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CONVERSION: Considering a New Paradigm

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Several days ago, two couples kept separate appointments with me to discuss conversion. Both couples were in their late twenties, and both had their own peculiarities and needs, as well as misunderstandings and apprehensions about the conversion process.

The first couple came at the insistence of the parents of the Jewish partner. Her parents told her in no uncertain terms that without conversion prior to the wedding, there would be no wedding. The husband-to-be was quite fond of his prospective in-laws and genuinely wanted to please them. Since he had no religious affiliation, he felt he could embrace Judaism readily enough. So readily, in fact, that he wanted to be Jewish within three weeks in order to keep the wedding date originally set and certified on the already-mailed invitations.

The second couple to see me that day had a different problem. They were already married — and pregnant. The mother wanted to become Jewish before the baby was born in order to assure the Jewishness of the child. We had about six months to accomplish this. Actually, the couple had been working on conversion for quite some time, having enrolled in a community conversion program offered by the UAHC (Reform). After ten weeks, they had dropped out of the class complaining of bad feelings, lack of relevant study, and an inability to make the material come alive in their lives.

To both couples I explained

my biases vis-à-vis conversion to Judaism. First, I don't "convert" anyone. Second, the only reason one should become (or remain) Jewish is if Judaism enhances your life, deepens your sensitivity and understanding, and adds to the meaning you derive from everyday living. And third, time is no criterion; living Jewishly is.

The word "conversion" means that one abandons one set of beliefs in favor of another. This would make perfect sense if the potential convert held beliefs that are at odds with Judaism. Certainly a believing Christian, holding that God so loved the world that He gave His only son to die for its sins, would have to convert that belief into something more palatable to Jews. But on what belief would we settle as being more palatable? Atheism? Supernaturalism? God as the power that makes for . . .? Is there a criterion of right belief for the liberal Jew?

Thankfully, I don't have to answer these questions in this context. The people who come to convert to Judaism are not believers. If someone believes in the divinity of Jesus and the efficacy of praying in his name, there is no way in the world we are going to change that person's mind. And why would we want to in the first place? More importantly, it is unlikely that people who believe in Jesus would desire to become Jews, knowing that in so doing they would have to abandon their Christology.

The vast majority of individuals who seek to become Jews



are not believing Christians. They are followers of what Robert Bellah calls the American civil religion. They have some vague notions of God and goodness; they celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July with something less than religious or patriotic zeal; and they rarely question the inherent presuppositions of their thoroughly homogenized secularism. And neither do their Jewish spouses or spouses-to-be who hold essentially the same beliefs, throwing in High Holy Days, Hanukkah, and Pesah to make peace with their Jewish heritage. They are not believers in any meaningful sense of the word. They are Jewish or Christian by default, not conviction. It is, therefore, unproductive to think of conversion as a process of changing non-Jewish beliefs to Jewish ones. Rather we must speak of mutual adoption: the non-Jew (and spouse/partner) and the Jewish community adopt each other, establishing mutual support for and obligations upon each other in ways that enhance the meaningful survival of both.

Selfish Reasons

My second bias, that one should convert only for selfish reasons, grows out of the first. People are looking for meaning and community in their lives. Religion should be one very important way in which both are fostered. If becoming Jewish does not enhance your ability to derive meaning from life, and does not engage you

in a voluntaristic, democratic, and egalitarian community that supports your quest for meaning and provides an environment for sharing life's joys and burdens, then I cannot imagine conversion in the first place. A person who converts under pressure or coercion is not going to become a healthy Jew or a productive member of a

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Jewish community. When we speak of our communities as voluntaristic we are, whether we like it or not, relying on self-interest to keep the community alive. Certainly you will ask, "What can I do for my community?" but only after you're clear as to what "your community can do for you." Jewish affiliation must help the convert be more of who s/he wants to be. In that way, it enhances the life of the Jew and binds one eternally to the community of Israel.

Time Is No Criterion

My third bias, that time is no criterion, works in two ways. First, by removing the time factor, it effectively erases any hope of conversion by curriculum. It doesn't matter if one studies for ten weeks or ten months; the time involved is of no consequence. It is a question of what you got out of the study, not how much time you put into it. Second,

by emphasizing "living Jewishly," Judaism becomes an ongoing experiment in self-discovery and communal solidarity.

If we take seriously the notion that Judaism is a civilization and not a creed, how does one realistically become Jewish? By reading up on the history and holidays? By

memorizing the dozen or so major Hebrew rubrics of prayer? By becoming erudite in the origins of kashrut or the varieties of Judaism in America? No. There is only one way a person becomes Jewish, and that is to live Jewishly.

Now what have I said? The liberals are up in arms. "To live Jewishly? What does that mean? Follow the Shulhan Arukh? What about the vast majority of Israeli secularists, are they no longer Jewish? There is no criterion for living Jewishly anymore; you cannot ask that of a couple unless you can define precisely what it means."

On the conservative side, the voices are no less challenging: "How can a person live as a Jew until he or she is a Jew? You mean you would allow them to participate in Shabbat services? Recite the Shema, or, God forbid, have an aliyah? These are things reserved for Jews. Let them first become Jews, then they can take up

the burden of what being Jewish is all about."

I am not imagining the responses of the liberal and conservative camps. I am quoting them from discussions I have had at the June 1984 FRCH convention in Buffalo, N.Y. These criticisms are not facile. They cut to the heart of the Jewish reality. Given the contemporary democratic and voluntaristic Jewish environment, there are no definitive guidelines for authentic Jewish living. Given the presupposition that Judaism is a civilization and not a creed, there is no way a person can live Jewishly without being Jewish. Living Jewishly, however that is defined, is the criterion for being a Jew.

Selecting Definitions

In other words, hidden in the very challenges to this way of thinking about conversion are the keys to that very way of thinking. The decentralized nature of the Jewish community makes communities responsible for their own guidelines. And they are — concerning everything from which sex sits where, to how kashrut is to be observed, to who can be a member and how. Local communities, congregations, and havurot are becoming de facto *batei din* (Jewish courts). They are selecting for themselves definitions of Jewishness that grow out of, enhance, and, ideally, challenge-toward-growth the lifestyles and situations of their members.

Thus, for example, we can

have and welcome a congregation in Baltimore especially designed to meet the needs of Jews with non-Jewish spouses. Surely there is no criterion other than the needs of the community for such a group. Nowhere in our history or our laws can we find precedent for a synagogue of the mixed multitude. Yet there they are: members of the FRCH, with all the rights and responsibilities as the rest of us. Who decided they were kosher? They did. And that is the way it is going to be as long as we are daring enough to maintain our democratic and voluntaristic ideals.

A new paradigm for thinking about and acting upon conversion is emerging de facto. What I would like to see is a de jure approach to it that encompasses the realities of the present even as it establishes responsibilities to the future. By way of initiating dialogue in this direction, let me share, briefly, my own approach to conversion.

Hands-On Experience

First, when a couple or an individual comes to me to discuss the possibility of conversion, I state from the beginning that I do not convert anyone. Conversion is an intensely private act, albeit one with intensely public consequences. I have no criteria by which to judge the authenticity of an individual's commitment to Judaism. I have seen too many Jews by birth bitterly abandon allegiance to their people, and too many Jews by choice take up the yoke of that allegiance with joy and good works, to imagine that I can judge, a priori, what a person will do with his or her Jewishness.

Instead of laying down judgmental criteria, I require hands-on experience. As my more conservative friends correctly noted, only a Jew can live as a Jew. So live as a Jew and see if it fits. If it does, you will know, as the joys and

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anticipations of the holidays and Shabbat become a regular part of your life. You will look forward to celebrating your adopted heritage and will find Judaism to be a haven in your search for community and authenticity. The wisdom of the Jew will deepen your insights into the nature of life, and the customs of the Jew will become your vehicle for expressing those insights in your daily life.

And if Judaism isn't for you, you will know that too. No matter how you try or what you study, the images, customs, and ideals of the Jew will remain foreign. No "aha" will accompany your reading or your experience of holiday and Shabbat celebrations. But you cannot know this in advance or glean it from books or classrooms. Only by living as a Jew can you know if you are one. If you are true to yourself, your experience will dictate your loyalties. If you are false to yourself, no class or curriculum, no definitions of Jewishness or peoplehood will affect your fundamental attitudes, and you will betray no one but yourself by continuing to masquerade as a Jew. You will drop out, and hopefully find your search fulfilled elsewhere.

Requirements

In light of these comments, I list my requirements for "conversion":

1. A one-year commitment to live as a Jew — to participate in

the life of our synagogue community as defined by that community in accordance with its charter and by-laws. (This includes paying membership dues to that community; fortunately putting your money where your mouth is often forces recognition that your mouth is in the wrong place.)

2. Regular attendance at, and participation in, congregational celebrations, both social and religious.

3. Enrollment in the adult workshops scheduled before each holiday. These workshops provide information on the origins and practical celebration of the holiday, and insight into the spiritual dynamic of the holiday as it relates to personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal growth.

4. Participation in any other learning situations that the congregation or larger Jewish community provides and that seem meaningful to you. (Beth Or provides ongoing seminars on a variety of topics that meet on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Sundays. Miami has a community-wide education

7. A desire to see that any questions pertaining to Judaism and your participation in it are addressed and answered to the best of our ability either by speaking with the rabbi or by independent research and inquiry.

8. A commitment to read and discuss with the rabbi a mutually agreed upon series of books and articles pertaining to Judaism, and your full participation in it.

Transformation

With the commitment on the part of the individual or couple (both the Jewish and the non-Jewish partner) to adhere to these requirements, I welcome them into the process of being a Jew and encourage the non-Jew to begin immediately by calling him/herself a Jew.

At first, I explain, it will be awkward. If it remains so, Judaism isn't for you. But in time, as you become more accustomed to the lifestyle of

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program called Midrasha.)

5. Membership in our monthly Jews by choice support group, whose express purpose is to help each other survive the often awkward and sometimes traumatic experiences of a Jew by choice, and to help each other live more fulfilling Jewish lives.

6. A willingness to be paired up with a member of the congregation whose "job" it is to help you through the "conversion" process by supplying practical support and hospitality.

the community, as the holidays and life-cycle events, the philosophies and the poetics become less strange and more intriguing and insightful, the awkwardness will give way to pride. Saying "I am a Jew" will be an affirmation of some deep truth taking root in your psyche.

When you sense the rootedness of the affirmation, your "conversion," or better your adoption, is complete. Only

you can tell when that transformation is complete. And when you do, we can celebrate it publicly, privately, or both with a formal ceremony of adoption. The community adopts you as a new Jew, and you adopt us as a family of choice. (Regardless of when the individual makes public his or her adoption of Judaism, the one-year commitment to practice and community involvement remains in effect.)

The responsibility is totally yours. I cannot judge your inner commitment. My own insights and practice of Judaism evolve continually. I cannot presume to measure the depth and sincerity of yours. I neither want to nor do I have to.

Insincere Converts

It is thought that the Jewish community will be threatened by insincere converts. This is nonsense. Insincere converts, like insincere Jews by birth, will not seek out active or leadership roles in the community. They will have gotten what they desired — safe passage into a marriage or a social group they deemed advantageous, and they will do no more. The community is self-censoring. Only the truly committed person will make the long-term effort necessary to arrive at a deep emotional attachment to Judaism and the Jewish people.

The Jewish community has nothing to fear from those who seek to trick us about their commitment to Judaism. These people fall quickly by the way-

side. Yet we have everything to gain from welcoming people whose Judaism is firmly rooted in their personal quest for purpose and meaning. Their desire to be a member of a community network sharing a common culture, wrestling with common concerns, and

urging the "convert" to call him/herself a Jew from the beginning, we are opening the process of Jewish identification. By emphasizing the position that Judaism must enhance our life and enrich our quest for values and meaning, we are taking care to insure that the

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supportive of uncommon conclusions makes for the continued survival of the Jewish civilization as a meaning-filled expression of the human striving for wisdom, purpose, and peace.

Kaplan's List of Qualifications

In his book *Questions Jews Ask*, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan set down the basic qualifications for being a Jew:

1. The identification of oneself as a Jew — the acceptance of the Jewish People with its past, its present and its future as one's own People;
2. Belief in the spiritual values of the Jewish tradition — the conviction that the Jewish spiritual heritage affords inspiration to the totality of human spiritual wisdom; and
3. Participation in Jewish life — sharing in those activities which help to insure the perpetuation of the Jewish People and the advancement of its civilization.

The program I have outlined here does each of these. By

convert finds in Jewish values and heritage the inspirations for living that are vital to the continuance of our or any civilization. And by involving the convert from the first in the full life of the community, encouraging full participation in services, holidays, and community decision making, we are affirming our position that Judaism is a lived reality.

It is crucial to the healthy survival of our people that we adopt a new model for both intermarriage and conversion. It is no longer sufficient to look for precedents to the unprecedented.

We must take seriously our own revolutionary notion that Judaism is the evolving civilization of the Jew, recognizing that to live as a Jew is to be a Jew. Only then can we hope to invite and involve potential members of our community into full participation with that community, thus creating the opportunities for personal growth and communal cultural enrichment that are essential if Judaism is to survive as a meaningful expression of a proud and identifiable people.