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REMINING US WHAT BEING JEWISH IS ALL ABOUT

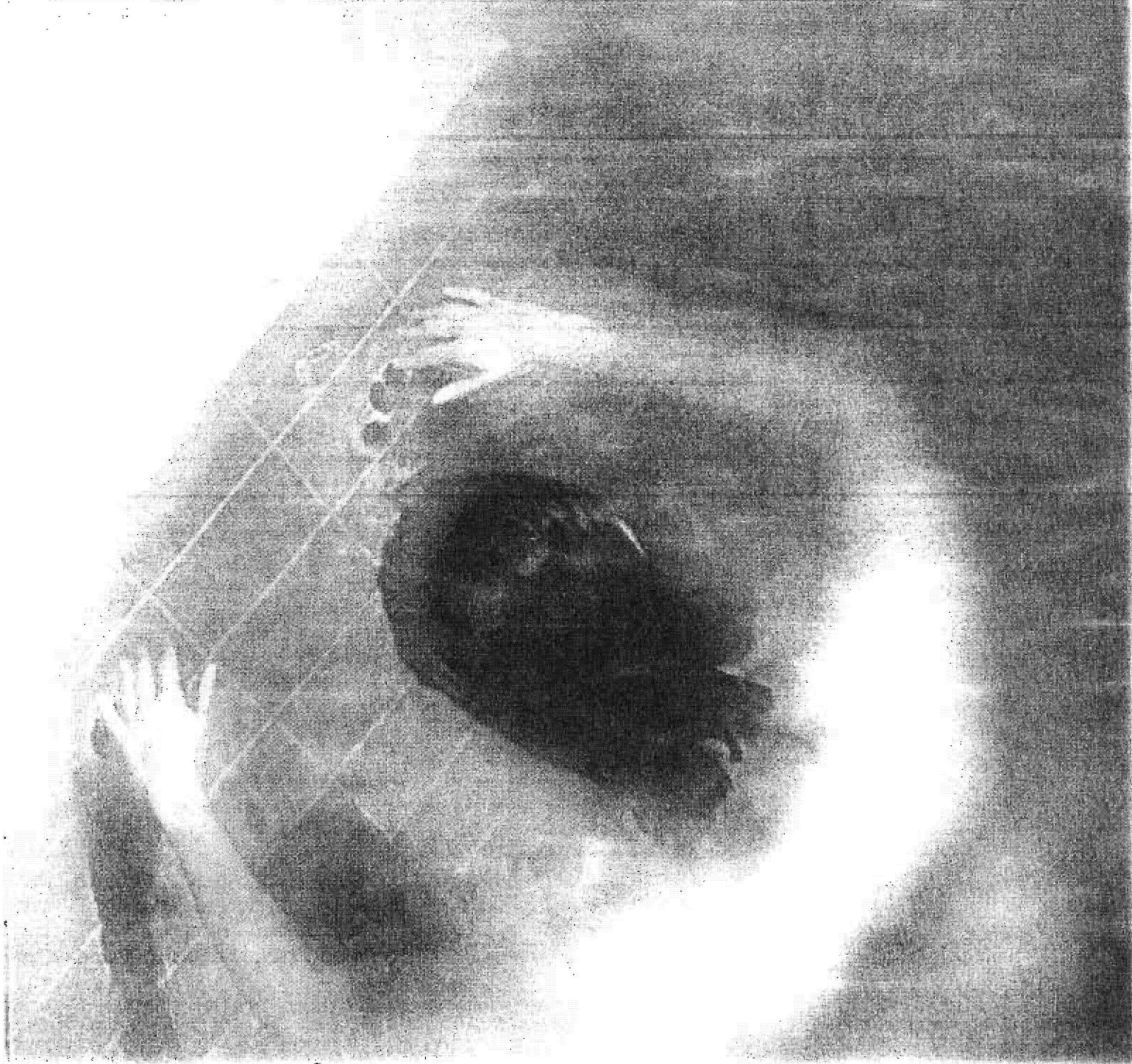
ELLEN JAFFE McCLAIN

Ask most congregational rabbis about converts to Judaism, and they'll reel off lists of dedicated individuals serving the temple as committee chairs, officers, and Torah readers. Talk to a Jewish in-law of a convert, and you're likely to get an earful about "the best Jew in the family": how beautifully and diligently she makes Shabbat, or how he inspired the whole family to learn more about Jewish history. Drop in on an Introduction to Judaism class, and you'll see a room dotted with prospective Jews aglow with the conviction that their journey represents a spiritual homecoming.

Yet ask many "biological" Jews how they view converts and they'll describe them with the same regard Pat Buchanan has for immigrants: They're everywhere, and they're not doing us any good.

About 200,000 American Jews were not born or raised Jewish; *gerim* (converts) and *gerut* (the process of conversion) have become established facts in Jewish institutional life. Converts account for about one of every 30 American Jews, and demographer Egon Mayer estimated

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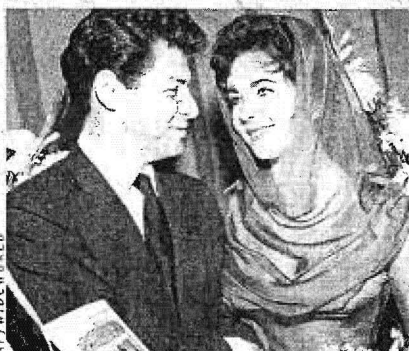
Ruth the Moabite, great-grandmother of King David, chose to join the Jews. After the death of her Judahite husband, Ruth followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem. Like other proselytes, Ruth simply accepted the

people and the God of Naomi: "For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

Kiev ●



The Khazars, people of Turkish origin living between the Black and Caspian seas, were said to have converted to Judaism (c. 730-740 C.E.). According to legend, their king, Bulan, arranged a debate between Jewish, Christian, and Moslem sages to determine which religion was best. After hearing them, Bulan chose Judaism for his people. A later king, Obadiah, built synagogues and schools, and the Khazars began to study Torah, Mishnah, and Talmud. Khazaria was destroyed between 965 and 969, but the Khazars settled in Ukraine, Spain, Poland, Hungary, the north Caucasus, and other places. Some people believe that Ashkenazic Jews are really descendants of the Khazars.



People often assume that actresses such as Elizabeth Taylor (pictured here at her Jewish wedding to Eddie Fisher in 1959) and Kate Capshaw, who married Steven Spielberg in a Jewish ceremony in 1991, converted to Judaism for their husbands' sake. But Taylor, Capshaw, and many others say they thought about becoming Jewish long before their wedding day.

in 1991 that by the year 2010 they may make up 7 to 10 percent of the American Jewish population. No centralized records are kept of how many people become Jewish. "There is not much of anything that is centralized in Jewish life," Mayer commented recently, "so it is not at all remarkable that record keeping about conversions is a strictly local affair for sponsoring rabbis." However, upwards of 5,000 people per year is the guess by people in outreach, five times more than the 1,000 per year that conversion advocate Lawrence Epstein estimated became Jewish during the mid-1960s.

Whatever the total, gerut is definitely a growth industry. The administrator of the *mikveh* at the Conservative-affiliated University of Judaism (U.J.) in Los Angeles estimates that several hundred adults each year immerse themselves in U.J.'s ritual bath to finalize their conversions. Conservative rabbi Stephen C. Lerner, of Teaneck, New Jersey, says he shepherded about 500 people through the process during the first six years he operated his Center for Conversion to Judaism during the 1980s. He's working with converts today at about the same rate, he says. And a lot more conversion programs have sprung up in and around New York.

With little data about how many people are converting to Judaism and how they're doing it, opinions on the subject are often subjective. Someone who knows of a conversion that "didn't take" is likely to be more suspicious of gerim than someone working alongside a couple of converts on her temple board. The lox-and-bagel Jew for whom Jewishness is solely a matter of cultural identity is often slower than the "religious" Jew to appreciate how someone not born Jewish can—or would—become Jewish.

Some of these people, skeptical of the authenticity of conversion, keep alive tales of "quickie" conversions, in

which a rabbi declares someone Jewish after as little as a single day of study. Such conversions are something of a red herring, more myth than reality. But "periodically one hears rumors about rabbis who arrange for 'shotgun' conversions upon payment of a fee," says Marc D. Angel, a New York rabbi who has written about conversion from a centrist Orthodox perspective. "Such conversions are a travesty of *halachah* and religious ethics. A conversion so performed would not likely be accepted as a valid halachic conversion, even if the sponsoring rabbis were ostensibly Orthodox."

Part of the suspicion from ethnic Jews derives from the fact that most conversions occur in the context of a new Jew's love relationship with someone born Jewish. Yet during the four years I researched my book on intermarriage and conversion, I interviewed and read about scores of converts, their partners, rabbis who work with prospective converts, and workers in outreach. If their testimony, along with recent gleanings from America OnLine (AOL), the Internet provider, and comments made in a couple of Introduction to Judaism programs are at all representative, the days of *pro forma* conversions to appease in-laws and community have pretty much passed. While these relationships serve as catalysts for conversion, they simply throw open a door into Judaism that many spiritual seekers in time would have yanked open on their own.

Outsiders have been embracing Judaism since there has been a Judaism to embrace. Among biblical figures, of course, the most notable convert was Ruth, progenitor of David and, it is prophesied, of the Messiah. But Ruth became an Israelite the way any other outsider did in those days: by living in an Israelite family after marriage and, more to the point, being willing to travel with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Judah, where most Israelites lived,

thereby leaving her own people and attaching herself to Naomi's. Not until the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E. did Judaism become portable, a matter of faith rather than turf. After the Second Temple was established, Jewish leaders formulated rituals for conversion, and codified them in the Talmud (*Yevamot* 47a-b) during the first or second century C.E.

The traditional guidelines for conversion haven't changed much in the past 2,000 years, though the requirement of an animal sacrifice was dropped after the destruction of the Second Temple. After becoming familiar with the history, theology, and ritual requirements of Judaism, proselytes declare allegiance to the nation of Israel before a rabbinical court, or *bet din*; immerse themselves in a mikveh, or ritual bath, which can be a natural body of water or an indoor facility that combines "living waters" with the city supply; and, if male, undergo circumcision (a symbolic pinprick at the head of the penis for men who were circumcised as babies). Prospective Orthodox converts generally study one-on-one with a rabbi or tutor, while converts in the liberal movements are more likely to enroll in a group class.

Orthodox rabbis say they expect prospective converts to accept the full weight of the "yoke of Torah," such as kashrut, complete observance of Shabbat, the giving of charity, and laws that specify the time and nature of sexual relations between husbands and wives. In rabbinic times, potential proselytes were told a sampling of the commandments, some easier to fulfill and some more difficult, with the understanding that they would take on the others over time (*Yevamot* 47a-b). Today, the period of study for many prospective Orthodox converts theoretically extends until they are living fully as Orthodox Jews. "[A] person must be committed to live as fully as possible as a religious

Jewish personality—involved in the community, observant of the commandments," says Rabbi Angel. "Until a would-be convert is able to undergo this inner transformation, a conversion should not take place." Today rabbis are less likely to take literally the Talmud's injunction to discourage a potential proselyte, assuming the Jews' history of persecution is discouragement enough.

Rabbi Avraham Union, who administers a conversion program for the Orthodox Rabbinic Council of California (RCC), says the RCC program requires each prospective convert to go before a *bet din* simply to be accepted as a candidate. RCC monitors the candidate's progress in embracing Orthodox Judaism. "We do more than ask questions—we follow their personal growth," Union says. "The essence of Orthodox conversion is life change, and if the change doesn't take place...then you can't really hide that."

Backsliding—not from commitment to Judaism but from Orthodox observance—"certainly happens," Union says, and non-Orthodox rabbis assert that it happens often. "I know people who have had Orthodox conversions, and I see them at regular [non-kosher] restaurants; I see that at times they don't always follow everything according to Orthodoxy," says one rabbi active in the Conservative movement. Actress Kate Capshaw, who is married to film mogul Steven Spielberg, went before an Orthodox *bet din* before her conversion, but Spielberg is on record as saying they don't keep a kosher home. Most "Modern Orthodox" rabbis recognize that no convert can be expected to accept every commandment. "In fact, there is no talmudic source that indicates unequivocally that acceptance of all commandments is a prerequisite for conversion," Angel wrote in 1983.

Conservative conversion programs lean on prospective *gerim* to keep

kosher and to become *shomer Shabbat*, but the rabbis on a Conservative *bet din* are usually more interested in whether a prospective convert is willing to carry out Jewish rituals than in immediate observance. According to Rabbi Avis Miller of Washington, D.C., who has served on the Rabbinical Assembly's outreach and conversion committee, converts are required to work with a sponsoring rabbi (meeting up to once a week during the period of preparation). These prospective converts are gen-

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erally expected to take Introduction to Judaism through a Conservative institution, although a Reform or Reconstructionist course is acceptable if logistics make a Conservative class impractical.

Dru Greenwood, director of the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), says the Reform movement's only hard-and-fast requirement of a prospective convert is that he or she work with a sponsoring rabbi. However, she adds, the "vast majority" of people converting under Reform auspices also take an Intro class. The Reform movement, consistent with its view of halachah as nonbinding, interprets *kabbalat ol*

mitzvot, acceptance of the commandments as simply a commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and does not require converts to appear before a bet din or to undergo immersion or circumcision.

However, an increasing number of Reform rabbis are encouraging prospective Jews to include the rituals in their conversions, and more and more people converting under Reform auspices are doing so. This is consistent with the trend in Reform Judaism toward a return to tradition, says Rabbi Howard L. Jaffe, who is the primary respondent in AOL's "Ask the Reform Rabbi" folder. Circumcision, immersion, and bet



din are encouraged, he says, "as an opportunity to participate in authentic Jewish ritual, which speaks meaningfully to the spiritual and emotional dynamic of the moment, and enables the individual to give wordless voice to the life-changing reality they are affirming."

"We are living in a time when the rituals and symbols of our tradition are seen as desirable," says Rabbi Arnold Gluck, who convenes a Reform bet din once a month in New Jersey. Gluck adds that the younger generation of rabbis is asking "why not?" perform rituals

rather than "why should I?" "I was ordained three years ago, and I do not know of any of my classmates who does not require converts to go to the mikveh," says Reform Rabbi Paula Feldstein. Her father-in-law, also a Reform rabbi, recently began to impose the same requirement.

Reform converts are also increasingly likely to include an optional public ceremony, generally at Friday night services, as the culmination of their path to Judaism. The convert answers a series of questions and recites the *Sh'ma* while holding the Torah scroll. As a reenactment of the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, Gluck says, a public conversion ceremony "makes the 'covenanting' of this new Jew real in the eyes of the individual and the community. At the same time, it reminds the community of the power and meaning of their own covenant with God as Jews and serves as an act of renewal and inspiration of their own Jewishness." Rabbi Allen S. Maller of Culver City, California, who helped pioneer public conversion ceremonies 25 years ago, estimates that about one of every three Reform rabbis now encourages converts to affirm their new allegiance at kabbalat Shabbat services. Orthodox Judaism does not include a public ceremony as part of the conversion process—the conversion is completed when the proselyte emerges from the mikveh—and Conservative programs that work with groups of students generally allow a "graduation" ceremony to serve as the public component of the process.

The time frame for formal study in preparation for conversion ranges from a few months to a year, in the liberal movements; to upwards of two years, in some Orthodox programs. Optimally, rabbis want a prospective convert to experience a full holiday cycle while studying, but in reality most Intro to Judaism classes can be completed in six months or less. Many prospective converts sign up for

Intro courses after years of informal study, however, and are already well read in works of Jewish history and theology and are often veterans of a number of holiday cycles shared with a Jewish partner. A number of converts posting on AOL report having lived as Jews, with and without Jewish partners, for well over a decade before finalizing their conversions.

One Reform rabbi who did perform one-day conversions was the late Emmet Frank of south Florida. "He spent the whole day with the convert and dunked him in the ocean [at the end]," said a colleague of Frank's, Rabbi Samuel Silver of Delray Beach, Florida. Frank claimed to be following the lead of Rabbi Hillel, who was challenged, 2,000 years ago, to explain Judaism in the time one is able to stand on one foot. "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to you—that's Judaism," Hillel replied; "the rest is commentary" that one can go and learn. "Hillel did it while [the convert] was on one foot; I do it in one day," Frank would boast, according to Silver, who asserts that most of Frank's one-day converts remained committed Jews.

Silver, in fact, is willing to officiate at conversions after a very brief period of study if he is convinced the candidate is committed to Jewish life. "I convert them and let them spend the rest of their lives exploring Judaism," he said. Mordecai Finley, a Reform-ordained rabbi with two independent congregations in Los Angeles, is a traditionalist about the halachic rituals of conversion but asserts, based on careful study of talmudic sources, that Jewishness is about having become Jewish in one's heart and before God, not about having completed a course of study. Say a couple is supposed to get married before the groom finishes the Intro class and finalizes his conversion, but wants to convert before his ceremony: "I'd call a bet din and immediately finish the process," Finley told a



"Do I want to be an object of curiosity, a sideshow freak? Julius Lester, former black militant, former anti-Semite, becomes a Jew! I would be less odd if I grew another head," wrote Julius Lester in the December 1987 issue of

MOMENT, five years after converting to Judaism. The son of a Methodist minister, Lester discovered as a child in the 1940s that his great-grandfather was Adolph Altschul, a Jewish peddler who married a former slave. Even before his discovery, Lester felt stirrings within him that drew him to Judaism.



Rachel Cowan, director of the Jewish Life Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation in New York and a Reform rabbi, converted to Judaism in 1980. New England American straight back to the

Mayflower, Cowan discovered Judaism and Jewish texts as she and her late husband, Paul, raised their family. She, along with Paul, is the coauthor of *Mixed Blessing: Untangling the Knots of an Interfaith Marriage* (Doubleday, 1987).



Born in 1941, Liesel Appel was "dedicated" to Adolf Hitler by her parents, Else and Heinrich "Wilhelm" Steffens, Hitler's minister of education. Liesel was a model Aryan child and lived a charmed life, but at age 17, unable to bear the burden of

her family's Nazi history, she left Germany. She converted to Judaism at University Synagogue in Los Angeles in 1990. Says Appel today, "Jews are truth seekers, and Jewish people are committed to creating a better world for everyone. I was doing those things on my own and now I'm part of a whole community that does this. I felt I came home."

study group. "Why do a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew when the guy's already Jewish between himself and God? Just because he doesn't have four weeks of class done? That's silly. Four weeks of class won't make him Jewish."

David Belin, founder of the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI), a cross-denominational organization that sponsors efforts to encourage intermarried couples to live Jewish lives, would like to see study requirements shortened for prospective converts who are already living as Jews. "Where the individual has many experiences of going to a synagogue and participating in Jewish holiday celebrations, recognition should be given," Belin says. "Why not make it easier for them to become Jews, rather than treating these individuals as people who have had no prior contact with a Jewish environment?" Belin would also like the JOI to develop audio and video tapes and computer technology that would allow people to study for conversion at home.

More traditional Jewish leaders are critical of conversion programs that don't give prospective converts the chance to experience a full holiday cycle. Conversion "is not just firing information in," says Stephen Lerner, whose Center for Conversion to Judaism conducts its nine-month program at various times throughout the year.

Contemporary converts appear to have two things in common: a profound alienation from the religious doctrines in which they grew up and a spiritual thirst that only Judaism can quench. They wrote off their Christianity years before they decided to become Jewish. "I was a Christian only because my parents baptized me and brought me to church," a Bay Area woman reported on AOL. She described, as many converts do, her discomfort with the idea that only Christians are saved from hell. Another woman posted,

"I had almost a physical revulsion at saying the name 'Jesus,' and tried as best I could to infuse my own spirituality into what I was learning in class. It didn't work." Like most converts from observant Christian families, these women quit going to church as teenagers.

Whether they were raised as Fundamentalists, given a perfunctory background in a mainstream church, or brought up without religion at all, converts report that Judaism is the destination they were seeking. The metaphor of "homecoming" turns up again and again. "I converted to Judaism 15 years ago, after many years of searching," one woman said. "I was raised in a devout Methodist family but always felt alone—like I didn't belong. My life as a Jew has been one of 'coming home,' and I have felt incredible peace and comfort with the rituals and traditions." Another recent convert says she remained a churchgoing Christian "for far too long." "Discovering Judaism—and finding my way back home—made it easier to leave a faith that had ceased making sense." (The idea of Judaism making sense when other religions do not is often cited as an attraction.)

This kind of thinking, Maller says, is consistent with the kabbalistic tenet that conversion represents a recycling of souls, a reincarnation of ancestors who were cut off from the Jewish people. Converts often report having admired Jews they met as youngsters, being impressed by Jewish history and Judaism's intellectual tradition, and seeking out Jews as dating partners. More than a few discover that they had a Jewish grandparent or great-grandparent.

It is also a myth that conversion takes place only in the context of betrothal or marriage. Rabbi Neal Weinberg, who directs the Introduction to Judaism program at

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the University of Judaism, told a Jewish weekly in 1994 that the number of single gentiles coming through his classes had more than quadrupled during the previous few years. The trend may be fed by a *fin de siècle* flurry of spiritual search among religiously rootless Americans, as reported by writers such as Wade Clark Roof in his book about baby boomers, *A Generation of Seekers* (Harper San Francisco, 1993), and Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman in their large-scale study of American religious affiliation, *One Nation Under God* (Harmony Books, 1993). Kosmin and Lachman report that about 30 percent of Americans switch denominations during their lifetimes, and a study released by a Presbyterian publisher in 1994 held that only 43 percent of Americans stay with the religious body into which they are born. Attraction to Judaism may be due in part to the fact that Jews are highly visible in American culture, and that works on Jewish themes are widely taught in schools.

At the same time, there's nothing inherently dishonest or sacrilegious about a conversion sparked by a relationship with a Jew. Traditional rabbis once reviled marriage to a Jew as an ulterior motive that made a conversion invalid, but commentaries going back to the talmudic period have justified it on the ground that it is better to avoid or "reverse" an intermarriage than to countenance a relationship considered illegal by Jewish law. (Contemporary rabbis across the ideological spectrum commonly cite Rabbi Benzion Uziel, the first Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, who in 1943 issued a responsum backing a "lesser of two evils" approach set forth by Maimonides and supported by statements in the talmudic tractates *Kiddushin* and *Shabbat*.) Rabbi Union, of the Rabbinical Council of California, says that about half the people who seek out his Orthodox program come with Jewish partners in tow—no problem if that partner, who more often than not is not Orthodox, is willing to maintain an observant lifestyle.

In fact, many rabbis say, having a Jewish partner tends to make conversion easier to pursue and easier to maintain. "It's very difficult to do it alone, without a partner," Rabbi Lerner says. "While the community can help, [the community is] simply not a partner you share your life with."

Jewish leaders often bemoan the fact that fewer conversions are taking place

before weddings, launching many intermarriages; where once about one out of three and perhaps as many as 40 percent of gentiles marrying Jews became Jewish before their weddings, today fewer than 10 percent do so. But the fact that most conversions catalyzed by relationships with Jews now occur after marriage, sometimes many years after marriage, is a clue to their sincerity. In previous generations, future spouses and in-laws were more likely to pressure gentiles to convert, which probably resulted in some of the slapdash conversions that people point to as proof that conversion "doesn't take." Today, a convert may become Jewish *because* of a partner, but is much less likely to do so *for* a partner.

"I didn't want to rush into it and didn't want anyone to think that I had converted just for marriage, to please my wife or in-laws, or for any lesser motive," a California man who took 14 years after he married to resolve issues with God, Judaism, and conversion said on AOL. "Gradually, through study, thought, and the development of events, I resolved these concerns." A woman in one of Maller's classes was married for almost 20 years before she told her husband that she was ready to become Jewish; she calls her impending conversion "an affirmation of who we are as a couple."

In a Jewish community obsessed with personal status—the ongoing "who is a Jew?" controversy—converts worry that they will not be accepted as Jews by everyone within the Jewish community, especially if they complete the process under non-Orthodox supervision. It's true that Orthodoxy does not recognize a conversion as valid unless the bet din is composed entirely of Orthodox rabbis; the thinking is that rabbis affiliated with movements that don't hold converts—or even rabbis—to strict observance of *halachah* cannot authenticate a conversion that is consistent with *halachah*. However, the Orthodox movements account for only about 10 percent of American Jewry, so practically speaking, unless a convert intends to live and marry in the Orthodox community an Orthodox conversion probably isn't necessary.

Conservative rabbis, on the other hand, recognize Reform converts as Jews if they have undergone *milah* (circumcision) and *tevilah* (immersion) and gone before a bet din. "Anyone who has gone through an organized program is Jewish [to me]," said the senior rabbi of a large Conservative synagogue in California.

"There is something I just don't like about checking up on people." Few Conservative rabbis, moreover, are concerned about who sits on a specific bet din. "It's important to the American Jewish community not to delegitimize rabbis automatically because of denominational labels," Rabbi Avis Miller says. Any conversion that includes the halachically mandated rituals, then, is viewed as valid, at least on paper, by nine-tenths of the organized American Jewish community.

Community leaders have tried (not hard enough, some say) to make it clear, in print and from the pulpit, that converts are in fact fully Jewish and that to call attention to their status as converts is contrary to traditional teaching. The official position of each movement is clear: "Once an individual has undergone a proper halachic conversion, it is the responsibility of the rabbis to see to it that the individual feels comfortable and accepted within the Orthodox congregation and community at large," Marc Angel says. Rabbi Moshe Rothblum, who leads a large Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles, has educated his congregants at services and his Sisterhood about the accomplishments and dedication of converts; his synagogue offers a year's free membership to new Jews, and several converts serve among its officers and committee chairs.

But the battle for acceptance often is fought one heart and one mind at a time. Rabbi Maller told a recent Intro class of a woman who complained of a Jewish acquaintance who told her that he could never accept her as Jewish; how should she respond? Maller said he started to give her a detailed, reasoned response, then stopped and told her, "Forget what I just said. The next time he starts in on you, you just look at him and tell him, 'You're a schmuck.' A little later she told me, 'Rabbi, I did exactly what you said.'" Maller asked her how the man reacted, and the woman replied, "He smiled and said, 'Well, maybe you are Jewish, after all.'"

It's been almost 18 years since Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the UAHC, called for the Reform movement "to launch a carefully conceived outreach program aimed at all Americans who are unchurched and who are seeking religious meaning." Schindler's call, in effect, to proselytize gentiles received some support but more resistance at that time, as well as when he repeated it at the 1993 UAHC

biennial convention. Published opposition has run along the fearful lines of "don't rile the *goyim*" and "don't do what the *goyim* do." "I don't like anybody asking me if I'm fulfilled in my religion, and we shouldn't do it either," Rabbi Richard Levy, director of the Los Angeles Hillel Council, told a Jewish weekly, although no one has ever suggested that Jews engage in confrontational activities. Others argue that a Jewish community with scarce funds should focus on people who are already engaged in Jewish institutions before casting the net for new recruits.

Many Jews, however, base their opposition to proselytism on the erroneous assumption that Jews have never been a proselytizing people. It's true that Judaism discouraged conversion for hundreds of years, but that attitude developed after centuries of increasing repression and anti-Semitism. Before Christianity took hold in most places where Jews lived, Jews were such ardent proselytizers that by the beginning of the Common Era, historian Salo Baron estimated in his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (Columbia University Press), one of every 10 residents of the Roman Empire was a Jew, totaling seven or eight million people. Classical rabbinic teachings praising *gerim*, urging their acceptance, and encouraging proselytism far outnumber the more wary writings that began to appear after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

Judaism found fertile soil in Hellenist society, Baron reported: "It appealed strongly to generations in which the craving for the supernatural was coupled with a wish for a rational understanding of life and dominated by a desire for moral rules which, while simple and easily grasped, were firmly rooted in the realm of the infinite." Two thousand years later, such sentiments are reproduced regularly in AOL's "Jews by Choice" folder.

Then, too, as more and more people decide they want to become Jewish in the new Hellenism that is American society, many ethnic Jews are expressing worry that large numbers of converts will somehow dilute Jewish peoplehood and ethnicity. "How many can we really take in?" asks one Reform rabbi. "If you have a huge influx, even though they may commit themselves outwardly to what you're doing, they still come from where they come. If there's a sizable proportion of converts in a congregation...you can have wonderful service attendance, people who are really going

to be into Jewish observance. But the sense of Jewish [cultural identity] is weaker. What is the threshold number that you can have?"

Yet any good conversion program takes pains to place cultural as well as spiritual guideposts along the prospective Jew's path and encourages candidates to form close ties with Jewish family, friends, and institutions. "The pain of anti-Semitism, the love of Israel, the affection for Jewish food, the history of Jewish family, all those are much more difficult to absorb and acquire" than religiosity, says Hebrew University demographer Steven M. Cohen. "But they are acquirable. Speak to converts, and you find that they do it."

Because most converts have come to Judaism through their relationships with Jews, we tend to see intermarriage and conversion as two sides of the same coin. Instead it may be time to view them as related but separate issues. Intermarriage to date has been a tremendous problem for the American Jewish community. Because some ethnic Jews who marry non-Jews have done so as part of their disaffection with Judaism, and because others who may have wanted to remain in Jewish life with their children have faced obstacles in their paths, intermarriages have produced thousands of offspring with superficial, ambiguous Jewish identities, or none at all.

Even if Jewish leaders and institutions make greater strides in welcoming and nurturing intermarried families who want to commit themselves Jewishly, many intermarried Jews and their children have been and will continue to be lost to Judaism.

But conversion, taken seriously and nurtured seriously, represents only gain for American Jewry. People currently signing up for classes in Judaism, trooping into rabbis' studies, and posting on the Internet are sincere and committed. They are bringing new fervor into stale Jewish institutions, and they are rekindling the *pinetele yid*, the spark of Jewishness, in many born Jews, including, much of the time, their own partners.

Non-Jews are unlikely ever to convert to Judaism in numbers large enough to threaten Christian leaders, but converts are providing individual gentiles with Jewish children, grandchildren, siblings, nephews, and nieces, undermining stereotypes, one family at a time. Their children are Jewish, and know that being Jewish is important enough to learn about and surround yourself with all your life.

Is it time, then, to encourage conversion more directly and more generally?

Rabbi Schindler thinks so, and he was hardly the first. (The first, of course, was Abraham, who raised his tent flaps and invited strangers to have a nosh and hear about that revolutionary idea, ethical monotheism.)

In 1975 another Conservative rabbi, Gilbert Kollin, writing favorably in the journal *Judaism* about "The Advisability of Seeking Converts," called on the Jewish community to establish schools and reading rooms for prospective Jews.

The UAHC thinks so; in 1994 its Task Force on the Unaffiliated advertised a three-session program called "A Taste of Judaism: Are You Curious?" in the mainstream press "to Jews and non-Jews." In its first two years, 3,100 people in more than 20 cities attended "Taste" programs, and according to regional coordinators, many participants signed on for full courses afterward.

David Belin thinks so; he scolds the UAHC for not doing more, for spending twice as much on political action as on outreach to the unaffiliated and the intermarried, and he lambastes the Conservative movement, which he says spends almost nothing to attract non-Jews to Judaism. "It is my firm conviction that Judaism must follow the ideals of Isaiah, who spoke of carrying the message of God to the ends of the earth," Belin said in a recent letter. "I believe that there is a tremendous opportunity not just to maintain the numbers of Jews

in the United States but actually to increase the numbers of Jews."

"If I am not for myself, who is for me? And when I am for myself [only], what am I?" Hillel asked. By gathering and devoting resources to putting the word out that Judaism welcomes newcomers, the American Jewish community can fulfill both sides of Hillel's challenge. The public encouragement of conversion shows the world that we value our own tradition and culture enough to want to share them, that we have let go of the idea that only by circling the wagons can we ensure our continued existence.

Our choice is clear: We can open our hearts and synagogues to the thousands ready to cast their lot with ours, or we can take our chances with biology and a grudgingly taught secret handshake. As we round the millennial bend, we can cower in fear or we can say, with Hillel, If not now, when? 🍀