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Inside Conversion

Lydia Kukoff
 Choosing Judaism, Redux . . . 1

Edgar M. Bronfman & Beth Zasloff
 Abraham & Sarah's Tent . . . 3

Sarah Luria
 Ruth from a Convert's Point of View 4

Monica Rodriguez
 Two Peoples 5

James Morgan
 The Reluctant Rebbitzin . . . 6

Toby Kovacs
 Families and Conversion . . . 7

Abigail Auer
 Living Jewish without Converting 8

Kerry Olitzky
 Lowering the Barriers and Raising the Meaning 9

Janet Shafner
 NiSh'ma 10

Jeremy Kalmanofsky
 A Spiritual Citizenship . . . 12

Jess Olson
 Power & Consequences . . . 13

Seth Farber
 Controversy & Chaos in Israeli Conversion Courts 14

David Ellenson
 "For the Sake of Heaven" . . 16

Zvi Zohar
 Birth and Conversion 17

Jason Kimelman-Block
 Sh'ma Ethics 20

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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