questions and answers borrowing from converts' personal testimonies. The intent of this pamphlet is to assist you in answering your own questions. In framing these questions, I was influenced by categories in Jews by Choice: A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism written by Conservative Rabbi Joseph Tabachnik and Dr. Brenda Foster. Based upon over 400 questionnaires, Tabachnik and Foster provide the following list of "reasons proposed to explain Gentile [affiliated as well as unchurched Christian] conversion to Judaism." (Note: this is a partial restatement of their total list.)

## RELIGIOUS RELATED

- Believing Judaism as a better religion
- Identified with Jesus as a Jew
- Felt God leading them down this path
- Felt Jewish beliefs made sense
- Liked Jewish worship
- Liked the realism in Jewish routine practices
- Sense of spiritual or religious need
- Search for a better religious identity
- Serious personal event caused questioning of faith

## MARRIAGE RELATED

- § Concern for religious identity of children
- § Desire for a Jewish wedding
- § Desire to provide children with a coherent family tradition and religion
- § To avoid dissonance in the home
- § To please the Jewish in-laws
- § To please the Jewish partner
- § To share faith and practice with partner

#### COMMUNITY RELATED

- Admiration of Jewish accomplishments in the face of hostilities
- Desire to belong to a close community
- Desire to be part of an ancient heritage which has withstood the test of time
- Felt Jews lived desirable lives
- Had many Jewish friends
- Identification with the Jewish fate.

Although not every one of the following questions may reflect your personal state of mind, perhaps some of them will accurately portray your feelings and assist in moving closer toward exploring a profound religious decision.

#### **Q: Does traditional Judaism accept converts, or is only the Reform movement liberal enough to be welcoming of Jews By Choice?**

A: Don't assume that the traditional segment of the Jewish community does not accept sincere converts. Representing modern Orthodox, for example, Rabbi Maurice Lamm's new volume entitled Becoming A Jew includes a final section, "Welcome Home: We are Keeping the Lights On," in which he articulates the warm affinity of traditionalists for pious newcomers.

'Those who stood at Sinai' [to receive the Torah via Moses] is a phrase that comprises those who are born to Jewish ancestors, all of whom originally converted at Sinai, those whose ancestors heroically converted since that time, and those who will convert today and tomorrow. (p. 417)

Rabbi Lamm and the rest of us in Jewry eagerly await the "return home" of persons whose destiny is to join ranks with the Jewish religious community.

As for Conservative Judaism, we are a huge movement of more than 40% of American Jewry, blessed with thousands of sincere Jews By Choice. Among converts into our ranks, we are proud to number some Rabbis, Cantors, Jewish educators, many local synagogues, Men's Club and Sisterhood Presidents, and countless well respected members of our Boards of Trustees, Committees and *Minyanim* (those who attend prayer services). The Chancellor of the Jewish

Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, in addressing a 1987 national conclave for the leadership of Conservative Jewry observed (regarding the desirability of conversion):

[Conversion is] an instrument that accords with our religious integrity ... Conversion opened up the Jewish community to the Greco-Roman world. There were many non-Jews who entered Judaism because Judaism pioneered the institution of conversion back [then] ... So I wish to make myself very clear. I think that conversion properly used is still the most effective way [in terms of responding to existing interfaith marriages] for us to be consistent with our past ... while at the same time addressing the real needs of the present. (Conservative Movement Conference on Intermarriage and Conversion, March 2-3, 1987)

All suitably prepared and involved Jews By Choice are welcomed by Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox groups within the mainstream of American Jewish religious life, in accord with each movement's standards of practice.

**Q: Will I have to forsake my Gentile family in order to become a Jewish person?**

A: This is a sensitive problem which must be treated with care. As Rabbi Sanford Seltzer has written:

It is true that initially one's parents may be hurt and resentful when informed that a son or a daughter has decided to leave their former faith. These feelings may exist even when one's family has not been particularly religious ... The impact of conversion to Judaism upon parents and other loved ones should be thoroughly evaluated before one decides to become a Jew. ("On Becoming A Jew," UAHC)

One of the paramount commandments of the Jewish tradition is the mitzvah of "honoring your father and mother." Judaism opposes cutting off ties with non-Jewish family members. Christian and unchurched relatives ought to be respectful of a convert's new religious needs as well. In her excellent guidebook for new Jews entitled Your People, My People— Finding Acceptance and Fulfillment as a Jew By Choice, based upon hundreds of case studies, Lena Romanoff, a committed Conservative Jew, offers the following advice:

A convert should explain to the family that he or she is the same person as before, with a different religious and cultural orientation. He or she should never criticize or ridicule the family's- and his or her former faith ... Converts should provide details about the conversion process and describe how they intend to incorporate Judaism into their lives ... Parents should not be expected to change their life-style because their child decides to convert, but they may be willing to accommodate some new needs. (p. 107)

Rather than sending Christmas cards to you, Christian family members should send Hanukkah greetings, and you should reciprocate with Christmas regards to them. Rather than beginning home meals with prayers to Jesus Christ when you are present, they might more suitably invoke the name of God. You should respect that Christianity is their religion, and they should respect that Judaism is yours. Once such mutuality is achieved in religious matters, your family interpersonal relationships ought to remain warm and respectful.

**Q: Should I be troubled with the prospect that Orthodox Jews will question the validity of my conversion under Conservative Jewish auspices?**

A: America is a land of freedom in decision-making. There are no government-mandated religious authorities. Instead, our country separates church and state. Neither in Christianity nor in Judaism can anyone dictate uniformity of practice. Consequently, many rituals and practices of Catholics are unacceptable to Protestant groups. Evangelical Protestants question the validity of Main-Line Protestant faith commitments. A convert into Methodism maybe regarded as inauthentic by "Born Again" Christians. A neophyte Unitarian might be considered as unacceptable to right-wing Christian faith communities. Mennonites and Amish are regarded as exotic, sectarian groups. Diversity and disagreement is characteristic of American Christian denominations. The same divergence is true among America's Jews.

Orthodox Judaism represents less than 10% of American Jewry. It has its own criteria for valid ritual practice, theology and conversion. So too does Conservative Judaism, which represents the largest number of affiliated Jews in the U.S.A. Our conversions are consistent with the nature of Jewish religion as practiced within our more than 800 congregations and more than one and a half million adherents. Jews By Choice who enter Judaism under the auspices of Conservative rabbis find their status as Jews acceptable to our entire religious movement, as well as to Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated Jews, collectively totaling more than 90% of U.S. Jewry.

In the remote situation that you subsequently become involved in an Orthodox community either in North America or in Israel\*, they would not recognize your conversion as valid any more than they would recognize a Conservative rabbi as a rabbi or a Conservative congregation as a synagogue. However, keep in mind that different standards would only be part of a fundamental reorientation for ANY non-Orthodox Jew (born Jew or convert) entering Orthodoxy, a re-orientation in ritual practice, in prayer, in belief, in every aspect of religious life. Just as a convert into a Main Line Protestant group would not be concerned about the opinions of Evangelicals or of Roman Catholics, as a Conservative Jew By Choice you need not worry about the minority views of Orthodox Judaism.

'Note: The civil ("the law of return") laws of The State of Israel do recognize the validity of Conservative conversion.

**Q: Will entry into Judaism resolve my personal faith concerns? Not having been satisfied with previous religious affiliations, will I find spiritual fulfillment within Judaism?**

A: Gail Saville, offers an eloquent articulation of the attraction of Jewish beliefs in contrast to her previous faith experiences:

I find great comfort in Judaism. Jewish children are born innocent [of original sin] ... Jewish children are not born with the burden of guilt. They do not come into this world tainted with original sin, but rather blessed with original purity ... When I was small, I often wondered how God could possibly think I was so terrible. I was too young to have done something wicked enough to make God mad at me. It is a comfort now to learn that God thought highly of me all along.

There are no intermediaries between Jews and God. Jews believe that all people have close, personal access to God. As a Jew, I don't have to go through an ecclesiastical switchboard ... in charge of human affairs to reach God.

A few friends have expressed to me their regret that we Jews have no human savior, no one to take on the burdens of our sin for us. My answer to them is, "Thank God!" When I am in a car, I do not like riding in the passenger's seat, putting my life in someone else's hands. I prefer controlling my own destiny; I prefer to earn my own salvation.

There is also security in knowing that as a Jew I am part of a people and a way of life that has survived and will survive. Nothing so life affirming, so family-and people oriented, with such strong roots and widespread branches, can cease to exist unless humankind itself ceases to exist. As a Jew, I feel secure as a part of something very special, and in a very real sense, immortal. (Gail Saville, "Why I Chose to Become a Jew," Reform Judaism, Fall, 1983, p. 20)

The testimony of a former Protestant minister, Richard Kajut, is equally forceful. He writes:

The decision to break with my former Christian faith was the culmination of a lengthy process of religious search and intensive self-examination of my personal beliefs. There was no flash of lightning which prompted my choice to convert. Ironically, it was the desire to know more about the character of Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, which eventually led to the renunciation of my Christian heritage...

During my college years, I spent many spare hours in the religion stacks of the university library pulling texts on the 'historical' Jesus. [Albert] Schweitzer led me to R.H. Charles, Charles to Albright, and Albright to Powell Davies. I graduated soon to Joseph Klausner and Abba Hillel Silver ... A whole new understanding of the ZEITGEIST of the early first century opened before my eyes: apocryphal and pseudopigraphical theology ... Greek mystery religions, Sadducees, centrist Pharisees, apocalyptic Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Hillel and Shammai ... If I was to serve the one God of Moses and the Prophets in the manner I was drawn to Him, I could do so only as a Jew. (Originally published in the Jewish Spectator and reprinted in M. Lamm, On Becoming A Jew, pp. 29-30)

For many converts to Judaism, membership in the Jewish community, in addition to comfort with our beliefs, sparks a new sense of spirituality, of religious vitality. Paul Cowan's personal odyssey, An Orphan in History, describes his wife Rachel's spiritual rebirth via conversion under the supervision of Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, the former Executive Vice President of The Rabbinical Assembly.

She [Rachel] said that she had been thinking about the idea [of conversion] for months, ever since she discovered that worshipping as a Jew released something inside her which enabled her to think about God; to feel, at rare moments, a faith whose intensity startled her. (Paul Cowan, p. 217)

In a related assessment, one of my own students for conversion into Judaism, Ben Asher, explains:

That is precisely why [one]... converts, because of some sort of experience of something spiritual that has never been accessible prior to undertaking this perilous journey. A window was somehow miraculously opened. At the time of 'illumination,' the convert may be in awe as his whole disposition reflects the extraordinary process of transformation

going on within ... The Power of God at work. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey)

**Q: Having been raised as a non-Jew, will I ever find religious meaning in the Hebrew prayers or in sacred sites of Jewish history, such as the Land of Israel?**

A: Don't be intimidated by what might seem to be a chasm between Jews and Gentiles in religious vocabulary and experiences. Once a person sincerely enters into Judaism via conversion, Hebrew prayers, *Eretz Yisrael*, and other internal Jewish symbols not only open up to you, but will become enormously inspiring. As Lucy Katzen, a Conservative convert, observes:

It took time for Jewish tradition to grow and it is logical that it should take time for someone to grow into it. If I had waited for every custom to have meaning before I observed it, I'd still be waiting. I learned instead that customs can grow to have meaning because you observe them. I had to give myself time to make memories and the two years I had when I [prepared for being] converted cannot compare to the ten years of experiences I've had now. (The Newly-Jewish Family: A Newsletter, Jewish Family Service, MetroWest, New Jersey, September, 1990)

Emotionally, in Love Song, Julius Lester, the involved member of a Conservative congregation, expresses the birth of the love for Hebrew language, ritual, and for the liturgical beauty of Judaism through the eyes of a new Jew.

I am in love!

What an odd thing to say about a religion, but it is true. I am in love with Judaism, with being a Jew ... I am having a love affair with my soul ...I have begun my second semester of Modern Hebrew... Knowing Hebrew will give me the confidence to go anywhere among Jews. And Jews are the only ones with whom I can share my great love. (J. Lester, Love Song, p. 202)

Joann Boughman, a Jew By Choice, was initially moved during a professional conference in Israel, by the spiritual power of a visit to The Wall (Judaism's most sacred spot, in Jerusalem, at the site of the ancient Temple), and by subsequent encounters with Jewish ritual.

I was absolutely overcome with emotion (when I saw the Wall). My knees got weak and I started crying. One of my colleagues had to help me sit down on the pavement ... [It was the feeling that] thousands of years had come crashing down on me all at once.

I fell in love with the incredible richness of Jewish tradition and ritual. For example, one thing I always liked about Christmas was the candle lighting services on Christmas Eve, the warmth and beauty of it. Well, (Christians) light candles once a year. I do it every Friday night. (Alyssa Gabbay, "Jews By Choice" in Baltimore Jewish Times, June 1, 1990, pp. 52-53)

These powerful spiritual experiences are not at all uncommon among converts to Judaism. For example, Judith Lee traced the evolution of her own receptivity to entering into Judaism to a search shared among people in a Board of Rabbis' (Conservative and Reform) Conversion Class. In many cases, they were seeking a stronger religious identity. Recounting personal sharing among classmates, Judith writes:

Those of us who were not Jewish at that time had given a great deal of thought to many things before we decided to come together that [first] night [of class]. We had thought about ourselves and how, despite the fact we were all educated and professionally successful, we were somehow missing a needed sense of individual and communal spiritual connectedness...

We each had felt a strong pull towards Judaism for several years and had sensed that living as a Jew would make it possible for each of us to realize our potentials in accordance with our values, our intellect and our emotions. (Judith S. Lee, *Reconstructionist*, June, 1986, p. 15)

**Q: Is it valid to initially consider converting into Judaism because of the desirability of being part of the same religion in which my spouse and I have chosen to raise our children?**

A: Conversion into Judaism is a serious endeavor and ultimately must reflect sincere commitments on the part of the convert. However, to begin to explore Judaism as a statement of commitment to one's children's religious well-being is praiseworthy. Conservative Rabbi Michael Wasserman, recounts the thoughts of a new Jew, Kathy, one of his students in his Introduction to Judaism course.

Kathy [said] ... that having grown up with parents of different faiths (Catholic and Lutheran), she considers it important to have a single religion in the home so that the children can get a consistent set of religious messages. She wants religion to play an important role in their family life, and is willing to accept Daniel's religion so that she will have Daniel's support in that area. She can take that step, she says, because she does not believe that any one religion has a monopoly on truth. (Michael Wasserman, "The Convert and the Rabbi as 'Stress Absorbers,'" in Egon Mayer (ed.), *The Imperatives of Jewish Outreach*, p. 161)

Reflecting a later stage of parenting, Francis Price concludes:

My entrance into Judaism dates from the beginning of my small son's religious education... When our son was five and had reached religious school age, I sent him to a synagogue near our home. My mind began to turn to Judaism, not only for him but for myself. I must admit it was purely an academic thing with me [initially]. What makes a Jew a Jew? How does a Jew think? What are his traditions? These and many other questions nagged at me and, for the sake of my child's religious training, I wanted to know the answers. My quest for Jewish knowledge began. (M. Lamm, *On Becoming A Jew*, p. 15)

Similarly, one of my own students for conversion into Judaism, Diane Gerberg, recalls her own spiritual evolution.

I started thinking about my family unit. We were thinking about the education of our son. And I was thinking in terms of all he had to learn in Hebrew. And the thought came into

my mind that maybe he should go to yeshiva. And because religion has always been extremely important to me - throughout my life it has always been my standard bearer in a sense, the thing that was very, very important to me - I started looking at my family unit and feeling in a way not part of it. It was a strange sensation that came over me one day where I realized that my son and my husband were Jewish and I was this oddity in the house, I wanted to make my family a unit. I wanted to be part of my family. And I really believed that this was the place to be. To me it was like coming home. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey).

**Q: Is it reasonable to begin the encounter with Jewish study and Jewish religious practice as a response to experiences which I encountered among my Jewish spouse's extended family?**

A: Whether for children or in-laws, no one should enter Jewish life solely in response to others. However, it is entirely commendable to first explore Judaism because of powerful feelings of family, whether with Jewish in-laws or with other new relatives.

In *A Certain People*, author Charles Silberman interviewed many Jews By Choice who had been drawn into Judaism after becoming comfortable with Jewish family settings. The Passover *Seder*, Hanukah celebrations, festive weddings, sensitive mourning customs, Bar/Bat Mitzvah festivities and similar memories evolved into a growing comfort with Jewish religion. (p. 308) Dolores, a convert to Judaism, tells writer Susan Weidman Schneider:

"It probably sounds a little macabre, but it was going to Jewish funerals [of her husband's extended family] that first attracted me to Judaism. There was no open casket, which I liked, and the Shiva [seven days of mourning] seemed very civilized and psychologically sensible." (Susan Weidman Schneider, *Intermarriage*, p. 201)

Also responding to in-laws, an English Jew By Choice writes about his own changing motivations:

The project [of conversion into Judaism] ... was one about which I had felt not the slightest tremor of religious or transcendental sentiment ... I had undertaken it with reluctance, only to meet the needs of my future wife's parents ... I approached the matter, therefore, with diffidence and embarrassment ... Yet to my surprise, the nature of the experience itself was such that these feelings were changed into interest and respect...

...I began a modest course of study, learned by heart a number of prayers and she explained the significance of the Jewish festivals ... As Passover was due, I was taken through the Haggadah ... *I* was charmed by the way it [the Seder] involved children ... [and] that for Jews, it is in domestic matters that religious and aesthetic feelings come together; for example in the Seder, or in the lighting of the Sabbath candles. (Originally published in *Commentary* and reprinted in M. Lamm, *On Becoming A Jew*, pp. 45-46)

**Q: What about my spouse? Is it unreasonable to feel attracted to Judaism as a result of my love for my partner?**

A: Here too, it is perfectly understandable to become interested in Judaism through the eyes of a lover, a fiancé, or a spouse. Perhaps ultimately this quest may lead to religious fulfillment and

conversion into Judaism on its own terms. Lois Lederman, a Jew By Choice, shared with Lena Romanoff, an assessment of her entry into Judaism in the context of intimacy with her husband, Hershel.

When I fell in love with Hershel, I wanted to know everything about him -his interests, his ideas, beliefs and hopes ... For instance, he introduced me to the world of opera...

I came to Judaism in much the same way. It was Hershel's love for his heritage that influenced me to explore it for myself. Although it was my love and respect for him that sparked my initial desire to discover Judaism, in the end it was my decision. Although I have not adopted all of Hershel's interests --tennis for instance, I just can't get into -- I came to believe it vital that we share something as important as religion ...I know the entire process has brought us closer to each other. It is a part of our life we will always share with each other and our future children. (Romanoff, Your People. My People., p. 54)

**Q: Am I justified in considering conversion because I am attracted to the positive qualities of the Jewish people throughout history, The State of Israel, etc.?**

A: Judaism is more than simply a creed, it is also a religious communion to fellow Jews around the world and throughout time. As Conservative Rabbi Simcha Kling writes in a primer for converts, published by The Rabbinical Assembly, Embracing Judaism:

A convert to Judaism not only adopts a new theology and different ritual practices but also joins a different people. To be a Jew means belonging to a unique historical community. The community is neither racially nor genetically defined, since those born outside it may become fully accepted members. Yet it is a community in which history, culture and tradition have been transmitted through family ... People not born into the community need to learn its history, culture and traditions. (p. 6)

Elsa Rosenberg attributes part of her motivation for becoming a Jew to encountering the reality of the Jewish historical community as a volunteer in Israel:

One month stretched into eight months, working on a *kibbutz* [a collective farming community]. It was one of the most rewarding and memorable periods in my life. My consciousness was expanded about what being Jewish is all about. I learned more about the principles and moral values of the people for whom I felt an increasing affinity. (Elsa Rosenberg, "Why People Choose Judaism," *Reconstructionist*, June, 1986, p. 19)

In similar fashion, writer David C. Gross relates the testimony of an African-American convert, attracted to collective Jewish perseverance in the face of oppression:

Jews have become strong over a thousand years of oppression and I wanted to become part of that strength ... I wanted to become a Jew because it gave me a great strength. I wanted to become a Jew because I felt it gave me the answer to an inner peace in life...

I wanted to become a Jew because it was the answer to a life filled with confusion and uncertainty. Judaism gave me security and understanding. (David C. Gross, The Jewish People's Almanac, pp. 511-512)

**Q: This comment by a Jew By Choice of African-American background leads to the question: Can you convert into Judaism if you're Black, Asian, Hispanic, or of some other non-white ethnic or racial group?**

A: Judaism offers a religious life-style and fellowship which binds together Jews around the world of countless racial and ethnic groups. The State of Israel has accepted and rescued Jews from Europe, from Ethiopia, from Arab lands, from Latin America, from the Orient, from India, in total from over 100 varied communities worldwide. Local synagogues should be equally colorblind. Our tradition teaches: "Kol Yisrael *arevim zeh lazeh* (The fate of *all* Jewish people is intimately bound up with one another)." When someone of color converts into Judaism, they are fully accorded all honors and privileges. Demonstrating this acceptance into a Conservative congregation is the following anecdote recalled by Professor Julius Lester, an African-American convert to Judaism.

I knew that [after formal conversion] I could no longer stay at home on *Shabbat morning* and be happy studying [alone]. I needed to be in a synagogue, needed to be with other Jews, singing prayers to God ... So the following Saturday ... I drove the ten miles to the [Conservative] synagogue in Northampton.

From the beginning of the preliminary service I knew that I had found my home. If I had any doubts that B'nai Israel was truly my home, they were banished when the gabbai, the man who passes out the aliyot [ritual honors], whispered in my ear, 'Kohen or Levi?'

'Israel,' I responded.

'*Shlishi*,' he responded. 'What's your Hebrew name?' 'Yaakov ben Avraham.' He patted me on the shoulder and continued around the congregation. (*Love Song*, p. 201)

**Q: Am I alone in feeling a desire to become Jewish as part of a search to reconnect with my Jewish ancestry?**

A: In an age of openness, more and more cases are coming to the fore of persons with Jewish roots, who are now reestablishing ties to their Jewish heritage. Rabbi Allen S. Maller has written about meeting many "Jews By Choice who have discovered Jewish ancestors-[sometimes as much as] three to five generations removed ... If converts really are the incarnated souls of lost Jews from previous generations, a great deal of their behavior is easily explained." (Allen S. Maller, *Reconstructionist*, June, 1986, p. 23). As an example of this pattern, in the very same symposium within the *Reconstructionist*, Jew By Choice Elsa Rosenberg recollects that after her grandfather died, "Going through his books and papers, I discovered in a footnote to our family genealogy, that centuries ago in Austria there were Jews among my ancestors. This seemed an almost providential confirmation of my instinctive turning in this direction." (p. 20)

Quite common today are households in which one parent is Jewish. The adult children may have been raised as Christians or with no religion. In her article evaluating the experiences of similar adult children of interfaith marriages who ultimately converted into Judaism, journalist Charlotte Anker reports a wide range of findings.

Why do [these adults] ... choose to be Jews?...

The *Shoah* [Holocaust] is clearly an impetus - one born of grief and a resolve akin to that which impels born Jews to return to tradition. But the *Shoah* has a special meaning to [adult children of interfaith marriages]... They know intensely, that being only half Jewish would not have allowed them to escape. 'I knew I could be killed because I was Jewish [said one such woman] ... I knew there was no getting away from being Jewish; it's always with you.'

Other [adult children of mixed marriage] ... are drawn by the spiritual elements of Judaism, observing that born Jews often take for granted the spiritual pull of Judaic rituals...

[Or similarly representative of motivations for conversion into Judaism] a recent trip to Israel at the age of forty triggered in [one such person] ... a desire to learn about her Jewish side and perhaps make a choice ... It was 'a question of finding what heritage to identify with ... Israel blew me away ... It was an extremely emotional experience.' (Charlotte Anker, "The Children of Interfaith Marriages Speak Out," *Moment*, 1991.)

**Q: Should I be troubled that the stimulus to explore Judaism was sparked but by Jewish friends, whose religious lifestyle seems so appealing?**

A: In a society in which many non-Jewish people have close friendships with Jews, such affinity is a wonderful way to see the strength and beauty of Jewish living.

Tom McHale was attracted to Judaism during his college years because of his friendship with some Jewish students. As Lena Romanoff, a therapist and committed Conservative Jew, assesses in Your People, My People: "Religion - or lack of it- was not a matter of priority for him [Tom], yet his increasing contact with Jewish students made him begin to wonder what it was about Judaism that inspired so much loyalty and pride among many of his friends." Tom reflected that he:

envied them [his Jewish friends] when the Jewish holidays came around. They really looked forward to going home for Passover and Rosh Hashanah. I guess they detected my envy, because I was often invited along. I liked what I experienced. (Romanoff p. 3)

Ms. Romanoff concluded that "the more he experienced, the more Tom felt that Judaism could fill a spiritual and cultural void in his life. Eventually, Tom decided that he wanted to become Jewish." (p. 3)

Among those he interviewed for a study on the motives of converts to Judaism, Professor Egon Mayer encountered one eloquent Jew By Choice, who came to Judaism through a Jewish community.

I began to think about converting to Judaism a little bit, when by chance I had an apartment within an Orthodox community during one year of college. I saw that the people had something, a closeness, a bond between themselves as friends, as family, that most non-Jews I knew didn't have. (Egon Mayer, Conversion Among the Intermarried, p.12)

Alternatively, Anne Burg, a convert to Judaism in my Conservative congregation, related to me:

We tremendously enjoy [the congregation]. There is such joy in the rituals. People are so sincere in their observance. Members carry their spiritual vitality into all parts of their lives.

We are now coming every week to Sabbath Services and are delighted that families with young children are so encouraged and provided for. The wonderful spirit in [the] ... congregation is very 'catchy' and in a few short months, we went from a family who lit *Shabbat* candles and went to High Holy Day services to a family who enjoys attending Sabbath services weekly, studying and learning more about the religion, and motivating me to finally convert. (Conservative Congregation Agudath Israel, Caldwell, New Jersey)

**Q: Is it either peculiar or unprecedented that my attraction to Judaism was ignited by reading books about the experiences of Jewish people in dramatic settings such as the Holocaust or the rise of the State of Israel?**

A: As more and more written accounts of Jewish life become available, many Gentile Americans feel closer to Judaism because of what they read. Some Jews By Choice identify with the fate of Jews due popular books, films, or their study of Jewish ideas in college-level courses. Nancy Wingerson, for instance, recalls that the beginning of her teenage interest in Judaism stemmed from Exodus, just as other converts have been influenced by The Diary of Anne Frank or by the writing of Elie Wiesel, Chaim Potok and Leon Uris. Wingerson recalls:

[Reading Exodus] was my first real exposure to the Holocaust. It haunted me. I kept reading and reading about it. Soon I found I was very pro-Israel. I kept taking Zionist positions in arguments with my friends.

[Later on, at college, in Jewish studies courses, Wingerson] felt that ... sense of being in one place but belonging to another. I felt a hunger to learn more about Judaism. (Paul and Rachel Cowan, 'Our People: Nancy Wingerson's Story,' *Moment*, April, 1983, p. 60)

In a related fashion, Shoshana Lev, a convert to Conservative Judaism, observes:

I passed through Christianity, from the dogmatism of Catholicism to completely undogmatic Quakerism, through atheism and agnosticism, meditation and yoga, and still could not find a vehicle for religious expression. One day I picked up a copy of Leon Uris' Mila 18 and made a shattering discovery: at age eighteen, I didn't know that Hitler had exterminated six million Jews. I had always assumed that concentration camps and prisoner of war camps were the same thing, and that Hitler was just another tyrant. I learned about anti-Semitism and genocide. I wanted to know what it was about the Jews and their beliefs that made others want to exterminate them. So I went to a Jewish bookstore and there found a little volume by Milton Steinberg called Basic Judaism. At last I felt I had found what I had been looking for: here was what I believed. (Speech at University of Judaism, reprinted in M. Lamm, On Becoming A Jew p. 8)

Also affected profoundly by Uris' Mila 18 was Jew By Choice, Samantha Lindblad:

At age 28 I read a book that changed my life. The book was Mila 18 by Leon Uris. It was about WWII, the Warsaw Ghetto, and it was about Jews.

Jews in the twentieth century? I am sure that somewhere in my subconscious I was aware that some Jews were still around. But outwardly they were always the people of the Bible, depicted by Catholicism and her offshoots as the murderers of God.

But within the pages of this book, a novel incredibly based on a true incident, Jews were just like everyone else. They lived and acted just like others and yet were looked upon with ignorance and treated in mind-boggling horror because someone hated them so much they wanted to kill them all. Why, I asked myself?

After reading more on the Holocaust I turned to books of Jewish belief ... I was surprised to find out how many things Christianity had taken from Judaism...

As I continued to study Judaism my sensitivity and awareness of the world around me grew...

I also found that Jews were not afraid to question God...

But there finally came a day when it [learning about Judaism] no longer seemed insurmountable. A day when the realization finally came that what was needed most to fulfill my desire to become an observing and knowledgeable Jew was time, determination and practice. (Samantha Lindblad, "A Convert to Judaism Tells Her Story," The Jewish Post and Opinion, October 16, 1981, pp. 3-4)

**Q: If I am interested in converting into Judaism, is it really necessary if my father was Jewish? Doesn't Reform Judaism recognize patrilineal descent as adequate for Jewish status?**

A: Yes, the Reform movement does recognize patrilineal descent. However there are a few problems with this assumption: First, even within Reform Judaism, Jewish status is not automatically conferred upon the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers. Reform Judaism requires that such sons and daughters be raised actively as Jews—brit (ritual circumcision) or baby naming at birth (and no baptism), synagogue membership, religious school, bar/bat mitzvah and other basic Jewish experiences. Furthermore, even if these mainstream encounters do occur, Reform's patrilinealism is not universally accepted within Reform Judaism, and it is rejected by the other Jewish movements. It is a fundamental break with the two other major branches of American Judaism and with Jewish communities (Reform included) elsewhere throughout the centuries and throughout the world. That is why the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards affirms:

Jewishness is defined through either lineage or through conversion to Judaism... Matrilineal descent [being born to a Jewish mother] ... has been authoritative in normative Judaism for many centuries as the sole determinant of Jewish lineage.

If you are sincerely interested in being part of the entire Jewish religious tradition and future, we welcome your involvement. Nevertheless we do urge your entry into a conversion program so that you will appropriately become accepted as a Jewish person by the entire Jewish people.

**Q: Is it true that rituals such as immersion in the *mikvah* (ritual bath) and ritual circumcision are required for conversion?**

A: Conversion into Judaism should be a profound experience. As Rabbi Ismar Schorsch has stated, "(Conversion) is tied up with many factors of the personality, of the home, of the community, and it is a step not to be taken lightly, not without preparation and not without ritual celebration." (1987 Conservative Movement Conference on Intermarriage). Simply proclaiming that someone has become Jewish at the end of a process of study and religious observance and

growth would be a cold, unfeeling transition. Rituals are necessary to mark critical rites of passage-birth, adolescence, marriage, death and conversion. To enhance the power of the moment, traditional Judaism also requires ritual at conversion: the meaningful acts of immersion in the *mikvah* (a ritual pool) for men and for women, and ritual circumcision for uncircumcised males. As the Director of Philadelphia's Jewish Converts' Network, Lena Romanoff, writes:

Many who go to a *mikvah* as a part of their conversion find it to be a deeply meaningful experience - a spiritual cleansing and renewal; sometimes, even a mystical relief of tension. (Your People, My People, p. 31)

In like fashion, Julius Lester writes about the powerful meaning of ritual circumcision for his entry into Judaism: "After the circumcision ... this is how I feel. Now I am whole ... Only a small bit of skin was removed but it is as if something within me has been set free."

(p. 215)

**Q: What other procedures are necessary for conversion?**

A: The Rabbinical Assembly's Rabbi's Manual (1968) offers the following additional guidelines:

A rabbi, approached by a prospective convert, should acquaint his/herself with the family background and present circumstances of the applicant, and with the motives that prompt him or her to seek conversion to the Jewish faith...

A minimum of six to eight months of intensive study of assigned material should be required for the average applicant for conversion... A longer or shorter period may be required for a specific individual, at the discretion of the rabbi...

During this period of instruction and preparation he or she should be invited to attend synagogue services as often as possible...

[After the conclusion of adequate study and religious growth] two colleagues [rabbis or cantors], or, if that is infeasible, two qualified laymen in the community, should be acquainted with the particular case and invited to join the rabbi in constituting a *Bet Din* [traditional court of law]. The *Bet Din* examines the knowledge and attitude of the prospective convert and presides over his or her admission into the Jewish faith.

**Q: What's the next step?**

A: If any of these answers reflect your own frame of mind, then we invite you to consider a serious encounter with Jewish study and observance. Join an Introduction to Judaism course to learn more about Judaism and whether or not Judaism is right for you. To do so, you are welcome to contact your local Conservative congregational rabbi or the regional office of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. In addition to study, the rabbi and synagogue can offer the opportunity to experience Jewish ritual and prayer observances in a communal setting, as well as providing "mentors," people who have already converted to Judaism as well as born Jews who can guide your religious growth as a Jew from their perspectives.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Lena Romanoff's Your People, My People (Jewish Publication Society) offers helpful insights from the perspective of a Jew By Choice who skillfully directs the Jewish Converts Network of hundreds of couples within the Philadelphia metropolitan area.
- Rabbi Simcha Kling's Embracing Judaism (The Rabbinical Assembly) is a Conservative primer for prospective converts.
- Julius Lester's Love Song is a sensitive and poetic personal testimony to his path from Christianity into conversion as a Jew.
- Rabbi Joseph Tabachnik and Dr. Brenda Forster's Choosing Judaism (KTAV) is a study of the data collected from 400 questionnaires completed by graduates of the Conversion Training Institute of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, surveying the range of motivations, observances and values which accompanied this process.

Also if you wish to begin your own initial exploration of "Basic Judaism," the following resources are recommended:

The Sabbath - The Shabbat Seder (Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs) by *Ronald Wolfson*

Kosher Food - The Jewish Dietary Laws (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) by *Samuel Dresner and Seymour Siegel*

Prayer - Man's Quest For God (Scribners) by *Abraham J. Heschel*

Theology - The Book of Jewish Belief (Behrman House) by *Louis Jacob*

Holidays - The Jewish Holidays: A Guide & Commentary (Harper & Row) by *Michael Strassfeld*

Jewish History and Culture - Jewish Literacy (Morrow) by *Joseph Telushkin*.

Hebrew Language - Reading Hebrew (Sephardic) (Behrman House).