

Judaism *by* Choice

Experiencing the joys of Jewish life.

Who are the people converting to Judaism?

By Rabbi Neal Weinberg, Director and Instructor, Judaism by Choice

For 24 years I have taught thousands of students in Los Angeles the fundamentals of the Jewish religion and subsequently they have chosen to convert to Judaism and are today living productive Jewish lives.

The question I am asked many times is who are the people converting to Judaism today? I want to share my experiences with you of the different kinds of people who today are choosing to follow the Jewish religion and become part of the Jewish people.

The men and women who are converting to Judaism are black, and white, Hispanic and Asian, heterosexual and homosexual, they come from all religious backgrounds such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and there are those who come from no religious background- and so people from all racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds are choosing Judaism today.

I think there are several factors to why people are choosing Judaism in the 21st century.

There are many people who were born Christian, Moslem or from other religions who no longer believe in the religions they were brought up in. They are spiritual seekers who find in Judaism a religion that they can affirm and believe in with integrity.

In the first class session of our program I tell the students that in Judaism we do not do conversions. I mention that the word, “convert,” means “to change” and that we are not going to change anybody.

The adults in my class already know what they believe in- they have a theology and they have values- and so how does one know that he or she wants to become a Jew?

I tell them that it is through the process of study that they will come to understand that Judaism affirms what they already believe in.

I find the people who want to convert to Judaism from other religions are attracted to the Jewish idea of God- a God that is beyond human comprehension, they are attracted to the values and traditions of Judaism and they want to live by the commandments in the Torah. I also find that these people are attracted to the mission of Judaism which is Tikkun Olam- healing and repairing the world. They like that Judaism is this world oriented. What are these people to do? Rather than calling themselves non-practicing and non-believing Christians, Moslems, Hindus or whatever-through conversion to Judaism they now can call themselves Jews.

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Let me share with you what one of my students wrote to me about her journey toward Judaism.

She wrote: “I do not feel I am converting into another person. Rather, I feel I am choosing to make a turn, like driving down the highway that is life and changing lanes. It is still the same old me, driving the same old car, it is just that I am now going down a different road. This road is indeed very new to me, and I do not know my way around it very well yet. Before my current exploration into Judaism I was in no man’s land religion wise. I followed no rules, honored no rituals, reckoned to no spiritual authority. God was an instinct to me; a humble sense that there is something out there bigger than me. What I learned right away about Judaism is that to live a Torah life is to live a life of rules, rituals and constant tribute to the holiness around us- 613 commandments to be exact. In the Talmud it says- where people truly wish to go, there their feet will manage to take them. Jewish life is sometimes a difficult life, the Torah is a high standard to hold ourselves against, but it breathes meaning into our life and brings a sense of purpose and direction that makes the challenge worthwhile.”

Isn’t it beautiful what she has written about Judaism? I think it is wonderful that such individuals embrace Judaism and are ready to live by Jewish values and rituals and live a Jewish way of life. These new Jews by Choice are bringing into Judaism a group of religious Jews who are knowledgeable, observant and committed to Jewish life.

What kinds of people are converting to Judaism?

We have in our program many single people- men and women- individuals who are choosing to convert to Judaism on their own. These people are singles with no Jewish partner and no Jewish family connections. Many times these single people are asked by inquiring Jews whether they are converting to Judaism because they are with someone who is Jewish. This is an insult to these people to ask such a question- as if as individuals he or she could not have made this decision on their own- and it is insulting to Judaism as if there is nothing worthwhile in Judaism that would make a single person accept Judaism without some other motive. Many singles who convert to Judaism come back to our program years later with a Jewish fiancé and having met this convert, the Jewish person now becomes more religious.

The majority of students who take our classes, however, are couples- it could be a Jewish man with a Gentile woman or a Jewish woman with a Gentile man. Usually it is a Jewish man with a Gentile woman but through the years I have seen the number of Jewish women with non-Jewish men increasing. Jews are meeting non-Jews in the work place, in school and the barriers that once existed that made such relationships forbidden are no longer there. The couples who are taking our program are those who are trying to eliminate the religious differences between them. At the end of our program many of these mixed couples become Jewish couples through conversion.

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There is a stereotype that many Jews have about mixed couples which we need to eliminate and that is, that a gentile who is with a Jew is converting to Judaism only because of marriage. I once read that many gentiles who want to become Jewish had considered conversion to Judaism way before they had ever met a Jew. In fact, they had chosen a Jewish partner on purpose because they wanted to find an entry way into the Jewish community. We should not look negatively upon a gentile who has chosen Judaism because he or she was influenced by the Jewish person he or she is with. In everyday life we have many influences that lead us to the direction we take in our lives and there is nothing wrong to say that the gentile at first was influenced in studying Judaism because he or she had met a Jew, but in the end, that person is choosing Judaism for themselves. In fact, sometimes I have had couples break up while in the program and the gentile person always continues on for conversion and this shows that the gentile's interest in Judaism had nothing to do with the Jewish person at all.

Now what happens to those Gentiles who take our program who decide not to convert to Judaism? Some of the couples will agree to raise their children as Jews, even though the gentile does not convert to Judaism.

If the woman is a gentile, then at the birth of the child, the child can be converted to Judaism. There are a number of graduates from our program where one spouse is gentile and the other is a Jew who are now raising their children successfully as Jews- celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays in their homes and providing a Jewish education for their children in the local synagogue.

I want to tell you an amazing story.

Back in the 1990's I use to officiate at High Holiday services at a small Conservative synagogue in Tucson, Arizona. The first year I was there I stayed for the whole period between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur so I asked for a kosher home to go to for Shabbat on the intervening Friday night. The President of the synagogue told me that there was only one family in the whole congregation that kept a completely kosher home and observed Shabbat so it was set up for me to go to this family on Shabbat.

I came to their home and I was welcomed by the husband, the wife and their two teenage daughters. Never had I seen such a Jewish home! There were mezzuzot on all the doors, and Jewish art hung on the walls, and Jewish books and ritual objects were all over the home.

When Shabbat began, the wife blessed the candles so beautifully- encircling the candles with her hands. And her husband, who had a full beard and wore a kippah on his head, said the Kiddush over wine so perfectly as well as all the other prayers that followed.

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In the middle of the dinner the woman told me that she was a convert to Judaism and I told her how surprised I was to hear that. I then turned to her husband, whom I could see was very traditional, and I asked him what kind of Jewish background he came from- Orthodox or Conservative?

He turned to me and smiled and said the he was not even Jewish at all! I said, "What!"

He then explained to me that he and his wife, before they had children, were two gentiles coming from Christian backgrounds who no longer believed or accepted Christianity. His wife was interested in Judaism and so he and his wife took the local conversion course in Tucson.

When the class concluded, his wife converted to Judaism, but he did not out of regard for his parents feelings. He agreed with his wife, however, that they would raise their children as Jews in a Jewish home-so they keep kosher, they celebrate Shabbat and the Jewish holidays in their home and they go to synagogue every Shabbat and for all the holidays.

That taught me a lesson that one does not necessarily have to convert to Judaism in order to raise one's children as religious Jews.

In our program we have also had some gentile couples and whole families that have converted to Judaism. For example, I once had a couple where the man was from a Protestant background and his wife from a Catholic background. They both had abandoned their religions years before and they did not want to bring their children up as Christians since they no longer held to Christian beliefs. Through their study of Judaism they found that Judaism affirmed what they both believed in and so together they converted to Judaism with their children.

There are also many people from different races and ethnic groups who choose Judaism. In our classes we have had people from all over the world who want to convert to Judaism. I find in our program here in the Southland that among ethnic groups, that the largest group to take our program are Hispanic Jews- primarily from Mexico, Central America and South America. I believe there is a reason for this. Many of these people, and these are primarily women, are with Israelis or Persian Jewish men whom they have met downtown in the garment or jewelry business. Hispanic women meet Israelis or Persian Jewish men in the workplace and an attraction takes place. I also get sometimes women or men who believe they come from a Marrano background and want to return to their ancestor's religion.

The next largest group is Asians- again mostly women who are with Jewish men. These women are primarily from Korea, Japan, the Philippines and China as well as American born Asians. Again, I think Jewish men are meeting these Asian women in the workplace since we have a large Asian community here in the Southland. In fact, I once got a phone call from a have a large Asian community here in the Southland. In

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young Jewish man who told me his mother wanted him to marry a Jewish woman but that he liked Asians and so he asked me if I had any Asians converting to Judaism in our program that he could meet. I guess I could make a good living on the side setting up Jews with the ethnic mate of their choice!

The number of Blacks converting to Judaism is the smallest group. The Blacks who come to us who want to become Jewish identify with Jewish history and the Jewish people- that we share the experience of slavery and persecution. These Blacks do not want to be Christians or Moslems who historically were the ones who enslaved them- so they choose Judaism. It is interesting that most of the blacks who come to us are not with Jews, although a few are, but most are single people.

I am very proud of those people who have taken our program and converted to Judaism. Some have gone on to become rabbis and cantors and are active participants in their synagogues leading services, reading Torah and serving as officers in their synagogues and active in the Brotherhoods and Sisterhoods.

It is important that we be accepting of those people who have chosen Judaism and want to live as Jews.

I once officiated at a marriage for a man who converted to Judaism in our program- he was marrying a Jewish woman whose family were Holocaust survivors. This man had become very religious- he kept Shabbat and kept Kosher and attended synagogue every week- he had even gone through a full circumcision to become Jewish.

Well, after the wedding ceremony, I sat down at a table during the reception and the woman next to me said in a strong European accent- “Do you really accept that Shagetz- that Goy as a Jew?”

I was taken aback by her words and so I said to her- “Where are you from?” She answered: “I am an American”. I said- “I do detect a slight accent- where are you from originally?” She said she was from Germany.

So I said- “Oh, you are a German lady?” She protested- “No I am an American!” I asked her- “What makes you an American?” And she said- “Well, after the Second World War I came to America where I took citizenship classes and I took a test and then I went before a judge who swore me in as an American citizen.”

I said to her- “What do you think this young man did? He studied for over six months about Judaism and then he went before the rabbis of the Beth Din who questioned him and found him to be knowledgeable and observant and after immersing in the Mikveh, he received a document from the rabbis saying he had successfully converted to Judaism and was now fully part of the Jewish People.”

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him to be knowledgeable and observant and after immersing in the Mikveh, he received a document from the rabbis saying he had successfully converted to Judaism and was now fully part of the Jewish People.”

I said - if she could not accept him as a Jew, I could not accept her as an American. She paused a moment and then said: “Rabbi, you are right he is a Jew.”

In conclusion, I want to state that it is important that we in the Jewish community be welcoming and accepting of those people who have chosen Judaism and want to live as Jews. These new Jews have enriched our Jewish community and will help the Jewish People to grow and survive and this will greatly benefit Judaism.

Contact Rabbi Neal Weinberg at 888-539-2924. Leave a message and he will return your call. For information about the classes or post-conversion activities of Judaism by Choice go to www.JudaismbyChoice.org.