

CHOOSING JEWISH

Conversations
About
Conversion

SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.

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Foreword

Ever since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey revealed unprecedentedly high intermarriage rates, American Jews have been unable to ignore the tremendous impact that the private decisions of intermarried couples have upon the demographic strength and the cultural vitality of the entire community. In this context, where the intermarriage rate in America is currently approximately half of all Jews who have married in the last five years, conversion into Judaism has been held out as the primary hope for building a positive Jewish future for the children of these couples. Yet rates of conversion into Judaism have remained stagnant, with fewer than 20 percent of mixed marriages resulting in a conversion to Judaism. Indeed, the actual number of converts into Judaism only slightly exceeds the number of born Jews who have converted to Christianity or other faiths.

In a broader American climate in which religion-switching is not uncommon, and interfaith marriages are quite routine, knowledge about the dynamics of conversion is vital to the survivalist agenda of the Jewish community. We need to know: What is the process through which interfaith couples decide whether a conversion will take place? When does the topic of religion come up, and when in the life of the marriage may the conversion occur? How significant is the advocacy of the Jewish spouse, and what factors determine the strength of that advocacy? How do converts feel about their decision? What are the catalysts and attractive features of Judaism that draw converts? What can partners, family, friends, rabbis, and the Jewish community as a whole do to open the door and make converts feel welcome?

Sylvia Barack Fishman's *Choosing Jewish* is a pioneering study into the decision-making process that underlies a conversion into Judaism

and into the ethnoreligious character of the families so formed. Through in-depth personal interviews with 94 Jewish and non-Jewish members of couples in a dating or marriage relationship who have considered conversion to Judaism or have formally converted or have rejected conversion, Prof. Fishman, of Brandeis University, has delineated the highly individualized dimensions of these relationships. Both conversionary and non-conversionary households exist along a continuum of Jewish activities and involvements, but the great majority of conversionary households have a Jewish index of measurable behaviors—holiday celebrations, Jewish education, and social networks—that resembles that of inmarried Jewish homes.

However, as Prof. Fishman shows, converts to Judaism are far from monolithic. She suggests a tripartite typology: 30 percent of the sample may be characterized as Activist, 40 percent as Accommodating, and 30 percent as Ambivalent Jews by Choice. The Activist converts, found in every branch of Judaism, are in many ways more committed to Jewish practice than are most born Jews. Contrary to earlier studies, these Activists are found to identify deeply with Jewish peoplehood and Israel. Their children are virtually indistinguishable from children of inmarried households in levels of Jewish identity. The largest group, Accommodating Jews by Choice, usually come to Judaism because they are asked, and they let their spouses take the lead in determining the level of Jewish observance; their Jewish profiles are similar to moderately affiliated born Jews. The 30 percent who are Ambivalent converts continue to have doubts about their conversion and feel guilty about beliefs or holidays left behind. Their children mirror their ambivalence by thinking of themselves as “half-Jews.” These variations, Fishman shows, require viewing Jews by Choice in a more differentiated way, recognizing the range of Jewish attitudes, behaviors, and affiliations that they bring, and not averaging their behaviors into one generalized profile.

Fishman’s research also underlines the importance of advocacy for conversion—from spouses, families, and rabbis who say unam-

biguously, “We have something precious here.” Many converts are drawn to Judaism because of its encouragement of questioning, the discussion of ideas, the emphasis on family life, and the practice of Sabbath and holidays. Thus perhaps the critical catalyst for conversion may be the degree of seriousness that the potential convert encounters within the Jewish community.

In this regard, it is worth recalling the challenge laid down twenty-five years ago by Rabbi Alexander Schindler in an address to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, in which he urged the Reform movement to advocate for the conversion of non-Jewish spouses within mixed marriages. He expressed the belief that a faith that was sure of itself ought to be willing to share its treasures with others. Twenty-five years later cultural attitudes have shifted so greatly that a national Jewish organization recently sponsored an essay contest encouraging mixed marriages to express their Jewish identities, and one of the winning essays, published in a Jewish newspaper, carried the title “Bagels, Lox, and Easter Ham.”

It is time for the Jewish community to restore the ideal of conversion as the single best outcome of a mixed marriage. A communal posture of neutrality is unlikely to result in a wholly Jewish household. Toward that end, the role of the rabbi can be particularly significant as mentor, teacher, and public symbol of the Jewish community. Well-intentioned rabbis who downplay conversion out of fear of offending their congregants or undermining outreach efforts may be actually discouraging a potential convert. Outreach to mixed-married couples merits space on the Jewish communal agenda for both demographic and human considerations. But outreach advocates should keep their eyes on the prize—namely, the creation of unambiguously Jewish homes, in which children are raised exclusively as Jews. This goal is best secured through the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse.

In sponsoring this research, the American Jewish Committee and the William Petschek National Jewish Family Center have undertaken to illuminate the underlying phenomena in the process of con-

version. This study follows an earlier AJC study on *Conversion among the Intermarried*, undertaken in the late 1980s by Egon Mayer and Amy Avgar, and a related qualitative study of mixed-married families by Prof. Fishman, *Jewish and Something Else*, published in 2001. There is much in this new study, summarized in the major findings at the end, that commends itself to policy makers. It is our hope that communal leaders will weigh the implications in terms of the practical recommendations and the cultural values and climate we seek to nurture in the Jewish community.

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This research was planned and implemented with the help of an extraordinary research team, under the auspices of Brandeis University's Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Many of the interviews and focus groups were skillfully implemented by Deborah Skolnick Einhorn and Nicole Samuel; tapes were transcribed with cheerful and speedy dedication by Rebecca Hartman and by Amanda Milstein (through the Brandeis Women's Studies Student-Scholar Partnership). Deborah and Nicole also helped to generate a computerized analysis of the transcripts. Beth Cousens's ongoing research on Gen-Xers in Boston's Riverway Project added new insights on the young adult population, and Benjamin Phillips's demographic analysis of religious switching as revealed by the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 1990 and 2000-01 data rounded out the big

picture. The sharp eyes and thoughtful editing skills of Rachel Werner at Brandeis and Roselyn Bell at the American Jewish Committee were much appreciated.

Naturally this study would not have been possible without the men and women who generously and candidly told their stories. Their concerned searches, their negotiations and renegotiations, their explorations of ethnicity, religious identities, and spiritual and cultural maps of meaning form the breathing core of this report. Several individuals and institutions helped us locate a diverse population for our interviews by publicizing our search for couples with cross-cultural backgrounds, and professionals working with non-Jews to explore the possibility of conversion shared their time and critical insights: to all of them, a sincere thank you, along with hopes that they will find this report an interesting and useful analysis of our conversations.

As always, my research was aided by my colleagues at Brandeis University. Department chair Marc Brettler and the faculty of the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department were interested in and supportive of the research process. Chae Ran Freeze, in particular, shared interesting materials on historical Jewish conversions. At the two institutes I am happily associated with, CMJS director Len Saxe and Hadassah-Brandeis Institute founding director Shula Reinharz and their respective staffs helped immeasurably on a practical level, as well as with their astute ideas and comments.

My last (and dearest) thanks go to my family and all the tangible and intangible ways they enrich my work on American Jewish life, to my grown children, who bring their own explorations to the table, and to my husband, Phil, still my best reader and critic, and our continuing conversations and choices.

Introduction: Conversion Is Controversial in Contemporary Jewish Life

Why Study Conversion into Judaism?

Conversion into Judaism is a topic of intense interest in the American Jewish community today because more than one-third of American Jews are married to non-Jews, and close to half of recent “Jewish” marriages are mixed marriages between persons of Jewish and non-Jewish descent.¹ Furthermore, many as-yet-unmarried, cohabiting Jews are involved in interfaith relationships, and one recent study suggests that “of all cohabiting adults who say they are Jewish by religion or of Jewish parentage or upbringing, 81 percent are living with a partner who is not of Jewish origin.” When Jews and non-Jews date, cohabit, or marry, some think about the possibility of converting into Judaism. However, while the number of Jews marrying non-Jews has climbed from decade to decade, the proportion of spouses deciding to convert into Judaism has not risen commensurately. Of those non-Jews who have married Jews over the past three decades, fewer than one out of five converted into Judaism.²

The relative decline of conversion in the face of increasing intermarriage has precipitated arguments that polarize the Jewish community. Observers argue about whether and how conversion into Judaism may be considered an effective strategy to counter the negative effects of intermarriage upon the cultural transmission of Judaism. In terms of Jewish cultural continuity, conversion is considered by many to be a potentially positive outcome, and intermarriage a problematic situation, because converts into Judaism, often called “Jews by Choice,” help to create households with more distinctively Jewish demographic

and ethnoreligious profiles than families with one Jewish and one non-Jewish spouse. Conversionary households almost universally aim to raise their children as Jews, according to their own description.³ In contrast, the proportion of intermarried (Jewish-non-Jewish) couples hoping to raise children within Judaism and no other religion has remained at about one-third, according to National Jewish Population Surveys conducted by the United Jewish Communities (NJPS 1990 and NJPS 2000-01).⁴

Mixed-married families that choose to raise completely Jewish children are sometimes very successful, and have received both popular and scholarly attention. In her article “Can a Gentile Wife Raise Jewish Kids?” Gabriele Glaser paints a glowing picture of non-Jewish mothers who are “*enjuivee*, infused with Judaism,” who read “Jewish magazines” and prepare Rosh Hashanah brisket and “sumptuous and spiritual Passover seders.”⁵ However, statistically, such Jewishly intense mixed-married households represent a tiny minority. In a new analysis of “ethno-apostasy and change in religion among American Jews,” based on NJPS 2000-01 data, Benjamin Phillips and Shaul Kelner find that “having one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent” and being raised “half” or “partially Jewish” are both associated with the abandonment of “Jewish religious self-definition as an adult in favor of a non-Jewish religious identification,” and with “increased propensity to ethno-apostasy.” In their startling conclusion, Phillips and Kelner argue that the very concept of religious faiths comprising “mutually exclusive categories” has lost its salience for those with “a mixed religious upbringing in childhood.”⁶ For children who grow up in mixed-married households, having more than one religious tradition often seems both normative and normal.

In the dual contexts of normalized interfaith marriages and inclusive outreach programs, an emphasis on conversion as public policy has become virtually unspeakable among large segments of the Jewish community. Indeed, when Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, addressed 4,500 Reform Jews at the URJ’s

biennial convention in Houston (Nov. 19, 2005), urging the Reform movement to encourage conversion more openly, his words were greeted coldly and followed by an outpouring of negative comment. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky of Jewish Outreach to the Intermarried (JOI) was acclaimed by many when he wrote that “encouraging conversion . . . should not be confused as an outreach strategy.” Those who haven’t yet connected, Olitzky warned, will be alienated by an emphasis on conversion. Rather than making conversion a cornerstone of outreach policies, he argued:

[P]art of being a warm and nurturing community is understanding people’s needs at different points in their lives, providing meaningful experiences at every point along the way. If conversion is part of that journey, terrific. If not, there’s still a place in our community for warmth and growth without judgment or coercion.⁷

Thus, inviting spouses of Jews to formally join the Jewish people and the Jewish community is characterized as judgmental and coercive rather than welcoming, and even the head of the Reform movement is viewed as transgressive for breaking the silence around conversion as a primary policy strategy in American Jewish communities. Nevertheless, as evidenced by Yoffie’s talk and by a similar pro-conversion exhortation by Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, a few weeks later at their Biennial Convention in Boston (Dec. 6, 2005), American Jewish religious leadership is coming to understand that wide-scale intermarriage without conversion into Judaism provides enormous challenges for the transmission of Jewish religious culture to the next generation of Jews.

Jewish communal discomfort around conversion as public policy takes place in an American environment where more than 1.5 million Americans have one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent,⁸ which, in turn, has a significant impact on choices of marriage partners. The 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) revealed that

among American Jews ages 25–49, those with two Jewish parents had a 28 percent mixed-marriage rate, whereas those with only one Jewish parent had a 77 percent mixed-marriage rate.⁹ Thus, rising rates of intermarriage are greatly increased by the second- or third-generation intermarriage of children who grew up in interfaith families. It is in this context of concern about the future generations of Jewishly committed families that social scientists and Jewish community observers explore the potential of conversion into Judaism, which may provide dramatically improved prospects for producing children who identify as Jews, as compared to children of intermarried families. Accordingly, a few recent studies, such as Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik’s Chicago-based mail-back report on converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism, have begun to look at conversionary beliefs and behaviors. While limited, these reports present some interesting suggestions.¹⁰ However, little has been published about the actual process of decisions about conversion: how and why interfaith dating, cohabiting, and married couples consider or proceed with conversion into Judaism, and how their lives change over time when they do—or do not—become Jews.

Choosing Jewish analyzes the process through which interfaith couples decide whether a non-Jewish partner or spouse will convert into Judaism and explores the impact of the pro- or anti-conversion decision on the ethnoreligious character of their families. While many converts come to Judaism outside of the context of romantic relationships, this report focuses on the creation of Jewish families rather than on individual spiritual journeys. As explained below, this research includes in-depth personal interviews with Jewish and non-Jewish men and women in Boston and Atlanta, including those who were born and are currently Jewish, those who were born and are currently Christian, and those who were born Christian and converted into Judaism. The interviews reflect the perspectives and experiences of Christian as well as Jewish spouses along a continuum from couples

who form completely and actively Jewish households to those who continue to negotiate Christian and Jewish observances within their family settings. Data from NJPS 1990 and 2000–01 are used to provide a statistical context for phenomena described in the interviews.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I identify my own interpretive framework as one overtly and openly concerned with the transmission of Jewishness, a particular minority culture. Jews outside of Israel are embedded in a vast sea of national and international majority ethnoreligious cultures. In the United States, the prevalent majority religion is Christianity—80 percent of the population to Judaism’s 2.5 percent. My concern about the transmission of Jewish culture, while honestly gathering and analyzing data without bias, was influenced by my mentor, Marshall Sklare, of blessed memory. Sklare proposed that social scientists could engage in dispassionate research on a subject they felt passionate about through a stance that he dubbed a “Jewish survivalist” framework.¹¹

My Jewish survivalist framework is apparent in this report’s use of positive language about those Jewish family environments that predispose children toward Jewish identification. This language requires some explanation. First, my positive description of Jewish cultural transmission in no way insinuates judgments about the relative value of differing religious cultures. I respect Christianity as a religious culture for practicing Christians. Second, because religion is connected for many readers with issues of morality and ethical goodness, I would state emphatically that this study does not focus on the moral dimensions of religious culture. An individual or household that fails to transmit Jewish culture may or may not be “nicer” or “kinder” than another individual or household that succeeds in transmitting Jewish culture, but moral qualities are not part of the scope of this study. This study examines the effectiveness of the transmission of the Jewish ethnoreligious culture itself, not the morally transformative effects of Judaism or any other religious tradition.

*Conversion Provokes Debate
across the Denominational Spectrum*

Formal conversion into Judaism enables the convert to become a member of the Jewish people as well as a practitioner of the Jewish religion. Within most streams of American Judaism, the process of conversion usually entails a period of study followed by immersion in a ritual bath (*mikveh*) and an actual or symbolic circumcision (*brit milah*) for males. This sequence is based on a formal process of conversion established by historical rabbinic Judaism in the first century C.E., as will be discussed in more detail later in this report. (See page 52ff.) Although the great majority of contemporary American conversions to Judaism take place within the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal wings of the religion, conversions take place within contemporary Orthodox and Conservative settings as well. Thus, conversion is an issue of concern to the entire American Jewish community. Leaders from all streams of Judaism, as well as from the scholarly community, have commented on the methods, advisability, and impact of conversion.

The Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal wings of Judaism are widely perceived as being more open both to intermarried families and to Jews by Choice. However, perhaps counterintuitively, pro-conversion and anti-conversion advocacy spans the American Jewish denominational spectrum. Observers from religiously liberal communities, the segment of American Jewry experiencing the highest rates of intermarriage, are split into two camps: Some suggest that the Jewish community should advocate for wholesale conversion, popularizing Judaism and easing conversion policies. Gary A. Tobin, for example, argues that the American Jewish community should actively proselytize. By drawing non-Jews into Judaism, American Jews will encounter their own religious tradition with more enthusiasm as well.¹² In contrast, other Jewish liberals argue that conversion is not necessary, and simply bringing individuals from interfaith families

into a closer state of Jewish engagement should be the goal.

The engagement agenda was articulated in a recent *Forward* editorial essay responding to a Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) research report on the adult children of intermarriage. The editorialist said that intermarriage was “yesterday’s problem,” and the current challenge is welcoming diverse individuals:

The Jewish community needs to come to terms with the fact that it’s living in a new world where barriers are nonexistent and ideas flow freely. In today’s world, every Jew is a Jew by choice. Most Jews know this; it’s only the leadership of the community’s institutions that hasn’t come to terms with it. Judaism will continue to thrive only if individuals are encouraged to embrace it and made to feel welcome when they do. The question is no longer how to stop Jews from fleeing the community, whether by “marrying out” or simply assimilating. Those are yesterday’s problems. The burning question today is this: Can the Jewish community make room for the many types of Jews who want to join?¹³

Pro-conversion spokespersons in each wing of Judaism advocate for more consistent, energetic efforts to draw non-Jewish spouses and potential spouses into a path to conversion. For example, a 2001 edition of Reform “Guidelines for Rabbis Working with Prospective Gerim,” published by the Committee on Conversion of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), is remarkably similar in content and language to approaches in Conservative and some Orthodox policy publications. The Reform “Guidelines” suggest that “rabbis should ensure that prospective *gerim* [original in Hebrew letters] participate in a full year of Jewish life prior to completing *giur* in order to demonstrate a credible commitment to Jewish living.”

However, within decentralized American congregational religious settings, each rabbi and her/his community are free to establish their own standards. Official guidelines within the Reform movement are often dramatically more traditional than congregational behavior or expectations. Some Reform rabbis enthusiastically encourage conversion, but, as this study demonstrates, some rabbis and leaders are

uncomfortable advocating vigorously for conversion because of perceived conflicts with respect for individualism and the Reform religious principle of free choice. The vast majority of Reform-affiliated intermarriages do not result in conversion into Judaism. Nevertheless, such guidelines do have an impact. One example is the experience of historian Marc Lee Raphael, who performs intermarriages but only after bride and groom fulfill his requirement for a year of study and congregational participation before the intermarriage takes place. Raphael reports that such Jewish living effectively increases conversion rates.¹⁴

The Conservative movement has embraced the term *keruv* (meaning to bring close) to distinguish itself from more tolerant communal outreach programs, as Rabbi Alan Silverstein, a past president of the International Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement, explains: “In contrast to the notion of ‘outreach,’ in which we change our self-definition in order to count the mixed-married among our numbers, *keruv* connotes the attempt to bring Jews and their non-Jewish spouses closer to our established Jewish communal standards.”¹⁵

Others, especially among the right-wing segments of the Orthodox community, are skeptical of the sincerity of conversions undertaken to please a potential spouse or spouse’s family, that do not demand strict Orthodox observance. Rabbi J. David Bleich, who is a professor of Talmud and director of a graduate program in Jewish law at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, articulated these fears in an historical analysis of attitudes toward conversion, concluding:

[C]onversions of convenience are not sanctioned by Halakhah and cannot be countenanced as a panacea designed to minimize the exacerbating problems posed by intermarriage. The situation with regard to converts who have no intention of observing the precepts of Judaism is even graver. The preponderance of halakhic opinion ranging from Reb Chaim Ozer to the late Chief Rabbi Herzog is that such conversions are null and void. It follows, of course, that

the children of spurious female converts can also not be recognized as Jews in the eyes of Halakhah.¹⁶

Ironically, conversion is delegitimated by some across the denominational spectrum, both by liberals and traditionalists, as either unnecessary or ineffective, as we will discuss in greater detail later in a section on diverse leadership approaches to conversion (pg. 92ff.).

Social scientific information about Jewish conversion is sparse, particularly since the NJPS 2000-01 did not collect information on conversion in respondent families of origin (parents of respondents), but both the 1990 and the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Surveys indicate that numbers of persons converting into and out of Judaism during recent decades have been about equal. Benjamin Phillips found that 221,316 persons raised as Jews converted to other religions, while 262,012 converted into Judaism, including 178,047 from other religions and an additional 83,965 from no religion (1990 NJPS). Definitions of conversions both in and out of Judaism have been notoriously varied; for example, some compute persons who are Jewish and some other religion as apostates, and some do not. However, most social scientists agree that in terms of sheer numbers, conversion and apostasy tend to cancel each other out.¹⁷ However, “religious switching,” as sociologists call it, does have a sociopsychological impact on the construction of communal attitudes, behaviors, and norms.

Among other concerns, arguments about conversion reflect disagreements about what comprises a Jewish household. Jewishness typically incorporates elements of both descent and assent—peoplehood and Jewish identification. Traditionalists acknowledge that even completely secular, nonpracticing born Jews are bona fide Jews through strictly defined matrilineal descent. They insist, however, that persons who are not Jewish by matrilineal descent can only become part of the Jewish people through formal assent—a religiously stipulated conversion, followed by a life marked by a dense fabric of quotidian Jew-

ish activities and ceremonies. Through assent (like the idealized biblical heroine Ruth the Moabite) a non-Jew can become so identified that he or she becomes part of the Jewish people and shares Jewish identity, the Jewish concept of God and religious behaviors, and Jewish destiny.

In contrast, religiously liberal Jews point out that the vast majority of Jews around the world today do not live lives characterized by regular religious ritual and Jewish cultural involvements, and yet secular, nonobservant Jews identify as Jews, and have, in times both tragic and triumphant, shared Jewish destiny. For liberal Jews, conversion—whether formal or de facto—can take place through the kind of assent that resembles more closely the identification of liberal Jews, including those of secular or cultural Jews. The Reform movement officially, many liberal Jews individually, and most sociologists believe that a Jewish father, or perhaps some other Jewish relative, can define a person as being “of Jewish descent,” if that person defines him/herself as being a Jew. Some secularists, both in Israel and in the United States, believe that secular conversions should also be established. Since social scientists, Jewish communal leaders, and laypersons have diverse opinions about what comprises Jewish identity, it is not surprising that they also disagree about how one converts into Jewishness and acquires a Jewish identity, and what conversion means.

Research Methodology

Despite these and other practical and ideological disputations, little is known about the process through which interfaith couples themselves think about and decide whether to proceed with conversion into Judaism, nor about how the ethnoreligious characteristics of their households reflect decisions pro or con on conversion. *Choosing Jewish: Conversations about Conversion* looks precisely at these issues. This study is built upon analysis of 103 interviews, including 94 interviews with persons who were born Jewish and spouses or partners who were not born as Jews, of which 37 interviews are with formal converts into

Judaism. These interviews included three groups: those in which a born non-Jew had decided to convert and formally become part of the Jewish people; those in which he or she definitely had decided not to convert; and those in which a firm decision really has not been made, since couples are still actively involved in the decision-making process. We also interviewed 9 professionals working with interfaith families and potential converts.

These 103 interviews include 70 new, person-to-person interviews conducted in the greater Boston and greater Atlanta metropolitan areas (2003-05). In these new interviews, 61 men and women were part of a dating or marriage relationship with one Jewish and one born non-Jewish partner and have considered the possibility that the born non-Jew might convert into Judaism. Twenty of the informants in the 2003-05 interviews (9 women and 11 men) had formally converted into Judaism before they were interviewed. Analysis of these 70 new interviews (the 61 members of a couple plus the 9 professionals) is supplemented by secondary analysis of 33 interviews with Jews by Choice and their spouses conducted in 1999-2000 in an earlier American Jewish Committee-sponsored research on internal family dynamics in American Jewish mixed-married, inmarried, and conversionary families (*Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Married Families*).¹⁸ Using the 2003-2005 interviews together with those from the 1999-2000 research enabled us to explore patterns in the process of negotiations over time among couples who were seriously dating, engaged, newlyweds, recently married young parents, and veteran parents of school-age and older children.

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. These recorded interview transcriptions were used as a text for analysis both through intensive reading—immersion in the narratives—and by using a computer software program. Both methods were important in complementary ways. Computer analysis allowed the research team to identify large patterns. Close readings revealed patterns over time, nuances and ambivalences, motivations and changes that would be difficult if

not impossible to discern using only computerized analysis.¹⁹

One particular rhythm that close reading revealed, for example, is worth commenting upon: Individuals share information as the answers come to their minds and as their comfort level enables them to articulate them. It is very common (but not universal) for informants to begin with bland, normative answers and to become more revelatory later in the interview, dealing in greater depth with materials that they find challenging. This progression in emotional intensity—and sometimes personal candidness—is not easily captured by a software program. In particular, feelings of ambivalence or resentment are often not articulated initially, but are expressed toward the end of the interview. (And sometimes only when the interview is over! Researchers quickly learn not to shut off their tape recorders immediately.) For this reason, whenever it seems significant or relevant, our discussion comments upon when in the interview given information was revealed. It should also be noted that this evolution in interview materials is one of the reasons recorded interviews tend to yield more candid data than telephone, written mail-back or e-mail materials.

Names of interview informants in both studies have been changed to protect their privacy. Although the names of informants have been changed, their narratives have not been altered except for privacy reasons, and no composite characters have been created. Since the professionals interviewed are sharing their professional methods and assessments rather than personal information, their names are attached to their words in order to respect their intellectual property.

Topics of Analysis

One primary focus of this research report is discovering those factors that contribute to a non-Jewish partner's openness to conversion into Judaism, and those factors that move individuals and couples toward a decision for conversion. Informants were asked to recall and reflect on changes in their thinking and behavior over time. The interviews show that for many, perhaps most converts, conversion is a process

that neither begins nor ends with formal conversion. Only one segment of spouses who ultimately convert do so before marriage. Others decide to convert as they think about having a family, or as they enroll their children in synagogue schools, or as they prepare for their child's bar/bat mitzvah, or as they undergo some other life-cycle event. (More than one informant converted to celebrate a wedding anniversary.) Bereavement also sometimes spurs people into new religious commitments.

A second primary focus of this study is the impact of conversion on the couple, on their children, and on their extended families. Interviews explored the couple's perceptions of how they had been treated by Jewish individuals and the Jewish communities with which they interact. They were asked about their own friendship groups and connections to Jewish communal institutions and to Israel, and about their goals for their children concerning Jewish identity, activities, and connections. Because social scientific information is especially thin about young dating couples and families, this study made a special effort to sample an unmarried and newly married young Reform and unaffiliated population.

Part I suggests a typology of three models of Jews by Choice—the Activist convert, the Accommodating convert, and the Ambivalent convert. Illustrative examples from the interview data approximate, rather than exactly correspond to, each of the model types. The Activist (30 percent)/Accommodating (40 percent)/Ambivalent (30 percent) typology is useful in helping us to organize and analyze the data and to visualize the larger picture. This report presents information across the spectrum, from the 10 percent to 15 percent of converts who become extraordinarily involved Jews—some of whom become passionate Zionists and public advocates for Israel and for Jews around the world—to the 10 percent to 15 percent at the other end of the spectrum, regretful converts who long for the culture they left behind and participate in few Jewish activities. The most fervent Activist converts are disproportionately affiliated with Orthodox and

Conservative congregations, but they make up a significant portion of active lay leaders within the Reform movement as well. Some committed Activist converts become professional leaders within Jewish religious or communal settings. In contrast, many of the most Ambivalent converts live in secularized families, or in conversionary households not affiliated with a temple or synagogue, but they are also found among conversionary households with synagogue membership. Part I concludes with a comparison of the Jewish lifestyle choices in conversionary and mixed-married families.

Part II begins with a brief overview of historical approaches to conversion, with the purpose of contextualizing diverse contemporary suggestions for policies. It looks closely at the interviewees, starting with their growing-up years, and discusses patterns in the backgrounds of our informants, as they recall their families, communities, secular and religious education, and especially their peer groups and dating patterns in the years before they met their current fiancées or spouses. Substantial analysis is devoted to the process whereby they decide to become Jews by Choice and to a portrait of diverse Jewish conversionary relationships and households. Attention is paid to children in conversionary households and social networks, the relationship of the primary dyad to extended family, rabbis and other mentors, and the Jewish community, with a special section on the topic of interdating and exploring conversion in “Emerging Adulthood.”

Part III presents a typology and analysis of interviews with professionals who work with converts and interfaith families, noting differing attitudes toward conversion within the streams of American Judaism. In conclusion, Part III offers a basis for communal policy based on research, including a summary of major findings about conversion from this and other systematic research.

Part I: Typologies of Conversionary Households Three Types of Converts

Converts are not a monolithic group, and their levels of Judaic connections can vary dramatically. This is extremely important to keep in mind, because casual observers naturally tend to base their assessment of conversion on the particular converts they happen to have encountered. Judging from statistical data gathered in the 1990 and 2000-01 National Jewish Population Surveys, in terms of measurable behaviors (holiday celebrations, life-cycle events, providing children with Jewish education, involvement with Jewish communal organizations, and social and cultural connections), the great majority of conversionary households have a Jewish index that resembles that of inmarried households. In contrast, among the majority of intermarried households, Jewish activities are much lower than both inmarried and conversionary households.

Jews who marry Jews today are as a group more distinctive and countercultural than inmarried Jews of the past. Although there are many secular Jewish marriages, secular Jews are the group most likely follow the broader pluralistic cultural norm and to marry non-Jews. Conversely, endogamous marriage in contemporary multicultural America is more likely to be associated with strong Jewish commitments than in the pre-1960s decades, when endogamous marriage was the norm for most American groups. Now that the cultural ethos supports pluralism and marriage across ethnic and religious boundaries, recently inmarried Jews have levels of Jewish education and Jewish involvements that are much higher than Jews who marry non-Jews. Jews who encourage their partners or spouses to convert have Jewish educational and involvement levels that are closer to inmarried than to

intermarried Jews. It is no doubt true that the same background and attitudinal factors that predispose a Jew to marry another Jew or to ask a non-Jewish spouse to convert also predispose him or her to seek out more and deeper Jewish connections. Thus, it is not only that inmarriage and/or conversion make a family more likely to be Jewishly engaged, it is also that, as a group, those Jews who are married to another Jew—whether a born Jew or a Jew by choice—are more Jewishly engaged, and that is why they are married to another Jew.

Nevertheless, over and above these background factors, the absence of another religion in a Jewish household has an important effect on the Jewish character of that household. The similarity of conversionary to inmarried rather than mixed-married households is demonstrated in the lower prevalence of Christian ceremonial behaviors. This is especially striking because mixed-married households conform to American cultural norms, while conversionary households, like inmarried Jewish households, must go against cultural norms: Within mixed-married households, more than four-fifths have some Christian ceremonial behaviors in the home. In contrast, fewer than 10 percent of inmarried Jews have any Christian ceremonies in the home (including “secular” Christmas trees and Easter bunnies). Conversionary households are more than twice as likely as inmarried households—and mixed-married households are ten times more likely—to include some elements of Christian ceremony, ritual, or behavior.

These statistics encompass a broad range of conversionary attitudes and behaviors, and it is important to separate out the three very different groups who all fall into the category “convert into Judaism,” or, in popular contemporary parlance, “Jew by Choice.”

Choosing Jewish interview data suggest that Jews by Choice can be divided roughly into thirds with three different profiles, which this report gives the names Activist, Accommodating, or Ambivalent converts into Judaism. Activist converts have very high levels of Jewish connections and statistically raise the Jewish index of the whole cohort

of converts. Ambivalent converts, on the other hand, are the group of converts most likely to incorporate Christian observances into their familial holiday calendar. In the next section, one or two examples from the interview data are provided for each of these categories of conversion models. However, none of the descriptions in this typology is completely characteristic of any one individual. Since converts do not live in a vacuum, but interact with, are affected by—and affect—their partners, spouses, children, parents, extended family, and community leaders and members, the actual stories of individual families are more complex and nuanced than the typology.

The Activist Convert

About 30 percent of Jews by Choice can be categorized as Activist converts, the subject of many anecdotes about super-Jews-by-Choice. Activist converts often recount stories of powerful spiritual journeys into Judaism, and describe themselves as feeling part of the Jewish people and Jewish destiny. About one-half of Activists (approximately 15 percent of married converts) start on the road to conversion before they meet the Jew they will become engaged to or marry.²⁰ The other half of Activist converts do not investigate formal conversion until they meet a Jew they wish to marry, but they are interested in Jews and Judaism from an early age, and once on the road to Judaism, they tend to give up other religious observances and to be fully committed to living Jewishly. Converts who join Orthodox or Conservative congregations are disproportionately Activist converts, although many are prominent in Reform lay and professional leadership as well.

One segment among the Activist convert population becomes extraordinarily, intensely involved in Jewish life, including taking on Jewish leadership roles. This “star” level Activist convert is characterized by three factors: 1) Activist converts have moved toward Jewish identity even before they met their current partner or spouse; 2) Activist converts are involved with or married to a deeply committed Jew, often someone with extensive Jewish education and vital Jewish

commitments and interests; and 3) Activist converts have found Jewishly committed social networks that reinforce and support their commitments to Judaism.

Very attracted by Jewish holiday celebrations, Activist converts are often particularly fond of Shabbat observance and go to great lengths to ensure that Shabbat is marked on a regular basis. Not infrequently, it is the Activist convert—not the Jewish spouse—who initiates these activities. Sometimes the extended families of the Jewish spouse are dismayed by the religious intensity of the Activist convert. Contradicting data that indicates that converts relate primarily to Judaism as a religion, rather than to the Jews as a people, Activist converts often relate intensely to Jewish peoplehood. Characteristically, the Activist convert visits Israel and feels intensely supportive of Israel. Activist converts play an important role in public Judaism by volunteering frequently to take leadership roles in the wider Jewish community.

The majority—but certainly not all—of Activist converts are women. Both jokes and anecdotal stories about such converts often conclude with the astonished born-Jewish husband watching his intensely Jewish-by-Choice wife scurrying around her kosher kitchen, and wailing, “Oh my God, I married my mother!” Activist converts include women who become prominent rabbis, spiritually inspiring cantors, dynamic synagogue presidents, brilliant Jewish scholars, and devoted communal professionals. No doubt the prominence of women among the “superstars” is due partially to the fact that the total number of female converts far outstrips male Jews by Choice. It is also partially due to the fact that women in general greatly outnumber men in Jewish adult educational contexts. (Some speculate that only the continuing presence of glass ceilings preserves men’s dominance in certain Jewish leadership arenas.)

“A Feeling They Get from their Mother”

“Basically the children’s religion, I think, is based on a feeling they get from their mother,” says Sandy Stern, who converted into Judaism before marrying her husband, Gerald, nearly two decades ago. “I usually notice that children are as observant as the mother is.” Sandy grew up in an Episcopalian home in a Jewish neighborhood of Brooklyn, where “most of my neighbors were Jews ... and there was nobody in school on the Jewish holidays.” Sandy has been converted three times—first by a Reform rabbi, a year before the wedding; then just before the wedding by a Conservative rabbi, who also performed the ceremony; and finally by an Orthodox rabbi, after her children were born and the family had grown more observant. Their children are enrolled in what she characterizes as an Orthodox “yeshiva.” They maintain a warm relationship with her family, although they stopped going to Christmas and Easter dinners in relatives’ homes somewhere between Sandy’s Conservative and Orthodox conversions, when they became fully kosher “inside” and “outside.”

Gerald’s Hungarian family “survived the war by hiding out in Budapest.” His aunt lived through Auschwitz. Gerald’s parents came to the United States when he was two years old, leaving him in the care of his maternal grandmother in Hungary until he was nine, when they succeeded in acquiring papers for him so that he could emigrate and join them. He recalls a confusing adolescence when he spent most of his “effort in coming to figure out the language and what was going on and trying to get a lay of the land and having friends.” A diamond importer, Gerald works in New York’s diamond district on 47th Street.

Both Sandy and Gerald recall that her family was deeply upset by her marriage to a Jew and her conversion into Judaism. Sandy said her parents “almost disowned me” when she told them she was converting to Judaism before the wedding. Interestingly, while she describes her parents as “a mailman and a housewife,” Gerald

describes them as “people who came from Revolutionary blue blood in Philadelphia. Their heritage goes back to the *Mayflower*. To be married to a Jew was quite a letdown. They are very socially active in lots of social circles.”

Gerald’s parents and his uncles, who got him involved in the diamond business, are not particularly observant. They objected more to his increasing religiosity than to his marriage to a woman who was not born Jewish, according to Gerald’s reports. Sandy says that she adored her father-in-law, although he found their observant lifestyle bizarre. “I remember his father saying, ‘So if I die on Saturday, no one is going to be able to tell you because you are not going to be able to pick up the phone.’” However, Gerald’s family has gotten used to their religiosity and now joins Gerald and Sandy for Passover Seder and for Rosh Hashanah. They avoid visiting them at times of the year when their Orthodoxy is most at odds with American lifestyles—for example, in mid-summer, as Gerald explains, during “the nine days [before Tisha B’Av], at the time of summer when we have to give up swimming, because the kids want to go swimming. Then we have Tisha B’Av [the day marking the destruction of the Temples, a 25-hour fast day].”

Sandy reports that, although she went to an all-girls Christian parochial school, her first sexual experience in high school was with a Jewish boy. “I don’t know if I was attracted to him because of it,” she ponders. “He lived on my street and we had the same birthday.”

In contrast, she remembers, “For some reason I don’t have very good memories from Christmas. There was a lot of tension.” In college, her “roommate was Jewish, and we are still friends.” She had a non-Jewish college boyfriend, a young man with a background very similar to hers, but, she reports, “I ended up hating him so badly; I have no idea why I was drawn to him; I have wondered that for years now.” Sandy feels these experiences taught her important life lessons that she tries to transmit to her daughters:

I try to teach my little girls that there is a certain kind of guy that will always look out for you and ... will be protective as opposed to not good for you. A person that is more for you.... I have been very conscious in teaching them that this is the kind of man you should go with.

Sandy’s description of the “protective ... kind of guy” echoes descriptions of Jewish men in recent popular cultural materials about non-Jewish women who subscribe to Jewish Internet dating services to meet such reliable men.

In contrast to her negative experience with a fellow Christian, when Sandy met Gerald (at a Halloween party where she was dressed as a witch!), he impressed her with “his intellect, his honesty.” She recalls:

He is very, very honest. I knew he was incapable of telling lies. He was just an interesting man.

During their three years of dating, Sandy realized that (a) she wanted to marry Gerald; (b) he was a Holocaust survivor, (c) she wanted children, and (d) it would be important to him that his children be Jewish. Without telling him, Sandy began taking classes in Judaism at a local temple. When the topic came up in their conversations, she told him she was already studying for conversion. She converted with the temple’s Reform rabbi a year before they married. As they planned the wedding, however, they decided they wanted a more traditional ceremony. Sandy went to a Conservative *beit din* (rabbinic court) in New York, where she studied and converted again, just before the actual ceremony.

Sandy’s initiation into Orthodoxy occurred after her father-in-law died, and Gerald began saying the daily *kaddish* prayers at an Orthodox synagogue. Sandy’s experiences with Orthodox rabbis might have discouraged another woman:

Gerald wanted to join the Orthodox synagogue, but they said, “We can’t accept you because your wife’s conversion was Conservative.” I was very mad, because I spent a lot of time studying—and

living—Judaism. I said to them, “I would be in the gas chambers along with everybody else here, and you can’t accept it, but too bad!” But they kind of talked me into it. Then when I went to the *mikveh* [the ritual bath, for the conversion] they wouldn’t let me say the *brachah* [blessing] because they said, “You already made the *brachah* the other time you were in the *mikveh* for conversion. But this time we just have to witness that you went.” I said yes, but I was annoyed, and they knew I was annoyed, but they gave me a break.... It is just politics really.

In other words, although the Orthodox *beit din* would not accept the Conservative conversion, they did, in fact, believe that the conversion had taken place, as evidenced by their unwillingness to allow Sandy to recite the blessing a second time because of the halakhic principle of a *brachah levatalah*, a prohibition against using God’s name in vain by reciting unnecessary blessings.

With their increasing religiosity, Sandy has become quite familiar with *mikveh* usage, as she has taken on the laws of Jewish family purity, albeit with some discomfort. Like most Activist converts, she seeks out a primarily Jewish friendship circle that reinforces her family’s Jewish lifestyle and values. As she describes them:

Most of them are Orthodox. Most of them are mothers who have children, people that I really like and respect because we share values.... There is strength in numbers. And we look out for each other’s kids.

Sandy enjoys the Jewish holidays, especially the “introspection of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur,” and Jewish culture, “especially reading.” “If I don’t have a book, I am lost,” she says. She is very active in the Jewish community and was an AIPAC donor and activist for some time. She still works hard for Israeli causes and worries that the American government can be “basically anti-Semitic” and dishonest when it promises to “move the American embassy to *Yerushalaim*” (she says the word with the Hebrew pronunciation). Sandy reflects on how personal, rather than abstract, her identification with Israel is:

I feel so bad for the people in Israel right now. Their situation is just so tense and everything. They are so scared. I have friends in Israel I speak to on the phone, and they are really worried. It is a different thing when it is abstract than when it is real.

The interviewer asks Sandy, “Does it ever come up, ‘Hey, Mom, what was it like when you were a Christian?’” Sandy answers that the question comes up very infrequently, but that she responds without nostalgia:

I always try to show the commercial side of Christmas, how everything was building up to this big day, and when it doesn’t really happen, or it is just another day, it’s disappointing. And I tell my children, why can’t you be nice and kind to people everyday?... Why does it have to be just on Christmas?

Gerald, in his interview, reinforces the impression that both his wife and other Orthodox converts in their community are perceived as Jews, not only by their children but by the community as well:

They are aware that their mother is a convert. She is not an oddity in any way. There are a number of families in this situation, but mostly the converts are the women, for some reason. Do you know anything about why the majority of converts are women as opposed to men?

When the interviewer claims ignorance (interviews are not a teaching moment), Gerald continues, “The women we know who are converts are completely accepted in the community, and they don’t feel it to be a bad mark against them.”

“They Called Me the Baptist Jew”

It is important to note that men, too, become Activist converts, becoming passionately committed Jews and pursuing leadership roles in Jewish life. The *Choosing Jewish* sample included several men about whom their born-Jewish wives exclaimed, “My family says that if only I had married a Jew, I wouldn’t have to deal with all of this.” One example from the interviews is Cliff Jameson, a mid-level Activist con-

vert who became a Jew by Choice before his second marriage and encouraged two older children from a previous marriage, then ages six and seven, to convert as well. Cliff is not an Activist “star,” but plays leadership roles within his temple and currently serves on his Reform synagogue board. His family’s Jewish calendar includes Shabbat every week—although “it’s not always easy, especially with both of us working.” Because Cliff gets out of work a little earlier than his wife each Friday, he gets things started. They observe all the major Jewish holidays, and Cliff serves as a temple usher on the High Holidays. He participates in temple activities such as “Shabbat under the Stars,” and made each of his children “fairly large parties” for their bar/bat mitzvahs.

Cliff showed impatience with Christianity and an attraction toward Judaism from an early age, despite the fact that he grew up in a very non-Jewish environment in Montana. He describes youthful activities that fulfill in many ways the Jewish stereotype of a non-Jewish life, complete with pick-up trucks and rifle racks:

I always had a very diverse group of friends. Part of it was forced upon [me] by the Navy lifestyle: Everyone was moving roughly every three years—you were lucky to stay in one school for the full three years. We had Spanish friends, and then we had Mexican and Puerto Rican friends, black friends, Jewish friends.... I don’t think there were any Arabs around.

When I went to high school out in Oklahoma, I had a rifle rack in the back of my pick-up truck, and I carried loaded guns in it—and mine certainly wasn’t the only one there.

I’d had friends all my life who were not Christian, including a couple of really good Jewish friends, and I had gone to a few things with them, and had learned a little about the Jewish faith. Then when I went to church, the minister would say, “If you’re ever in a moral dilemma, you should ask yourself, ‘What would Jesus do?’” And I said, “If we’re supposed to do what Jesus does, why don’t we follow the Jewish laws?”

When I was in high school, they called me the Baptist Jew. I had friends who were Jewish, and they considered me on the fringes of Judaism. They said, “You’re certainly more Jewish than some of the people we know.”

If there were such a thing as a “typical” person who chooses formal conversion into Judaism before the wedding, Cliff Jameson would be a good candidate. First, like a large proportion of those who marry across ethnic and religious lines, Cliff’s memories of his childhood include aspects he would not wish to repeat in his own marriage: In his case, his father’s Navy lifestyle precipitated excessive mobility.²¹ Either not liking something about one’s childhood, or feeling estranged from one’s family, predisposes a person to consider establishing a home in another religious culture. Second, Cliff had several deep friendships with Jews, and he felt attracted to Jewish people, ideas, and culture. Part of his attraction was a negative response to his own Christian upbringing. He remembers that he felt that his minister was continually saying, “Shut up and don’t ask those types of questions,” and that he was expected to “accept the dogma and go on.” Among Jews, in contrast, he found a lively tradition of argument and debate that extended into religious realms.

Cliff’s spiritual journey is tied to Beth Grumet, who became his second wife. Beth reacted early and viscerally in their dating process by expressing to him forcefully that she couldn’t tolerate a romantic involvement with a non-Jew because, at her age, she wanted romance to lead to marriage and she only wanted to marry a Jew. Beth tells the story in her own words:

I’d already decided by this point—you know, I was older, and I said, if I’m going to date anyone, it’s going to be somebody Jewish, because if I’m going to date someone, it’s to get married. So, Cliff wasn’t Jewish, and we’d gone to a couple of things and had all these club functions, and we’re getting pretty close. He was calling me a lot. He wanted to kiss me, and I said, “No, I don’t want to go there. I’m only going to marry a Jew, and I’m just not going to go

there with you.” He said, “I could be Jewish.” And that changed everything.

Cliff had become well acquainted with Jewish ideas in high school because of his close association with Jewish friends. His philo-Semitic ideas (and his outspokenness) got him into trouble in church classes. His negative feelings about Christianity were exacerbated during his first marriage to a Baptist woman, whom he claims was ostentatiously, insincerely religious, “just for show,” in Cliff’s words. Furthermore, Cliff had always found—and still finds—the divinity of Jesus to be an unacceptable idea, one not salient to his religious beliefs in any way.

Cliff started dating Beth while the divorce that ended his first marriage was not yet final. When Beth let Cliff know almost immediately that her dating patterns were virtually exclusively Jewish, Cliff volunteered to undergo a formal conversion. He explains why:

I was going through a divorce at the time, and we had dated but not dated. Beth had a thing, because I wasn’t officially Jewish. She couldn’t, didn’t want to, date anybody who wasn’t Jewish. We’d go out—but it wasn’t a “date.” I said I was OK with being Jewish. I certainly had not been brought into the Jesus myth. And Christianity without Jesus is what? True Christianity without Jesus is just Judaism.

Cliff’s assumption that Judaism and Christianity are the same religion, with the simple addition or subtraction of a divine son of God, would not win any prizes for a nuanced knowledge about religious differences in the history of religious thought. But, it should be noted, the prevalence of the notion of a “Judeo-Christian heritage” demonstrates the extent to which this is a common view among American laypeople of Jewish as well as of Christian backgrounds. In any case, as Cliff’s interview shows, from childhood on he had found the Christ part of Christianity to be irrational and troubling, and had wondered why early Christianity had abandoned Jewish religious practices. To Cliff, becoming a Jew was an opportunity to retain those

aspects of what he saw as a Judeo-Christian heritage that he enjoyed, without the paraphernalia of Christianity that he did not enjoy.

With their religious issues potentially resolved, Cliff recalls, “We had pretty much decided we were going to get married within two or three months after we started dating.” Cliff took classes in Jewish history, customs, and Hebrew at a local Reform temple, and was converted by a *beit din* (rabbinic court) that included the rabbi with whom he had studied. He remembers the conversion itself as warm and nonthreatening:

It was really, really funny when I went into the *beit din*. I went into there, and Beth is in there, and Steve Lebow’s one of the rabbis; the other two were friends of Beth’s mother, and they both said, “Well, I don’t know what we can do because if Mrs. Grumet [Beth’s mother] accepts you, I don’t see why you need us.”

They asked some questions. It wasn’t traumatic, just a little study, and write a paper, nothing like college. [He laughs.]

Like many non-Jews who convert, Cliff prefers his stable Jewish lifestyle to what he reports as the excessive mobility of his childhood. His current deep attachment to Jews and Judaism is reinforced by the social networks he and Beth have constructed. They go to temple together and often celebrate Shabbat and Jewish holidays together. They learn from each other, and are able to vent their frustrations as well. The support of Jewishly strong social networks helps couples who have to negotiate complex issues not to feel isolated and to work through their differences.

The Accommodating Convert

Accommodating converts make up the largest segment of Jews by Choice. Almost 40 percent of converts can be categorized as Accommodating converts, who often recall having warm feelings toward Jews and Judaism during the growing-up and teen years. Although the Accommodating convert typically does not think about conversion until asked to consider it by the romantic partner, spouse, family or

rabbi, this convert overcomes any initial reluctance and acquiesces with some eagerness to the process of classes and conversion. Unlike the Activist converts, who often take the initiative in upgrading the family's Judaic observances, accommodating converts usually let the born-Jewish spouse take the lead in terms of household religious rituals and ceremonies, diligently and sometimes enthusiastically enabling a variety of Jewish connections and practices. Not infrequently, the Accommodating convert joins Jewish organizations, but finds most of his/her Jewish life within the home, extended family, and friendship circles. Accommodating converts are, not surprisingly, very influenced by the Jewish strength—or lack of it—of the Jewish spouse, family, and friends.

“We Didn't Ask for a Dissertation”

Nothing about Ginger Mahoney Morgenstern's background would have indicated to a casual observer that she would go from being a “pom-pom girl” cheerleader and athlete in high school to a very traditional Jewish mother in her third marriage. To a student of cross-cultural marriages, however, certain aspects of her background predisposed her to establishing a lifestyle very much at odds with the one she was raised in. Ginger Mahoney grew up in a series of working-class neighborhoods until her father became involved in the military. After that, the mobility continued, but the housing conditions improved. Still, she remembers that both her father's and her mother's family were “kind of strange,” and left her with little she wanted to emulate when she established a home of her own.

Ginger fell in love in college and married young. After a few years of marriage, however, she retreated from the increasingly violent, abusive behavior of her husband, and arranged for a divorce. A very short-lived and equally unsuccessful marriage followed, but in the interim, Ginger trained to be a nurse, a profession for which she had an excellent aptitude, and which she purveyed into a health consulting business. Following the breakup of her marriage, Ginger moved to

Colorado, where she continued consulting, teaching nursing, and working as a nurse. Working in a clinic, she met a divorced Jewish doctor whom she would eventually marry—despite the fact that she had sworn to herself:

I am not going to marry a doctor. I had been through two marriages. I had no desire to get married again, and especially not to a doctor.

Jack Morgenstern's young school-age children were living with him when he met Ginger, because his ex-wife didn't want the children with her. When Ginger saw the four-year-old and the seven-year-old being raised by a nanny, she felt troubled: “God, these kids have basically four parents, and they are still being raised by a nanny. That made no sense to me whatsoever.” At the same time, Ginger was very attracted to what she saw as Jack's caring, concerned parenting style—a kind of warmth she felt boded well for a marital relationship as well. As the relationship became more serious, Ginger decided that if they got married, she would quit her full-time job and work part-time so she could devote herself to raising Jack's children. “I hated giving up the education stuff I was doing because I loved it so much, but I also felt like if I'm marrying him, and we have these two kids, then they were the priority to me. So I quit.” Indeed, she had already had a hysterectomy, but after she married, she wished for the first time that she would be able to have children with her new husband.

The Morgenstern children attended a Jewish community day school from first through twelfth grade, and Ginger became very involved in their education, often serving as the room mother and the field trip chaperone. It wasn't until two years after the wedding, however, that Ginger converted to Judaism. She and Jack had been attending an “Introduction to Judaism” class in a Reform temple, and at the conclusion of the class, she and the other students were given a worksheet about the basics of Judaism to complete. “We actually had a date set with the rabbi to get married,” Ginger recalls, but “that was only provided I had already converted.”

Ginger, who was “very comfortable all along with Judaism,” was uncomfortable with the idea of converting before she really understood “what I’m getting myself into.” She admits, “I was scared to death.” While studying nursing in Chicago, she had gone to the wedding of an Orthodox coworker, and found the separation of bride and groom before the wedding strange and frightening. “I also wanted to be a kind of scholar, so to speak.” She recalls:

It was real interesting that as soon as we started learning about Judaism, it just seemed to fit. There was always something when I was growing up that kind of bugged me about Christianity, and I could never put my finger on it, but even though I went to church and we did all these things, there was just something there that was missing to me, and I couldn’t ever figure it out.

During the time period they had set aside for the wedding, Jack’s relationship with his ex-wife became very acrimonious, and the children were going through intense emotional mood swings. Ginger decided it was too much to deal with so many changes at once, and she and Jack got married by a justice of the peace, without the presence of Jack’s “parents and family who were not going to come until we had our wedding with the rabbi; we never did it.”

After the wedding, however, Ginger went back to filling out her worksheet. She recounts:

Two years later I handed the Judaism test back to the temple rabbi—the rabbi who had taught the course had left and I lost touch with him. I just gave him the paper. He said, “Ginger, we asked for these questions to be answered—not for a dissertation!” I had written up a fifty-page thing, and I felt comfortable with it then, at that point in time.

Ginger’s brother was horrified that she was going to convert to Judaism, she remembers. He challenged her, “How could you give up Jesus?” Ginger found her feelings “clicking into place” when she heard that question:

I just looked at him and I said, “I don’t feel like I have given up Jesus—Jesus never, never clicked for me. To have somebody sup-

posedly die for my sins, to make the world better, and you see what a crummy place this world can be. It just never fit.” ... For me, that what we are waiting for is the Messianic period makes a whole lot more sense. I always looked at myself as being a good individual—not a good Christian or a good Jew or anything. I always wanted to do the right thing.

Ginger is proud of her Judaic knowledge. She is proud that Jack’s parents call her when they want to know some fact about Jewish history or observance. She feels she is well-accepted by the community, but sometimes regrets that she doesn’t have the knowledge created by Jewish memories—she knows how to read the prayers, but doesn’t know them by heart; she doesn’t recognize Hebrew or Yiddish idiomatic phrases unless they are part of the general culture, like the word “schlep.” Nevertheless, she says that “even though I feel stupid in that way, if I say something to people, they are pretty accepting of it.” Ginger reports that most of the tension in her household today is not so much about religion as it is about ethnic styles. Jack reflects his family’s talkative, easy-going style of raising children; Ginger hearkens back to her family’s strict discipline, defined table manners, and controlled environment:

You don’t chew with your mouth open. You don’t put your elbows on the table. If I were ever to sit at the table with my head leaning into my hand, my dad would take our elbows and pound them into the table. Jack’s family is not like that. Even to this day it drives me crazy to go to family functions at his family because everybody is talking, everybody has food in their mouth, and they are all—the food is not literally flying, but that is what I imagine. It was something that was so ingrained ... that both my brothers and myself have had difficulties with our spouses. I would bet 99 percent of our arguments are frustrations about the kids. And I worry about my relationship with Jack’s daughter. She and I have a fight, and it escalates, and it’s like growing up with my mother. I used to hate it. That is why I said I would never have kids, because I didn’t want to continue that cycle.

Jack and Ginger attend services several times a year, and she is

more likely than he to attend on minor holidays like Purim. The two children have differing attitudes as well, now that they are teenagers: the son is very involved in B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO), while the daughter is not. She is happy that Jack's children have received a day school education and have a good background. Ginger serves as president of the day school board, and looks at religion as a "base" from which children can grow into adult responsibilities and adults can launch their "adventures and their life." Her goals for the children do not differ appreciably from those of many born, inmarried Jews:

The primary goal for them is to be happy. It would be important to me for them to marry someone Jewish and to raise my grandchildren, or step-grandchildren, [or] whatever you want to call them—but my grandchildren Jewish. But it is probably more important that they be happy.

"Judaism Doesn't Have Guilt"

Carl Graziano, like Ginger Morgenstern, matches most closely the profile of an Accommodating convert. Raised mostly secular in a Catholic-descended family, Carl expected to be positively impressed when he visited Italy, but found that the Christian artifacts left him cold. This was disturbing to him, because he "respects religion" and would have liked to respond warmly to "Florence, Rome and the Vatican." Instead,

I remember walking out of a beautiful church in Florence, and I realize that I just am having trouble buying it.... And that was ten years ago. I had some trouble with it over the years, that Jesus is X, Y and Z. I never really had the developed belief of it. I have the utmost respect for religion, any religion. I'd like to be able to pass that on to my children. If I would have met a Catholic girl, I would have passed the Catholic religion on to my children. But I met Vicky instead, so my children are learning how to be Jews.

Although he knew that he didn't relate strongly to Christian

symbols, Carl Graziano began his relationship with Jews and Judaism with almost no knowledge about Jewishness as a religious culture. He learned about Judaism gradually by dating Jewish women. Like many non-Jews who choose to convert into Judaism, Carl often felt drawn to Jews as he constructed his social networks. Unlike many of them, however, he was unfamiliar with both secular and religious Jewish culture until he became close to Vicky Granowitz and began his formal studies in preparation for their marriage.

Carl was not a confirmed secularist, nor was he in favor of bringing his children up without religion. Carl wanted his potential children to have a religious orientation—but which religion depended on an as-yet-unmet wife. As he noted, he would have been happy to marry a Catholic woman and have her religious passion guide the household. However, he did gravitate toward Jewish women:

I dated a [Jewish] woman before Vicky for nine months. She was the first Jewish person I had ever been close with. I had a couple of childhood friends that were Jewish, but I didn't even know what that mean[t]. You know? Nor did I know what that meant through grade school, through high school. No one ever, even one time, ever told me what the pillars of Judaism were. I didn't even know that Jesus wasn't included in Judaism, the basic black-and-whiteness of it. So that was the level of my ignorance about the religion. I didn't know about the culture either—that you didn't eat ham or shell fish, milk and meat. Just the basic tenets of Jewish culture. But I did date her for about nine months or so, and I knew that if it became something larger, my not being Jewish would matter.

Part of Carl's attraction to Judaism was his impression that "what I've learned about Judaism has been a very positive thing":

It concentrates on being a good person and being good to other people and being good to yourself and treating yourself well. It concentrates on culture and family and life. It doesn't have the guilt. You don't have to drink blood. There's all kinds of wonderful things about it.

Carl's innocence about Judaism and Jewish culture is perhaps

symbolized by his assertion that Judaism doesn't instill guilt—to which the interviewer blurted out laughingly, “Some people would argue that there's guilt.” Carl's reply: “Is there really? OK.”

Ultimately, it was his fiancée Vicky's encouragement that led Carl to undertake conversion classes and to work toward conversion before their wedding. As he thought about what it would mean to marry and have a family together, he realized that accommodating Vicky's wishes and joining the Jewish people and religion in a way that was “sanctified” and “proper” and served his personal identity needs as well as their potential family were goals he could embrace:

Then Vicky and I had a conversation, and she said, “You know what? I've been thinking more and more about it, and I'd like you to convert.” I was a little bit surprised. At that point I realized it was something that was important to her, but I still didn't want to just do it, but to do it in the right way—in a way that was sanctified, in a way that was proper, and that was going to serve my identity in a real way as well. The more and more I think about us becoming a family together and becoming more of a real unit together, the more I realize that it's actually a great idea. There's no kicking and screaming. I'm very volunteering and excited about it.

Carl insisted that Vicky study with him, and says that the process of the couple studying Judaism together in preparation for his conversion and for their wedding has been moving and meaningful both to him personally and to them as a couple. Carl's narrative usefully illustrates one reason why many converts influence their Jewish spouses to become more Jewishly involved:

I consider it a learning process, which is great when you're in your mid-thirties. It's really a fundamental change—but so is getting married! One agreement I made with Vicky is she would do it with me, so that the effort that I'm making is really toward a union of us, which I wanted to make. I want it to be a circular thing. If we did the conversion together, it's not going to be a me/you thing. It's going to be the first step of our union, basically—which I think was the goal of it.

The Ambivalent Convert

Ambivalent converts, about 30 percent of those who undergo a formal conversion process, have second thoughts about agreeing to become Jews. Some of them are hostile to organized religion in general, a different mindset from those ambivalent converts who find themselves yearning for aspects of the religious culture they left behind. Forster and Tabachnik also found that one-third of converts “continued to have doubts” about their conversions, and identified the source of their doubts as “being able to give up former religious practices, being accepted by Jews, being able to relate to relatives, and being able to handle discrimination.”²²

In the *Choosing Jewish* interviews, one large group of Ambivalent converts simply didn't care for organized religion and didn't think of themselves as “religious” individuals. Sometimes they agreed to convert because it seemed important to their partner or the in-law parents; sometimes because it seemed to make sense to provide a coherent culture for the children. Like other converts, many Ambivalent Jews by Choice have some feelings of warmth toward Jewish social and intellectual styles, but, unlike the enthusiastic Activist or Accommodating converts, they are wary that the household not become “too Jewish” in terms of ritual practice.

A second large group of ambivalent converts express anxiety about failing in their connections to their original faith. When asked, Ambivalent converts may identify themselves as Jews, but about one-third of Ambivalent converts (about 10 percent of all married converts) articulate ambivalence that veers into apathy or outright hostility. Typically, these “hard-core” Ambivalent converts actually make no pro-Jewish changes in their lives or religious attitudes and have substantial negative feelings toward Jews and Judaism. Many ambivalent converts dislike the notion of Jewish “chosenness” or special mission. A few think they have mistakenly given up their prior religion and worry about endangering their souls.

Ambivalence can be present from the beginning of the marriage, and that pattern is typical of the “hard-core,” most alienated of the Ambivalent convert category. However, more moderate ambivalence often develops later in the relationship. Moderately Ambivalent converts sometimes initially willingly leave behind aspects of family or personal background. As time passes, however, second thoughts often surface, sometimes triggered by life-cycle events, such as a birth or death in the family. Ambivalent converts sometimes find themselves feeling guilty about neglecting their original cultural heritages. There are also often residual feelings of resentment about having given up Christian beliefs or, more often, holidays. Depending on the personalities involved, some of them exert subtle—or not-so-subtle—pressure on born-Jewish spouses to retain or resume non-Jewish festivities within their households. Most often, moderately Ambivalent converts feel passively Jewish, but this Jewishness does not affect their lives or thoughts deeply.

“I’ve lost my Japanese”

Kim Chertok currently articulates the attitudes of a moderately Ambivalent convert, although she began as an Accommodating convert. Her narrative, of acculturation and assimilation as a Japanese American, mirrors in many ways the stories of Jewish Americans a generation or two earlier. Kim grew up in Los Angeles, a third-generation Japanese American. Like many Japanese-American families, her parents, aunts, and uncles suffered in various ways during World War II:

My mom was born in Japan, but came to the United States to marry my dad. My dad was born in California, but he and his three siblings were sent to Japan for schooling because my grandparents were pretty poor. But then after the outbreak of World War II, three of the siblings came back. My uncle enlisted in the 442nd regiment that fought for the United States, and he was killed in Italy. My two aunts were put in internment camps. My

dad was the youngest, so he stayed in Japan with his grandparents where he went to school ... for a few years. So my dad didn't have the whole internment experience, but my aunts did and my uncle was killed in the war.

Once they were established as a family, her parents enthusiastically adopted American holidays and dropped Japanese religious and cultural practices, although they were loosely connected and gave money to the local Buddhist temple. Kim did not receive any Buddhist religious education. In the absence of Buddhist holidays, her family celebrated Christmas in an American “totally secular” way, which Kim describes as:

... an American thing, a gift-giving holiday, an excuse to have lots of food. We got the tree right before the week of Christmas. People would come over to our house; we'd go to their house. We went to see the Christmas lights—we'd drive to certain neighborhoods in L.A. that had the best lights. Maybe I believed in Santa Claus when I was little.

Kim came east when she was fifteen to spend her remaining high school years in a private boarding school in Massachusetts. There she found herself dramatically isolated as the child of a middle-class family—with firm middle-class morality—as well as an Asian American.

I was the first Japanese-American girl to go to the combined, co-ed school [Phillips Academy and Abbot Academy]. My parents were very middle class, [but at the boarding school] there were some incredibly sophisticated kids. And there was drug use, and just kids who had gone to private schools in New York City, and who all knew each other and had tons of money. They wore ragged jeans. A lot of kids were children of divorce.... To hear kids talk about their stepmothers and stepsisters and brothers, their houses here and there, it was such a trip. And it was incredibly academically challenging, and very intimidating for my first year, especially. I was constantly studying. I saw snow for the first time, and I started jumping up and down. People thought I was so weird. It was a bit of a culture shock, to be so far away, and not feel like I fit in.

Kim remembers that she was not friendly “with any of the

WASPs,” but instead made best friends with one South Korean girl, one very poor Italian girl, and a Jewish roommate from Beverly Hills. “She was . . . the first Jewish person I knew.” Kim notes that although her Jewish roommate friend came from a wealthy home, she seemed profoundly different than the wealthy WASPs:

She was from a very obviously rich, privileged background, but she was different, because she was creative, she was artistic, she was going to be a musician, to go to Julliard when she graduated. And she didn’t feel like she fit in, necessarily. She had sort of this reputation. . . . She was my first Jewish friend, and I would say she was one of my closest friends.

The bond between Kim and her Jewish high school friend was partially based on admiration and partly on a kinship that Kim felt with a girl who, like herself, didn’t quite fit into the WASP cliques because she was, by virtue of her background, an outsider. Later, when she attended Brown University, Kim found herself gravitating toward Jewish friendship circles and Jewish boyfriends. She says she liked Jews because, unlike her parents, Jewish classmates and their parents seemed warm, demonstrably affectionate, open and funny.

Eventually Kim began dating her husband, Peter Chertok. When she brought him home, her parents put up their American Christmas tree for Kim’s American boyfriend. Kim laughs, remembering:

They must have known he was Jewish, but they didn’t really think about it. They put up the artificial tree that they had in our basement. Peter thought that was so funny, but they thought they were being nice.

Peter has had a good effect on her parents, Kim says, because “even having Peter in the family has made my mother more open and welcoming and huggy.”

Kim cheerfully enables a whole calendar of Jewish holidays with a relaxed American style, and planned the festivities for her older child’s bar mitzvah. “I consider myself Jewish,” she says, and “we’re

raising our kids Jewish.” However, her feelings of ambivalence have grown more intense with the passage of time, and she finds herself identifying more with people in the temple whom she views as “outsiders” than she does with the born Jews she encounters. She wishes that there were “more persons of color in our temple.” She wishes that unconverted spouses of Jews had more “rights” in the temple hierarchy. Recently, Kim finds herself worrying more and more about her children learning something about their Japanese and Buddhist heritages as well.

When Kim attended her aunt’s Buddhist funeral, service, cremation and burial, she was very moved. “It was my first exposure to Buddhism in thirty years—and I loved it. It was kind of eye-opening.” The fact that her children do not have these experiences is her “biggest regret.” At this point, when the interview is almost concluded, for the first time Kim pours her heart out about her feelings of regret that she has not transmitted Japanese culture to her children:

The one thing I’m worried most about is that my children will not have any Japanese ethnic identity. They are going to have a very strong Jewish identity, but I worry that they are not going to have a Japanese identity. If we were living near my family, in California, at least they would see my parents, eat Japanese food—my mom is an incredible cook. We’d take them to Little Tokyo, which is the Japanese district in Los Angeles; they would see many more Japanese things, festivals and exhibits. . . . Not being near my family is hard. I grew up speaking Japanese. I went to Japanese language school after my regular school until I was twelve years old. [This is the first time in the interview that this has been mentioned.] So I still speak Japanese pretty fluently. But once I went away to boarding school and married, and college, I married someone not Japanese [little laugh]. I’ve lost my Japanese.

Like many individuals who have married across cultural lines, Kim finds herself belatedly accosted by feelings of ambivalence about the culture she left behind.

Not Jewish by Choice

Conversionary Compared to Nonconversionary Intermarriages

Converts into Judaism range from super Activist Jewish “stars” (about 15 percent) to very negative Ambivalent “Jews,” who feel alienated or apathetic about their formal religious choice (about 15 percent), with a broad middle group that can be categorized as Activists, Accommodators, and Ambivalent converts. This typology, however, does not describe those non-Jews who are married to Jews and have not converted into Judaism. The methodology of the *Choosing Jewish* study was to compare conversionary households with those households with one born Jew and one born non-Jew who had considered but rejected becoming a Jew by Choice. Because they have considered but rejected the option of conversion into Judaism, we can call this group of spouses “Not Jewish by Choice.”

The narratives of mixed-married Jewish families were explored in detail in this author’s book, *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (an expanded version of the aforementioned AJC study, *Jewish and Something Else*), which looked at negotiations between Jewish and non-Jewish spouses from the beginning of their relationships forward through diverse life-cycle events. This detailed study of the broad spectrum of interfaith family styles provides a useful comparison and contrast to conversionary family styles, and consequently some discussions in *Choosing Jewish* also draw upon this earlier research.

It is also helpful to reference the typologies for mixed-married families suggested by Bruce Phillips in his demographic studies of mixed-married family patterns. One study suggests dividing mixed-married households into these categories: Judaic, Dual Religion, Judeo-Christian, Christian or Christo-Centric, and Interfaithless.²³ His more recent work presents a further typology of mixed marriage

placed on a continuum running from the most Jewish to the most Christian homes. Perhaps the most important point Phillips makes for the purposes of this research report is that secularism makes a spouse—whether Jewish or Christian—less likely to advocate for inclusion of his or her own religious customs in the intermarried household.²⁴

Judaic observance is relatively low in most mixed-married households, with the exception of the “Conscientious Parents Raising Jews” discussed below. For four out of five mixed-married families, holiday observances cluster around Hanukkah/Christmas and Easter/Passover. Strikingly, Judaic mixed-married households and Dual Religion mixed-married households have exactly the same levels of Jewish observances—4.4 on a possible scale of 10. They differ only in their level of Christian observances. Dual Religion households show significantly elevated levels of Christian observances, almost as high as those of Christian mixed-married family types.²⁵ While analysts differ on exact percentages, both the 1990 and the 2000-01 NJPS showed that around one-third of mixed-married couples say they are raising their children as Jews. Within those households raising their children as Jews, about half celebrate both Jewish and Christian observances over the yearly holiday calendar. Because this research report focuses on decisions around conversion and lack of conversion, comments are limited to two types of non-Jewish spouses: those that are fully committed to the creation of a Jewish household—and thus have putatively the same goals as conversionary households—and those that have dual religious identification and would prefer that their households reflect that duality.

Conscientious Parents Raising Jews: It’s the Christian Thing to Do

The strongest parallels between conversionary households and non-conversionary mixed-married households are in those families in

which the non-Jew is fully committed to raising Jewish children and has agreed to have only Jewish observances in the home. Here, too, as in conversionary households, there are philo-Semitic “stars” who demonstrate a deep attachment to Jews and Judaism. Not all of these non-Jewish parents conscientiously raising Jews are secular. Indeed, some of the most knowledgeable non-Jewish parents of Jewish children are committed Christians. One non-Jewish mother who takes full responsibility for bringing her children to religious schools and creating Jewish Sabbath and holiday observances, for example, said that she was very influenced by the destruction of Jews in the Holocaust. Jews have every right to worry about their numbers and about cultural transmission, she said: “Of course, I am raising our children as Jews. Given the course of the twentieth century, it’s the only Christian thing to do.”

Another notable example of the Christian parent committed to raising a Jewish child is Prof. Harvey Cox, a Sabbath-and-Jewish-holiday-observing Harvard Divinity School Christian theologian married to a Jewish woman. Cox has written and spoken articulately and in detail about his attachment to the Jewish cycle of holidays and life-cycle events. In perhaps his most passionate mission statement, he challenges Christian parents of Jewish children, “We need to reassure Jews by words and actions that we are also committed to a future for the Jewish people” by ensuring that there will be a new generation of Jews.²⁶

What is the prognosis for mixed-married families who follow a course of unambivalent Jewish attachments in the home? About one in five children who grow up in mixed-married households and are raised as Jews eventually marry a Jew. Bruce Phillips’s research indicates that these 20 percent of return in-marriers were disproportionately not only raised in mixed-married households that were exclusively and actively Jewish (about 20 percent of mixed marriages fall into this category), but were also given formal Jewish education and experienced Jewish holiday observance and other home-based Jewish

activities, and had Jewish social networks and close relationships with Jewish extended family. As a point of comparison, Phillips observes that when Jewish children raised with two Jewish parents are provided with the same levels of Jewish intensity three times as many—about 60 percent—will marry Jews and establish Jewish homes. Thus, some mixed-married households do transmit Jewish culture and commitments, but they are, in a sense, competing with a handicap and require enormous effort.²⁷

Significantly, the *Choosing Jewish* interviews showed that Jewishly committed non-Jews in primarily Jewish marriages are often en route to converting into Judaism. More and more conversionary households are created at some point after marriage rather than prior to marriage. Thus, although they may be computed in sociological analysis as non-Jews in an unambiguously Jewish mixed marriage, a few years later they may have become Jews by Choice and would be computed as converts rather than as non-Jews. In such families the environment is one of increasing attachments to Judaism. This helps to explain why this group of non-Jewish spouses are those most likely to raise children who chose to marry Jews and establish their own Jewish households.

*Dual-Identified Non-Jews in Jewish Households:
I Can’t Abandon Jesus*

Unlike the Jewishly committed non-Jews who conscientiously raise Jewish children with unambivalent devotion—and thus resemble committed converted Jews—dual-identified non-Jews, a far larger proportion of the non-Jewish mixed-married population, differ strikingly from the Jewish commitments of most converts. These differences are especially dramatic when a dual-identified non-Jew is married to a Jewish spouse who believes they have already agreed that they are committed to an exclusively Jewish household. In such cases the assumptions of the two spouses diverge, and their narratives about negotiations and decisions are conflicting rather than complementary. As they described their goals and expectations, *Choosing Jewish* inform-

ants sometimes revealed astonishing levels of miscommunication. In these cases, the Jewish spouse continues to believe that his/her non-Jewish spouse will convert into Judaism and commit to raising Jewish children, while the spouse repeatedly says and does things that signal the opposite intention.

The dual-identified non-Jew has mixed feelings about raising Jewish children and still feels strong ties to Christian, Muslim, or other religious beliefs, culture, and observances. His/her ambivalent feelings often extend beyond Judaism as a religion to Jews as individuals and as a social group. Some view Jewish religious activities in the home as “alien.” Some have positive feelings about religious activities, both Jewish and non-Jewish, while other dual-identifying non-Jews are essentially secular. Those who are secularists may think religion provides a wholesome and useful structure for children as they grow up, but may dislike organized religion and look forward to sharing their feelings with their children when they reach adulthood. Those who do not dislike religion have a dual religious identity, thinking of themselves as “Jewish and something else.”²⁸ Although some Jewish spouses of dual-identified non-Jews would like them to convert into Judaism, as a group they are resistant to conversion.

Guy Kirk is one example from the *Choosing Jewish* survey sample of a dual-identified non-Jew. He would probably agree with the classification of himself as religiously ambivalent and dual-identified in terms of religious culture. Married for just one year and currently celebrating a first anniversary, Guy enjoys many aspects of Judaism and Jewish culture, especially the emphasis on history and the willingness to discuss all sides of the issue. He has taken several courses at his local temple, and says he has an excellent relationship with the rabbi. According to his reports, he and the rabbi have many substantive conversations about Jewish historical figures and ideas.

Guy’s wife, Varda, believes they have already agreed to have a Jewish household and raise their future children as Jews. Both Guy and Varda report that she actively encourages him to convert into

Judaism, by having her Israeli mother teach him Hebrew and by taking a Reform-sponsored “Taste of Judaism” class together with him. Varda arranges for them to socialize with conversionary couples. Guy talks about Varda’s campaign for conversion:

Varda will say, “He wasn’t Jewish and he converted,” like that’s the description of the couple. It’s not like, “Oh, they’re very nice, they live in Hingham, he drives a Mercedes, she’s in real estate.” It’s, “Oh, isn’t that sweet? He converted for her. He didn’t used to be a Jew.”

Guy describes himself as the son of a military man who has since become an attorney. Guy’s family moved around the Midwest frequently during his growing-up years. He spent his high school years in Michigan, where the majority of the population was Dutch Reform, which he describes as a “pretty conservative Christian” Protestant group. He and his family went to church every Sunday. He belonged to a church youth group and sang in the church choir through his teen years. His youth group volunteered for soup kitchens, Habitat for Humanity, and other communal social service projects. He attended Western Michigan University, and while in college, every few months he would visit home and go to church with his parents.

Not until Guy starts to describe his post-college work as a bartender in Brooklyn, where he met his wife-to-be, Varda Bernstein—who insisted from the beginning of their dating that her children must be raised Jewish—does Guy reveal that his “mother’s father was bar mitzvahed” [*sic*]. However, this “bar mitzvahed” grandfather had since converted to Christianity and went regularly to church and never to temple, according to Guy’s memories. Guy speculates that the family converted because they encountered anti-Semitism, including anti-Semitic violence, in their Midwestern home when they first emigrated there in the interwar period. Nevertheless, Guy feels very attached to the Protestant practices of his childhood. As Guy tells the story, it appears that dual identification is his authentic family tradition—a tradition he would like to replicate.

When we first started dating, she [Varda] was very vocal about the fact that, “Anyone I marry, whoever they are, I will never date anyone who isn’t Jewish again.” From the beginning, from ... within a few months of the relationship, it was made known to me that my children will be Jewish and they’ll be raised in a Jewish household.

INT: How did you feel about that? Coming from your Protestant background?

Well, my Protestant background. But actually, my mother’s father was bar mitzvahed. My mother’s maiden name is Finkelstein. My name is Guy Kevin Finkelstein Kirk. I have this Anglo-as-white-bread name as you can possibly have, with the addition of Finkelstein. So I do have Jewish roots that I was always curious about.

INT: And you knew that growing up? That your grandfather was Jewish?

Well, he wasn’t “Jewish.” I mean he always went to church with us. He never went to temple. But my grandmother, who was born and raised on a farm, ... cooked latkes—she called them potato pancakes—and I’ve eaten pickled herring since I was old enough to eat solid food. My grandfather’s gone now, but we serve pickled herring at every family get-together.

Guy agreed to have a Jewish household and Jewish children to please Varda, but—despite the latkes and the pickled herring on a toothpick—felt very strongly that he didn’t “want to abandon who I was; I didn’t want to lose my identity, and all that I’ve been raised with, and felt was really part of me.” This included such items as “baptizing my children” and having a Christmas tree:

I understand that we’ll celebrate the Jewish holidays, and my children will be Jewish, but at a certain point I ... felt like—one of the main arguments that we had was over baptism. I really wanted my kids to be baptized, because, I felt that it was important. Not in the sense that my kids are going to hell if they’re not baptized, not in the sense that God’s going to get me or anything like that. In the least bit, that didn’t even play into it. It was almost more the

tradition kind of thing....

We’ve been in a small argument about Christmas trees. My dad built our house with his own hands, and always, since we moved into the house, we had a huge Christmas tree. We had a cathedral ceiling, so every Christmas we had a sixteen- or eighteen- or twenty-foot Christmas tree, huge ... as I now know, the most goyishly possible Christmas tree you can imagine. I mean [voice now animated and excited] just huge, ostentatious, with lights all over it, like ornaments that I’ve had since I made them in preschool. There are picture ornaments with all four of us kids’ pictures on them. That’s not even part of Christmas for me—that’s part of winter, the season. If there’s snow on the ground, at some point there just has to be a Christmas tree. I don’t even connect it with Jesus. I’m actually starting to know the history of the religion a little bit, and there is a disconnect with the Christmas tree and the whole Jesus thing.

I think that’s where some of our tension arises. I think she [Varda] thinks in the back of her mind that any time I’m longing for some sort of connection with that part of who I am and ... how I was raised, ... it’s a Jesus thing. I think that’s sort of bred into every Jew a little bit, and maybe I’m generalizing here, but that ... anybody who has been a Christian is a Jesus freak and a Jesus fanatic. I’ve tried to explain that’s not so before, but I don’t think she gets it.

Later in the interview, however, Guy asserts that his belief in Jesus *is* an essential part of who he is as a person. Varda asks Guy “all the time, ‘Maybe someday you’ll convert; maybe you should think about it.’” But when the interviewer asks whether that possibility is on the table, Guy makes clear his resistance to the idea of conversion: Guy states that he believes in Jesus and is not willing to “abandon” that belief:

That’s a lot of soul-searching, because I’m into this whole abandonment thing, in my religion, growing up Protestant, what was that to me. I think at the core of it, [pause] I’m sort of, I don’t know. I feel defensive about it sometimes when I’m talking to Varda or anybody else in my close Jewish proximity. But yeah, I

am Christian. Yes, I do believe in Jesus. And if it would mean that I'd have to abandon that in order to become Jewish, I'm not willing to do it.

Guy “demanded a contract that said I could have a Christmas tree” before their marriage one year ago. Guy hastens to modify this by saying, “I just want a green tree, in the house, with lights on it, and a few presents. It doesn't have to be, you know, insane.”

Guy and Varda have agreed that they will spend Christmas with his family, since, as he notes, “her parents don't celebrate Christmas.” While there, he attends church on Christmas eve, for a candlelight service. “It's really, really pretty. It's a beautiful church that I grew up in, the First Congregational Church of Grand Rapids.”

Guy's contract for a Christmas tree and his desire to baptize any potential children are not simple nostalgia for the familial and cultural patterns of his childhood. Rather, according to Guy's own words, they are deep and complex convictions that are related to (1) his need to preserve his self-identity, and also (2) his resentment of the interweaving of nationalism or peoplehood, culture, and religion in historical Jewish identity. Guy ran these two ideas together in the following verbatim quotation:

[1.] I feel like I need some room for myself, because I feel like I've given up a lot, which I'm fine with, I really am, but I need some continuance of my own identity in the relationship. A lot of it's been a disconnect, even geographically.

Everything about me is now Boston: It's all new friends, a new job, a new religion, a new family, a new wife, eventually new kids. Everything is disconnected from my past life. But I still need some sort of—well, it's not even my past life, life as journey, life as linear, you know, but I need some sort of continuancy [*sic*] with the traditions that carry on from my childhood. I deserve to have some traditions that carry on from my childhood, you know?

[2.] And I think that one big disconnect I've had too is the separation of the Jewish religion from the Jewish people and the Jewish culture—'cause all of them are intertwined, and there's no separation.

That's sort of hard for me to understand, because when we were just talking about my high school and my youth group at church, the two never converged ever. So that's mentally how it's engraven [*sic*] in my brain's physiology, of how my philosophy went with how I was raised. I had a hard time grasping that there really is not separation: The Jewish people are the Jewish people, it's a religion, it's a culture, it's a people.

Nevertheless, Guy has visited Israel, which he found moving and magical. He adores the rabbi and their conversations about Jewish history and ideas, and takes pride in the excellence of the matzah balls he cooked for Passover for the family Seder, which he took a role in conducting. Guy Kirk identifies with the culinary-ethnic Jewishness of his grandfather, the Judaism and Zionism of his wife—and the exuberant Christian observance and belief of his parents.

It remains to be seen whether and how Guy and Varda will resolve their very different perceptions when their family encounters parenthood and other life-cycle changes. It also remains to be seen how Guy will resolve his own conflicting religious pulls. Despite his declarations of Christian belief, he, after all, chose to marry a highly identified Israeli wife. The story of Guy Kirk's religious journey is far from over, and the Jewish—or mixed religious—character of his and Varda's household hangs in the balance.

Part II: Thinking about Converting into Judaism

The Uses of the Past: Historical Jewish Approaches to Conversion

References to Jewish approaches to conversion in the past frequently appear in discussions of contemporary policies. Historical practice is often cited to support advocacy for a particular contemporary policy, rather than with the goal of tracing the nuances of religious and social-historical evolution. Because historical attitudes have been diverse and affected by changing conditions, it is not difficult to find precedents or support for one particular approach—especially if one ignores the other (sometimes more prominent) approaches. For example, a common strategy of the Outreach movement is to reference the lack of formal conversion procedures in the biblical period, and to highlight the Hasmonean forced conversion of non-Jews into Judaism, skipping over the 2,000 subsequent years of Jewish history, to avoid grappling with two millennia of rabbinic discomfort with conversion. In contrast, many Orthodox writers exclusively emphasize historical rabbinic hostility to conversion for the sake of marriage to support their own discomfort, and pay scant attention to the more pro-conversion thinkers within rabbinic tradition.

Our goal in this analysis of the ways in which Jewish professionals and interfaith couples think about conversion is to contextualize their reflections by first modestly sketching out and summarizing some basic historical approaches. We make no attempt to “prove” that one or another particular approach is more “authentic.” Similarly, later comments on policy implications that appear in the concluding sections of *Choosing Jewish* grow out of and are based on current socio-

logical research data and make no halakhic claims.

Looking back at the biblical period, one finds no formal procedure for non-Israelites joining the Israelite people described in the Hebrew Bible, although a text in Exodus 12:47-49 lays out the conditions under which a non-Israelite may change his status and participate in sacrifices and other communal activities:

If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country, but no uncircumcised person shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be a citizen of the country, but no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and the stranger who dwells among you.²⁹

It appears that Israelite behaviors and modes of worship, with their accompanying regulations, including circumcision, could be taken on by male non-Israelite fellow travelers who lived within the geopolitical boundaries of Israelite society. Non-Israelite women, on the other hand, were sometimes taken in marriage by Israelite men (see, for example, besides the non-Israelite wives of Joseph, Moses, and other prominent biblical figures, the prescriptive passages in Deuteronomy 21:10-14 and Numbers 31:17-18). “It never occurred to anyone to demand that the foreign woman undergo some ritual to indicate her acceptance of the religion of Israel,” explains historian Shaye Cohen. “The woman was joined to the house of Israel by being joined to her Israelite husband; the act of marriage was functionally equivalent to the later idea of ‘conversion.’”

However, after the destruction of the First Temple in 587 B.C.E. and the subsequent Babylonian exile, Jews encountered transformed circumstances. No longer living primarily in their own country, they were far more vulnerable to other cultures and had a new need to establish clear boundaries defining a nongeographically determined identity. As Cohen puts it, “[A]ttitudes changed when conditions changed.” He elaborates:

Judaea lost any semblance of political independence, the tribal structure of society was shattered, and the Israelites were scattered among the nations. In these new circumstances marriage with outsiders came to be seen as a threat to Judaeans (Jewish) identity and was widely condemned. The Judaeans sensed that their survival depended upon their ideological (or religious) and social separation from the outside world.³⁰

No longer able to depend on culture and geography to define membership, rabbinic Judaism put procedures into place. Lawrence Schiffman notes, “During the exile, Judaism had been transformed from a nationality which depended on a connection to the land and culture to a religious and ethnic community which depended on descent.”³¹ Although Schiffman, like most traditionalists, cites Ezra as one example of the hardening of lines against the entry of foreign elements into Judaic societies, biblical scholarship is far from unanimous on this assessment.

During the subsequent Second Temple period (520 B.C.E.-70 C.E.), the Judaeans nation-state was at certain times quite powerful. At the peak of its power under the Hasmonean kings, attitudes about conversion underwent a significant transformation. The protective sealing of boundaries characteristic of the period of the returning exiles was replaced by an aggressively positive attitude toward proselytizing. During part of this time period there was a vigorous upsurge in interest in Jewish proselytizing activity. The writings of the Jerusalemite historian Josephus Flavius (38-100 C.E.) suggest that during the Hasmonean period, in the reign of King Johanan Hyrcanus (from 134-104 B.C.E.), Judaeans engaged in mass conquest and conversion of peoples from the neighboring states. The Idumaeans and others were given a choice between being expelled from their country or “submitting to circumcision and having their manner of life in all other respects made the same as that of the Judaeans. And from that time on they have continued to be Judaeans.”³²

While scholars argue about the reliability of Josephus’s reportage, two matters are salient to our discussion: (1) At least at the time of

Josephus’s writing, a process for becoming Jewish and joining the Jewish people included circumcision and taking on the religious and social laws of the Judaeans; and (2) the Hasmonean kings seemed unambivalent about implementing wholesale conversions.

The actively proselytizing drive of early Judaism declined with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., and was further limited after the brutal crushing of the Bar Kokhva revolt in 135 C.E., followed by the eclipse of the Judaeans nation-state and the dispersal of the Jews throughout the Mediterranean basin and the Near East. The ascendancy of rabbinic Judaism in the first and second century C.E. following the post-Second Temple period provided the setting for the now familiar formal process and ceremony through which a non-Jew becomes a Jew. This process is depicted twice in rabbinic literature, in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot 47a-b, and in the post-talmudic tractate, Gerim 1.1.³³

The establishment of a uniform conversion ceremony introduced “a measure of order and verifiability in a situation where previously chaos had reigned,” Shaye Cohen explains. According to talmudic descriptions, the conversion ceremony consisted of three sequential actions:

— First, acceptance of the obligations of Jewish religious law as a concept. As described in the Talmud, a potential convert’s mere performance of some of the commandments would not satisfy the acceptance aspect of the process—the potential convert needed to acknowledge that s/he accepted his/her total obligation. What this meant in a practical sense was diversely interpreted by different rabbinic thinkers. Some said that the proselyte must simply be given an idea of what awaits by describing some of the most difficult and some of the easiest Jewish rituals. Other rabbinic thinkers stipulated that the proselyte must accept every word of the Torah and should be rejected if s/he rejects even “one detail of the words of the sages.”

— Second, ritual circumcision for males. While there is consider-

able initial discussion in the Talmud about the necessity for circumcision, it becomes a required step in the conversion process.

— Third, immersion in a *mikveh* or ritual bath, an absolute requirement according to rabbinic law for both men and women. Not least, all three of these actions were to be performed publicly—the witnesses becoming, in effect, a kind of certificate of authenticity were the actual conversion ever to be called into question.³⁴

The conversion process could only be entered into after rabbinical authorities were completely convinced of the sincerity of the would-be convert. The Talmud expresses considerable skepticism about persons who wish to convert into Judaism in order to gain financial or social advantages. Lengthy discussion is devoted to the possible advantages that would-be converts might be seeking through conversion into Judaism, and a priori a conversion for the purpose of gain (or for any purpose except wishing to serve the Jewish God and join the Jewish people) is considered inappropriate. A very strong strand of opinion argues that conversion for the sake of marriage also falls into the category of conversion for the purpose of gaining something, and is thus to be prohibited or at least discouraged. Talmudic writings express differences of opinion as to whether an insincere conversion can be considered valid after the fact.³⁵ The strength of the historical rabbinic dislike of conversion for the sake of marriage is one primary reason for the current Orthodox resistance toward conversion as a communal strategy.

With the rise of Christianity and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, conversions into Judaism diminished—partially, no doubt, because a series of Roman-Christian laws decreed death both for converts and for the Jews who converted them. Circumcision of Christians was banned, which made conversion into Judaism close to impossible. At this point, Jewish emphasis on turning away proselytes became more pronounced than it had previously been. Thus, proselytes were to be told of the suffer-

ing implicit in the practice of Judaism, of the potential persecutions, of the great difficulties of the Jewish lifestyle. If, however, the proselyte persisted, and continued to wish to convert into Judaism, at that point the conversion was allowed by Jewish authorities to proceed, with the assumption that becoming a Jew was a privilege that the proselyte had earned through his determination and devotion.

Numbers of converts rose and fell in differing locales and historical periods. Emphasis on turning converts away often became more pronounced in environments where Muslim or Christian authorities punished conversion into Judaism with death, sometimes for the whole Jewish community. A minority of rabbinic thinkers held that there was a “metaphysical difference” between Jews and non-Jews that made a true conversion impossible, (The Maharal of Prague, 1530-1609 C.E., was one famous example.)³⁶ Paradoxically, Judah Halevi (Iberian Peninsula, before 1075-1141 C.E.) argues similarly in many writings that Jews are unique,³⁷ but concludes the *Kuzari* with a profoundly sympathetic narrative about the conversion into Judaism of an entire people (the Khazars, a Turkish or Finnish tribe from the lower Volga region, who are believed to have converted to Judaism in the eighth century, under the leadership of their king, Bulan).

For the nearly 2,000 years of rabbinic Judaism before the dramatic changes wrought by the emancipation of the Jews, the Enlightenment, and the transformations of modernity, converts were part of many Jewish societies. Indeed, over the centuries some converts have attained extraordinary status as Jewish leaders and rabbinic thinkers. Rabbinic code books and responsa literature over the centuries have dealt extensively with conversion—its policies, practices, challenges, and concerns. While attitudes toward converts into Judaism have varied and continue to vary, most rabbinic writers have followed the lead of Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.), who insisted that once a sincere halakhic formal conversion has taken place, Jewish law requires that converts be treated with respect and consideration.³⁸ A reminder perhaps most familiar to Jews of many backgrounds is found in a passage

from the Haggadah, read yearly at the festive Passover Seder meal, that even the patriarch Abraham had an idol-worshipping father, and thus every Jew symbolically descends from idol-worshippers who converted into Judaism:

Mitkhillah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu...

From the beginning, our forefathers were idolaters. But now, God has drawn us close to worship him. As it is written: And Joshua said to all the people, this is what the God of Israel says: Your forefathers lived across the river [Euphrates], and Terakh, the father of Abraham and Nahor, worshiped pagan gods. Then I took your father Abraham from across the river, and I brought him through the land of Canaan [author's translation].

Conversion and Apostasy

Discomfort with potential conversion is in some ways linked to historical Jewish concerns about religious switching in general and to the repeated threat of apostasy—Jews abandoning Judaism and adhering to other religions and religious societies. As illustrations, biblical texts make it clear that often very sophisticated pagan cultures and rites lured many Israelites away from monotheistic practices; the Hellenistic period saw many Jewish men attracted to and attempting to emulate Greek cultural practices (including attempted reversal of circumcision); and apostates in the medieval period sometimes became the most vicious and effective enemies of Jewish communities, indicating to Christian authorities anti-gentile passages in the Talmud and other Jewish texts. Memories of the wholesale conversion of large portions of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities comprise a central chapter in Jewish historical consciousness. Nevertheless, despite often violent persecution, rates of apostasy from Judaism were generally relatively low until, ironically, as Todd Endelman points out, the modern period, when emancipated Jews became disillusioned with their prospects for advancement if they remained within the Judaic religious community. The largest numbers of converts in the decades before

and after the turn of the twentieth century were found in Germany:

In the early 1880s, there were at least two hundred conversions [to Protestant Christianity] a year; twenty years later, over five hundred.... [I]n Berlin, the center of gravity for German Jewry, the ratios were much higher: about one for every 600 to 650 Jews in the period 1882-1908. (In reality, the number of Jews leaving Judaism was much greater still, since these figures do not include converts to Catholicism and children baptized by their parents....) On the eve of World War I, alongside Germany's Jewish population of 620,000, there may have been as many as 100,000 converts and children and grandchildren of converts.³⁹

Small wonder that Jewish traditionalists tried to minimize religious switching in their attempt to protect the status quo! Jewish law itself made leaving Judaism much more difficult than joining it. Even apostasy, formal conversion into another religion, did not necessarily remove a born Jew from being considered a Jew according to many rabbinic authorities. Inter-marriage without conversion was forbidden by Jewish law for many centuries, partially because of the realistic assumption that a Jew who married a non-Jew was likely to switch religious allegiance and to convert to the majority religion—in ancient times, some form of paganism, and in later Jewish wanderings, Christianity or Islam, depending on time and location. Religious switching is thus not a new phenomenon, and has usually meant disheartening losses for the Jewish community.

Contemporary Communal Conversations about Conversion

Conversion has become a controversial topic because it touches so closely on the existential question of what Jewish identity means in a globalizing, multicultural world. In Diaspora countries, including the United States, Jews comprise a tiny minority of the population, even though they have achieved extraordinary educational, occupational, and socioeconomic success, sociocultural acceptance, and cultural and political influence. Numbers are part of the motivation for the heated

discussions about conversion. Although some social scientists argue that absolute numbers of Jews in America have increased, most agree that percentages of persons identifying as Jews in America have drifted downward to about 2 percent to 2.5 percent of the overall population, depending upon whom one is counting; Christians comprise approximately 80 percent, by comparison.⁴⁰

Some see a vigorous communal emphasis on conversion as a way of recouping losses. Those who argue that non-Jewish spouses should be treated and counted as Jews without formal conversion are also often concerned about numbers: They assert that insistence on conversion can be off-putting to many non-Jewish spouses, and that interfaith families need to be drawn into Judaism without stressing conversion.

Approaches to conversion in the American community today run a very broad gamut. Pronounced differences exist among the various wings of Judaism, with most Orthodox rabbis articulating stricter, more circumscribed attitudes and Reform rabbis adopting the most liberal approaches, while Conservative rabbis often position themselves in the middle. The Conservative process of conversion is currently closer to Orthodox standards than to Reform, although some Conservative rabbis are urging that the movement adopt a more liberal approach. The vast majority of intermarried and converting Jews who affiliate join the Reform movement; a considerably smaller group affiliate with the Conservative movement; and a dramatically smaller segment affiliate with Orthodoxy. Equally important, the children of Reform Jews are statistically far more likely to marry non-Jews—and thus to be in a situation where they might think about conversion—than the children of Conservative or Orthodox Jews.⁴¹ The Outreach movement is not directly tied to any one wing of Judaism, but is associated in some ways with the Reform movement, which has its own outreach efforts.

Thus, Reform temples include the largest source of potential converts, although, as discussed in this research report, the movement

as a whole places less overt emphasis on conversion and more stress on creating an atmosphere of inclusiveness that makes Judaism and Jewish environments feel welcoming to all types of families. In addition, many Reform rabbis have very large congregations with many responsibilities and report that they have limited time to devote to bringing congregants through the process of conversion. As a result, the potential for conversion in Reform temples is often not actualized to its fullest extent. Indeed, as noted earlier, the lukewarm reactions to URJ President Rabbi Eric Yoffie's recent pleas for greater emphasis on conversion as an outreach strategy demonstrate the extent to which the Reform movement as a whole has become at best neutral and perhaps even negative about actively pursuing the conversion of non-Jewish spouses of Jews.

Orthodox rabbis are the group of American Jewish clergy who are called upon least often to deal with intermarriage and conversion. Nevertheless, they do confront requests for conversion on a regular basis, and Orthodox rabbinic responses to these requests fall along a continuum. Proponents of high boundaries believe conversions should only be performed according to the strictest Orthodox standards and that potential converts must commit to leading completely ritually observant Jewish lives.⁴² Many contemporary American Orthodox rabbinic courts have brought this strict standard to their policies in regard to adopted children; thus, non-Orthodox couples who adopt non-Jewish children and want an Orthodox conversion so that the children will be fully accepted by Jews around the world often experience difficulty in finding an Orthodox *beit din* willing to convert their adopted children into Judaism. Within more liberal Orthodox circles there is some advocacy for the encouragement of sincere conversion, along with support for lowering the boundaries to encourage conversion.⁴³ However, it should be noted that more stringent rather than more liberal approaches to conversion are currently on the ascendancy within the Orthodox world.

With somewhat more flexibility than the Orthodox world, the

Conservative movement includes divergent opinions, ranging from strict rabbis and lay leaders who urge advocacy for endogamy and stringent halakhic conversion guidelines, to more liberal rabbis and lay leaders who believe that the movement should emphasize *keruv* (a Hebrew word for drawing a person closer to Judaism) and put less stress on boundary maintenance. The Conservative movement's talmudic authorities and decision-makers in its Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) research decisions by carefully exploring historical as well as contemporary rabbinic legal texts.⁴⁴ Rabbis in both the Orthodox and Conservative branches of Judaism base their decisions on legal precedents within the corpus of rabbinic legal writings from medieval through modern times. The Orthodox world, however, does not have a unified authoritative voting body like the CJLS to provide guidelines for individual rabbis. Orthodox rabbis often call upon their individual rabbinic mentors as well as consult written rabbinic texts (as Conservative rabbis do as well), but do not have published votes to serve as a benchmark for contemporary approaches.

One similarity that unites the majority of rabbinic scholars in the Orthodox and Conservative movements is a predominant attitude that becoming a Jew is a privilege rather than a right. Many Conservative rabbis believe that in not every case is conversion into Judaism advisable. Because Judaism emphasizes the concept that "the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come" (Tractate Sanhedrin, 105a), that righteous gentiles who observe the seven Noahide Laws (based on Genesis 9:4-7) achieve salvation, Orthodox and Conservative rabbinic authorities feel they need not abandon halakhic standards or boundaries to enable every gentile desirous of conversion to become a Jew. This halakhically-guided attitude often precipitates the charge that Orthodox and Conservative rabbis needlessly raise barriers between Jews and potential converts.

Both the Orthodox and Conservative movements have produced contemporary responsa dealing with situations surrounding

intermarriage, apostasy, and conversion, because rabbis in both movements encounter practitioners who are immersed in these situations. Despite the substantial overlap in rabbinic attitudes toward conversion at the center of the Orthodox and Conservative spheres, the less modern elements of the Orthodox world are generally less flexible than even the most stringent Conservative rabbis, and, conversely, the most liberal elements of the Conservative rabbinate are considerably more liberal than nearly all Orthodox rabbis. It should also be noted that strong forces within the Conservative movement have recently been urging greater flexibility.

The extent to which Jewish cultural standards and expectations have changed is most vividly illustrated by looking at Reform Judaism. Thus, as Reform scholar Daniel Schiff points out, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Reform movement displayed near-unanimity in its advocacy for endogamy and in its urging conversion in cases of marriage across religious-cultural lines. American Reform leader Kaufman Kohler's 1919 statement against Reform Jewish officiation at mixed marriages clearly articulated the expectation that a Jewish home must have only one religion, because "if man and wife belong to two different religions, it will be a house divided against itself. Without harmony of views in a matter so vital to the future, there is no real unity."⁴⁵

By the 1980s, however, intermarriage had become so widespread in most Western countries that the more liberal elements in each wing of Judaism struggled to find revised standards that could be applied to changing Jewish families. In 1983, the Central Conference of American Rabbis passed a resolution declaring that "the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people." Later Reform responsa dealt with situations where that identification becomes murky, emphasizing that "patrilineal descent must testify to the child's

positive and exclusive Jewish identity.” Many rabbis interpret this ruling to mean that any child of one Jewish parent must demonstrate his/her Jewishness by being raised in the Jewish faith and by affirming his/her Jewishness at an appropriate age.⁴⁶ However, in the popular American Jewish mindset today, it is considered only egalitarian—and thus only ethical—that a child with one Jewish parent of either gender may legitimately consider himself or herself to be Jewish, according to individual choice, without any overt additional demonstration of faith.

The emotionalism evoked by intermarriage and conversion issues in general and by the patrilineal descent decision in particular was exacerbated during the “Who is a Jew?” controversy in Israel. On several successive occasions (1972, 1974, 1977-78, 1983-85), Israeli religious parties in the Knesset attempted to establish consistent, halakhically based principles of conversion for conversions performed in the Diaspora and to incorporate them into the Israeli Law of Return, which guarantees all Jews citizenship in the Jewish state. Their goal was to accept as Jews only persons who had been converted by an Orthodox *beit din*. American Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist rabbis and laypersons alike felt that these stringent new rulings would effectively disenfranchise them. American leaders energetically and ultimately successfully lobbied the Israeli government not to put these standards into law.⁴⁷

Subsequently, the Israeli government and Israeli Jewish communities have faced their own “Who is a Jew?” crisis, as thousands of Russian Jews with non-Jewish family members and significant others emigrated to Israel, further complicating attempts to draw clear lines between Jew and non-Jew within Israeli society. At least 300,000 non-halakhic Jews are estimated to have entered Israel under the Law of Return, and many Jewish Israelis—including Israeli women—living or traveling abroad marry non-Jews and give birth to halakhically non-Jewish children. Most recently, Israel’s government under Ariel Sharon has made strides in dealing with increased demands for con-

version by creating the Joint Institute for Jewish Studies (informally called by a more accurate name: the Joint Institute for Conversion), which brings together rabbis and leaders from the three wings of Israeli Judaism to work together to instruct potential converts. Partially as a result of this and other efforts, the number of Israelis receiving conversion certificates has risen from 3,599 in 2004 to a projected 6,000 in 2005, with hopes for higher numbers.⁴⁸

For nonscholarly segments of the liberal Jewish population, the populations that Marshall Sklare and Charles Liebman called the Jewish “folk,”⁴⁹ even Reform “exclusive Jewish identity” standards established by the patrilineal descent decision have come to appear harsh, unwelcoming, and hard-line. Thus, in e-mail correspondence on an Internet discussion group about the work of the Jewish Outreach Network, one Episcopalian-raised adult child of a Jewish mother described her outrage when, twenty years ago, a Reform rabbi told her she would have to convert if she wished to change her status to that of Jew:

Speaking as a matrilineal, we are not accepted in many segments of Judaism, contrary to public myth. Only in rare instances have I found the concept of matrilineal Jews being “real” Jews fully honored by a *shul* or Jewish organization.

I have repeatedly heard from members of the Jewish community that I “don’t look Jewish.” My father was a WASP Episcopalian of Scots/English/Dutch descent, and I look like him, not my brunette Orthodox Jewish mother. Also, upon my first contact with Judaism in the mid-1980s, I was told by a Reform rabbi—who was following Reform guidelines, laid out in a 1980s responsa that is still in force—that Reform (and apparently Reconstructionists) do not consider me to be a Jew, because my parents raised me as an Episcopalian, and that I would have to convert to join his congregation. He was very, very, very unpleasant about it. Be advised that I am a strong friend of Reform, and an admirer of their current head, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, but after that interview I opted not to join a Reform congregation. These types of harsh feedback don’t help matrilineals or patrilineals affiliate as Jews.⁵⁰

The experience of the writer may be a rare occurrence, but what is notable is its interpretation as offensively strict, even though it follows the letter of Reform policy. Ironically, it is possible that this young woman might have been more easily accepted as a Jew within a clearly established, matrilineal-principled Conservative or even Orthodox setting. The very porousness of ethnoreligious boundaries today has created its own confusions and disappointed expectations. What should not be overlooked, however, is the apparent attractiveness of Jewish identification to many persons with pluralistic descent backgrounds. In contrast to prior eras of American Jewish history, when escaping from Jewish identification was perceived as raising one's status, today being considered a Jew is a very appealing status to many Americans who have some Jewish antecedents.

Formative Factors in the Premarriage Years

What leads persons with pluralistic descent backgrounds or those not born Jewish to consider conversion into Judaism? Many converts have been attracted to Jewish social networks since they were teenagers. Consciously or unconsciously, they sought out primarily Jewish friendship circles in high school. For some, this was a deliberate decision. For others, "it just happened." During college as well, they found mostly Jewish friends and often dated primarily Jewish men and women.

Here, for example, is the way Craig Semple describes his "bizarre" attraction to Jews during his growing up years:

I grew up in Dunwoody, which is upper-middle-class Presbyterian, and it was a suburb where parents dropped you off at Sunday school.... We were all the same, upper-middle-class white kids. There was no diversity anywhere of religion or ethnic groups. We were an isolated little group. I wasn't in the real world until I got to college.

INT: Did you date at all in high school?

Yes, I dated a lot, and you know what's funny? I dated a lot of Jew-

ish girls. I didn't meet them in high school. I met them where I worked, at Ace Hardware; that's where I met most of the Jewish girls. It was in downtown Atlanta, so you met most of the Jewish girls there.

In college, and even today, Craig says:

It's pretty strange. Nine out of ten of my current friends are Jewish, and don't ask me how this happened. Almost all my friends from adulthood are Jewish, and I don't know why. Some I've met here, and some I just met in other places, but they always turn out to be Jewish. I don't know how that happened. It's bizarre.

Many converts said they "felt uncomfortable with Christianity" during childhood or their teenage years, and yet they also felt a need to seek out religion; they didn't want to just walk away from religion. Especially for such people, Judaism as a religion had many attractive attributes. Craig Semple, for example, has enjoyed studying Jewish history and Jewish texts for many years. He describes his interest:

I still study it; to me it's really exciting, just fascinating, ... being given the Torah and how the whole thing evolved. I'm not knocking Christianity, but ... a lot of things, even when I was little, didn't make sense; it just didn't fit. Judaism just made a lot more sense, and it just fit; it felt really, really comfortable.

Cal Sargent, who grew up in the very different Christian ambience of a pious Southern Baptist family, also felt estranged from Christianity—but close to God—at an early age. He recalls:

I found things in the Southern Baptist or the very conservative religious movements that kind of confused me, especially in my later years.... On Sundays people would be very pious and very spiritual, but on Mondays they were trying to keep African Americans from going to school. So at this point a lot of my liberal leaning started. I was a church boy, I was involved, but I had an interaction with God, a personal relationship.... I didn't see this person up there waiting for you to make a mistake so He could pounce on you. It was a personal thing. I think I always felt that God realized that we had some sort of a connection.

Many converts said they felt estranged from their families of origin. The reasons for this are very wide-ranging, literally from the highly religious to the mostly secular ends of the spectrum. Some converts talk about parents who were “Christian religious fanatics.” Others say they “had no religious feeling in the home. My parents just dropped us off at Sunday school.” Some converts say their parents were “too controlling.” Others complain of parents who were “cold and uninvolved.” A substantial number had an alcoholic parent. One came from a lineage of “big stadium-deal Christians,” and had an uncle who “had an asthma attack and they just prayed and he died, and thus dad didn’t really get into religion at all.”

Some converts say they lived in densely Jewish neighborhoods growing up and wanted to be like the Jewish majority. Others lived in completely upper middle-class Mainline Christian environments, which they “found stifling—we were all the same,” and wanted to be like the exotic Jewish minority. Regardless of the reasons, it was very common for converts to wish to distance themselves actively from some aspect of the homes they grew up in. Converting into Judaism became part of this goal.

As in the study of mixed-married couples (*Jewish and Something Else*), the *Choosing Jewish* interviews revealed that a substantial proportion of Jews by Choice had come from families with characteristics from which they wanted to distance themselves. Charlene Jordan, for example, remembers her parents battling and their unpleasant divorce, and says she was “terrified of getting a divorce.” She was sure that because “my family is crazy, all families are crazy,” and she shared these fears with her then boyfriend and her Jewish father-in-law-to-be. Her new father-in-law gave her marital advice that she took to heart and sees as deeply Jewish:

I had a talk with his dad about it, and he was like, “Oh, no, my family is so normal.” And I was like, “What is he talking about? He’s in denial.”... We just spoke about relationship stuff, and the Jewish stuff came up within that. His dad gave us homework

assignments like, “You have to have a date night every week,” and “You have to write each other love letters.” We did that, and we try to still do it. We don’t have date night every week, but we try, and we have Shabbat now, so at least we have that time together. We make something for dinner that’s not [what] we make the rest of the week, and we usually make challah, though I’ve been trying to cut down on carbs, and we do a blessing on the candles and the wine, and after all that’s done, we just sit and talk. It’s like a little holiday for the two of us.

Similarly, Ken George grew up in a poor Southern family, one of four siblings born in three years to parents on their way to a bitter divorce. The only religious exposure they had as children was to weak Episcopalianism. Although the family was not religious, his grandmother was vocally very anti-Semitic. After his parents divorced, Ken moved with his mother to Cincinnati. As Ken tells it:

Cincinnati has a very strong Jewish community there, old German Reform; in fact the Reform movement started there. We just happened to take up residence in Avondale, which is the Jewish section of the city....

I went to ... Woodward High School, which was 60 percent plus Jewish. It was my first real exposure to Jews. The Jewish kids, I felt an affinity for them because they were the most hospitable to me. I was an outsider, and they were the most hospitable.... I had this natural curiosity about Judaism. A rabbi and his family lived in the duplex that we lived in, and he would build a Sukkah, and we would pepper this guy with all kinds of questions. He was very tolerant of us.

Ken went to Miami University and joined a Jewish fraternity. Even today, he says, he prefers “to hang out with my Jewish friends just because Jews are different, they think differently.” He describes this difference, as he sees it:

They like to argue; they like to banter, but in a very sort of affectionate way. They don’t do it with people they don’t like. They do tend to be more blunt and direct. If they disagree with you, they disagree with you.

In addition to a preference for this Jewish social style, Ken prefers what he experiences as Jewish willingness to question one's own religion. As he puts it, "The whole thing about Judaism is to question authority, and for Christians it's not to question it."

Jewish Religious Culture Compared to Christianity

A favorable comparison of Judaism to Christianity, in which a born non-Jew decides that he or she "really likes the way that Jews do things more," was the most frequently reported catalyst for conversion among the people interviewed. In analyzing these comments, one should bear in mind that informants are interpreting their own motivations and experiences. Their descriptions of their experience of Judaism as more fulfilling than Christianity may well be internally generated to justify and support their own life-transforming decisions. In any case, their words are reported as sociological data, not as testimonials to the choice of Judaism over Christianity.

Fully half of our converts cited this comparison as the reason they decided to convert to Judaism. Many expressed the idea that, as Cal Granger put it: "I think, in its truest form, Judaism is one of the greatest religions ... passed down in the world." Many, like Cal, were in awe of "the historical longevity of the Jewish religion."

Cal Granger made an interesting comparison to help explain his attraction to "authentic Judaism":

I think Judaism is like the Baptist Church compared to Greek Orthodox. The Greek Orthodox tries to maintain the pureness of it, while the Baptist Church tries to formulate it for convenience. So [I prefer] the part of Judaism that stays with the purity, not when some rabbi gets up there and imitates Madonna and sings a song like, "Let's get rabbinical," instead of "Let's get physical." I don't think that religion needs to be stoic, but it still needs to be pure. You can still find joy without having to bring in commercialized *chazerai* [junk].

Jews by choice often spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the strengths of Judaism and the relevance of Judaism for con-

temporary life. Charlene Jordan, for example, says:

You know what really got me into it? Passover. I love that stuff. It is so meaningful to me. I work with African American families, and I can see that those lessons need to be taught to other groups.... It's hard to say exactly, but the strength of the people spoke to me a lot.

Jewish Growing-Up Experiences and Spousal Conversion

Jews who insisted they would only marry a Jew, or insisted that their children must be raised completely Jewish, had certain common characteristics. Many of them had grown up in largely Jewish neighborhoods or, at least, had primarily Jewish friendship circles. Our interviews confirm the statistics in every recent study that reinforce the importance of (1) population density, and (2) social networks. Jewish population density and Jewish social networks are highly predictive of whether a person will grow up and establish a completely Jewish home.

In other words, all other things being equal, given two thirty-two-year-old Jewish women who are dating non-Jews, the woman who grew up in a densely Jewish neighborhood and had mostly Jewish friends in high school is much more likely to have a spouse who converts into Judaism. Likewise, the one who had few Jews in her neighborhood and few Jewish friends in high school is much more likely to have a spouse who does not convert into Judaism.

Jews who encouraged their spouses to become Jewish, or insisted that their children be raised completely Jewish, had received better than average levels of Jewish education as children. They tended to have several years of formal Jewish education and to have belonged to youth groups or gone to Jewish summer camps. They had positive memories of their youth groups or summer camps.

Similarly, Jews who encouraged their spouses to become Jewish, or insisted that their children be raised completely Jewish, tended to

have grown up in Jewishly active homes. Many grew up in households that celebrated all the Jewish holidays in some way, including frequent Shabbat observances. For many of them, grandparents were extremely important in their childhood Jewish experiences.

On the other hand, a passionate minority of Jews who encouraged their spouses to become Jewish had intermarried parents. They said they hated being pulled between two religions when they were growing up, and they wanted to make sure it didn't happen to their own children.

Casper Gates, a Jew by Choice who met his Jewish wife, Joyce, “working at the Bugaboo Steakhouse in Peabody, Massachusetts” when she was sixteen years old, remembers that “Joyce brought religion up pretty quick.” He recalls:

At the time, she was doing a lot of work in a youth group, so she'd be gone almost every other weekend with this youth group. Religion came up pretty quick with her because at the time, she was [saying], “I'm either going to marry a Jewish guy or I'm not getting married.”

Casper was somewhat confused by her insistence, because Joyce's father was not Jewish. Casper thought:

Having her father and then Joyce's uncle married [to] a non-Jewish woman who had no plans of converting ... already paved a way for me not to be Jewish. However, Joyce saw it just the opposite way: She stated how she would like it [Casper's conversion] for her kids, because of her father not converting. She found it hard to understand, growing up, why they did things or why they didn't do things, so [the subject of conversion] was definitely brought up between us.

Dating and Romance across Cultural Lines

Like many non-Jews who eventually marry Jews and convert to Judaism, Craig from upper-class Presbyterian Dunwoody and Cal from the Southern Baptist Bible Belt found themselves dating Jewish girls, often without realizing it. Craig recalls:

In college I met a girl named Deborah, and she and I went out a few times, and she comes to me one day in school and says, “I can't go out with you anymore.” And I say, “Why?” And she says, “Because you're not of my religion.” She didn't even say Jewish. It took me until years later to figure out what that had all been about.... Before my wife, there were a bunch, I would say eight or nine Jewish girls that I had gone out with.

Cal, a musician, found himself socializing primarily with Jewish men in the music business. He met his wife working as a bartender at a Jewish wedding. Cal's wife, Josette, brought up the issue of religion “as soon as our relationship became serious.” They dated for five years before marrying, and Cal became very involved in and fascinated by Jewishness, especially American Jewish history. Cal's conversion, four months before they married, was very meaningful to him, because he had become very close to his Reform rabbi at that point. Cal and the rabbi collaborated on a published book on the Leo Frank case, and his involvement with the case shows how much Cal feels himself to be an ethnic Jew, part of Jewish destiny:

A lot of people think I'm Jewish because I get asked to speak about the Leo Frank case all the time. I think the Jewish population needs someone to be—revisionist history is so conservative! Have you ever seen the movie, *Voyage of the Damned*? It's about the *St. Louis*. The Cuban government ... took these people's money, and then when they got to the harbor in Havana, they wouldn't let them come out. ... Because I'm a student of history, I've studied a lot of Jewish things, and I probably in my life have learned more about Judaism than she [Josette, his wife] has, because that's the important thing to me. You walk into a synagogue and people are going through a certain ritual; you need to know what the ritual is about.

For some Jewish informants, a very salient aspect of their attraction to their current spouse was the non-Jewish spouse's differences from Jewish men and women. As Belinda Nortan remembers:

I really had an epiphany. I had been dating several different Jewish men, and it was always a struggle. They were too much like me—

they were too controlling! I realized I didn't have to marry a Jewish man. I should marry a man, not a religion. And then when I met David, he was just so unlike me personality-wise.

For Jewish, as well as for non-Jewish men and women who married across cultural lines, romance and marriage to an unexpected partner were sometimes ways of establishing independence from a parent. As Pam Gerber, who eventually married an African American man who converted into Judaism, remembers,

My mother and I never got along particularly well, and ... when I told her I was getting serious with this guy, she said, "Well, is he Jewish?" and I said, "No." She said, "Are you gonna marry him?" and I said, "Mom, it is just two months, and it feels like something, an important relationship in my life, and I wanted to tell you, but I don't know if I'm going to marry him." And she said, "Are you going to marry him?" "I don't know." "Are you going to marry him?" "I don't know. I'm not setting out to marry someone who's not Jewish." A true statement—I wasn't planning on setting up a secret marriage. And finally she said, "Well, if you're not planning on marrying him, he could be black, for all I care!"

Significantly, Pam still has very ambivalent feelings about Judaism, while her husband, Jason, is an Activist convert. Although he found his adult circumcision somewhat more dramatic than expected, Jason has a positive Jewish identity. As he puts it: "I am a Jew by Choice, and my wife, Pam, is a Jew by chance."

Conversion as a Post-Marriage Process

Life-Cycle Events as Windows of Opportunity

One-third of the informants interviewed in this project were Jews by Choice—persons who were born into Christian households who decided to convert into Judaism. Some of them converted prior to or during their engagement. However, many in our sample, and in American Jewish life, convert after marriage, often in conjunction

with a life-cycle event, most commonly gestation, or the birth and naming, or the bar or bat mitzvah of children. Typically several factors are intertwined. Phyllis Jordan, for example, described mutually reinforcing factors: (1) Her husband, Jim, was initially well-disposed toward Judaism because of its lack of emphasis on salvation, in comparison with the Christian emphasis on damnation he had experienced during his childhood; (2) and she herself later spurred him on to formally convert into Judaism so that he would share his son's religion when he became a bar mitzvah, even though she had often told him previously that she didn't care whether or when he converted:

He felt very much at home within Judaism. It was more accepting—even with some negative experiences we've had—of people's differences than Christianity was. There wasn't any of this, "You're damned and you're going to go to hell." ... I always told him that I didn't care if he did it, and if he was going to do it, that was his decision.... I didn't care when he did it—but that if he was going to do it, please do it before Joshua was bar mitzvahed [*sic*] so that there would not be any question in anyone's mind who could do what during the service.

Even for those who converted before marriage, a life-cycle event often played a role in their decision. Phil Bernstein, for example, describes his fiancée's decision to convert after she attended a Jewish funeral followed by a Southern Baptist funeral, and found the Jewish funeral and Jewish approaches to death and dying far more appealing:

After our junior year my grandmother passed away. Christine came to the funeral with me. It was the first time she'd ever been to any Jewish life-course event. Shortly after that, her grandfather passed away, and they had gone to that funeral. It was a Southern Baptist funeral, and the stark difference between them was something she never realized before. She was like, "Wow! I really like the way that Jews do things more than [the way] Southern Baptists do things."

Advocacy for Conversion—the Encouraging Partner

Many born non-Jews who are romantically involved with or married to Jews think about converting. However, far greater numbers study Judaism than ultimately convert to Judaism. In looking at the differences between those who do and do not decide to convert, one finds three factors to be of the greatest importance: (1) the Jewish spouse, (2) the mentoring rabbi, and (3) the supportive Jewish family, each advocating on behalf of conversion. When the Jewish partner is utterly convinced that s/he must have a completely Jewish home, that advocacy comes naturally. As Jackie Gheary, a suburban Boston woman, put it:

It was not an easy road at the beginning of our dating. We broke up a few times. He knew from the start, once it got serious, that I really wouldn't marry someone not Jewish.... I never said that he had to do it, but obviously he knew that it was either we had to convert or it was just not going to work for me.

The Jewish family's support for conversion was also a significant factor. When young adults know that their parents are behind them, it is much easier for them to weather the decision-making process. Jackie Gheary thought about her family's role in advocating for a completely Jewish household, and how important their strong emotions were in enabling her to be firm on the conversion issue:

I kept saying to my mother ... for her really not to worry, that things weren't going to continue if it wasn't going to be a Jewish household for both parties. My grandmother was still alive, and my grandmother did get to know Charles for a year or two, and she was so upset because he wasn't Jewish. And then, when it came out that he was going to convert, it was like a night-and-day kind of thing.

When a Jewish man or woman really wants to marry a Jew and makes that known immediately and strongly, that statement often has a surprisingly strong effect on a non-Jewish romantic partner or spouse. As with other negotiating processes, conversions were some-

times helped along by the willingness of the Jewish partner to “walk away from the deal” if conversion wasn't in the offing. Stories about breaking up during the dating process were very common. As couples tried to figure out what they would do religiously, they often broke off their relationship and then reinstated it when they realized how much they mattered to each other. The reunion often was the setting for talking about conversion to Judaism.

A rabbi who draws couples closer to Judaism and advocates for conversion into Judaism as part of that process is a supremely critical factor for many converts. Almost all narratives about adult conversion before or after marriage included powerful stories about the role of a mentoring rabbi, and often a mentoring community as well. The rabbi connection is often made when couples move into a new community and start a family. As they contemplate the birth of a child, issues about baby namings and birth ceremonies suddenly become critical to them. At this juncture, they often ask around their own grapevines, or look in Jewish newspapers or other less personal lists of resources, to find rabbis who deal with interfaith families. These rabbis may come from any of the wings of American Judaism, depending on the preferences of the couple, but also on the rabbi's availability. As noted earlier, given the preponderance of intermarried affiliation with Reform temples, the majority of mentoring rabbis are, in fact, Reform, at least in the initial stages of a couple's moving toward conversion into Judaism. When the “chemistry” is right—when the couple finds a rabbi with whom they feel comfortable—many such couples move closer to Judaism as they create a sequence of birth ceremonies for their child-to-be. This is the first major window of opportunity for conversion after the wedding, and many born non-Jews choose to convert into Judaism prior to or in concert with the birth of a child.

A second window of opportunity very much influenced by charismatic mentoring rabbis is the bar/bat mitzvah event. In order to be of the same religion as a child who is now consciously accepting

Jewish identity at bar/bat mitzvah, many parents who have not yet converted choose to become Jews—and sometimes to have their own bar/bat mitzvah—in coordination with their children. When the Jewish community in the synagogue is warm, welcoming, and supportive, serving as a mentoring community, chances for conversion are greatly enhanced.

However, perhaps surprisingly, given the effectiveness of a mentoring rabbi in encouraging conversion, some rabbis do not ask questions about conversion because they feel uncomfortable advocating in this way. Rabbis tell stories about their shyness or discomfort in suggesting conversion—and their surprise when they receive a far more enthusiastic response than they feared. One rabbi, for example, described his trepidation in suggesting conversion to a congregant who had studied with him for several years. “He surprised me by shaking his head and saying, ‘I thought you’d never ask!’ It made me wonder how many more congregants there were out there waiting for me to ask, and how many non-Jewish spouses would be glad to convert if we would only ask them.”

Sometimes rabbis actually discourage conversion—perhaps unwittingly—when they respond to questions about conversion by saying, “Oh, you’re living a Jewish life, so there’s no particular reason to convert.” Several informants said they had thought about conversion, but were dissuaded by such rabbinic comments. These rabbis probably thought they were simply “not pressuring” the couple and didn’t realize they were actually discouraging people who would happily have converted with positive encouragement.

The decision to convert can feel very different to the Jew who makes the request and the non-Jew of whom conversion is requested. Interestingly, Jews who ask romantic partners or spouses to convert often remember the process as being more touch-and-go than the converts themselves. While Carl describes his decision to convert as an almost seamless positive response to Vicky’s suggestion, Vicky found the initial conversation and the decision much more intimidating and

tenuous. She describes it this way:

So far so good. I did ask him to convert, and he said yes, but there was a hesitation there. It’s a big, big deal, because even though you say, “Oh, you’re cool with things,” when you’re dating, it’s a much different thing to actualize it.

She herself came only gradually to the realization that Carl’s agreement to convert was necessary for her to move the relationship on to the next level, that of being an engaged couple:

I thought we would be engaged and the arrangement was going to be, I’ll be Jewish, and you’ll just be really cool with me being Jewish. But then I just started to feel, as I was thinking more seriously about it and envisioning my life, that I needed more of a commitment than that. You know, he definitely balked at first, but he thought about it more and more and decided that was something he could give to me.

Since Vicky herself took some time to come to the realization that she wanted Carl to convert, her perception of his hesitation may partially be due to her own initial uncertainty or ambivalence.

Liberal Jewish Social and Political Styles

Some born non-Jews, such as Cal Sargent, are offended by the political conservatism of their Christian childhoods, and are attracted to liberal, pro-civil-rights Jewish politics. Jewish social styles—arguing openly about politics and ideas—are also a big plus for many converts. Openness toward feminist ideas, specifically, was very attractive to born non-Jewish women thinking about marrying a Jewish man and also adopting the Jewish religion. Christine Kennedy, who converted into Judaism in preparation for her wedding to Phil Bernstein, for example, likes the model of the assertive Jewish woman:

Mothers are involved in the wedding ceremony, and women are just put up above—I’m not saying above men—but women are respected more in Judaism, I think, than in Christianity, at least in the Southern Baptist view, where women are supposed to be subservient. It was a stark contrast. I just loved that. It was like I could

see my mom walking down the aisle with my father. It was so beautiful. It just opened my eyes.

The second factor of great importance to Christine is the prominence of debate in Jewish religious culture, a “stark contrast” to what she experienced in a Southern Sunday school:

The biggest aspect that I really like is the fact that you’re asked to question. You’re encouraged to discuss everything, and it’s not preached at you. You don’t accept it as fact and then move on. That’s a stark contrast to my upbringing with the church.... You go to Sunday school, and you say, “But why? Why do we have to take all this on faith?” People look at you like you’re some kind of pagan! So ... considering that I value intellectual conversation, intelligence, and the ability to use it, I have trouble just taking things on faith. So I really like that aspect [of Judaism].

New Research on “Emerging Adulthood”

Over the last decade researchers have been paying close attention to the unique qualities of Gen-X young Americans—the early adulthood stage of life (usually ages 25 through 35) now called by some social scientists “emerging adulthood.” Recent studies suggest that Gen-Xers approach many aspects of life differently than older generations.⁵¹ Jewish “emerging adults” also report attitudes that are distinct from those of older generations.⁵² The concerns and values of Jewish Gen-Xers have commonalities with others in their age group, sharing especially attributes such as “denominationalism on the decline and pluralism on the rise,” “faith expressed in highly personal, informal ways,” “diverse social circles,” “more self-aware,” and “sex, jobs, and grades come before God.”

At the same time, Jewish young adults may be distinct in certain ways both from older adult Jews and from their age cohorts in other ethnoreligious groups. For example, a new REBOOT (REBOOT is a national network for young Jews) study of diverse religious groups in Generation Y suggests that 37 percent of Jewish 18-to-25-year-olds see their religion as being “very important in their lives,” compared to

56 percent of African Americans and 63 percent of Muslims in the same age groups. The attitudes closest to Jews in some ways were those of Asian-Americans—an ethnicity which has seen rising rates of intermarriage with Jews in recent years. When queried about the importance of “your ethnic origin,” 21 percent of Jews and 23 percent of Asian-Americans ranked it “very important,” compared to 50 percent of African Americans, 32 percent of Hispanics, and 44 percent of Muslims. Politically, like adult American Jews in general, young adult Jews, according to this survey, are much more likely than other ethnoreligious groups to report that their political beliefs are “very important” to them, 38 percent, compared to 17 percent of Asians, 23 percent of African Americans, 27 percent of Hispanics, and 29 percent of Muslims.⁵³

One subject of obvious concern to this analysis is the attitudes that young Jewish adults express about goals for eventual marriage and family. This question is included in the ongoing evaluations of the birthright israel project (which brings college students to Israel on a free ten-day trip) and also in a recent study of college students who were raised in Conservative Jewish homes. The 2004 birthright israel evaluations used college students who did not go to Israel as a control group. They found that fewer than one-third (30 percent) of students who did not go to Israel said it was of “very much” importance to them to marry a Jew. Students who did go on birthright israel, when asked before the program, had virtually the same proportion attaching importance to inmarriage: 31 percent. Immediately after the birthright israel trip that percentage had gone up to 36 percent, and, perhaps surprisingly, one year after the trip the percentage had risen to 40 percent.⁵⁴ The study of Conservative-raised college students asked, “How important is it for you to marry somebody Jewish?” In 2003 slightly over half (51 percent) of these students answered “very important,” and another 36 percent answered “somewhat important.” The last 13 percent said that marrying somebody Jewish was “not at all important.”⁵⁵ Other studies have suggested that not every single per-

son who says it is “very important” to marry a Jew does actually marry a Jew—but almost no singles who say it is not important end up marrying Jews.

The REBOOT study, birthright israel evaluations, and the survey of Conservative-raised college students are all statistical studies. Different types of insights emerge from qualitative studies, such as the American Jewish Committee’s two collections of personal statements, *Twentysomething and Jewish: Personal Reflections on Jewish Identity* (1994) and *Identity: Young Jews Speak Out* (2005). In addition, a very interesting and suggestive qualitative study of Jewish “emerging adults” is currently being conducted by Brandeis graduate student Beth Cousens, a Wexner Graduate Fellow studying the impact of Jewish education on young adults. She does her research as a participant observer at the Riverway Project, an outreach and education program designed to connect adults in their twenties and thirties to Judaism and eventually to Temple Israel, a large Boston-area Reform temple that sponsors and runs the program.

It should be noted that the Riverway Project does not have the name of Temple Israel attached to it, precisely because young adult Jews often avoid programs that are overtly attached to congregations. (The names of individual informants have, of course, been changed.) Cousens spends hours attending Riverway Project events and has informal conversations—as well as structured formal interviews—with couples who participate in various classes and activities. Some of her observations are included in this report.

The Riverway Project sponsors approximately six events a month that center on ritual observance, Friday night Shabbat services, and Torah study. Its director, Rabbi Jeremy S. Morrison, envisions synagogue communities in which 21 to 35 is not a missing age group. He sees adults in their twenties and thirties engaging with Judaism through serious text study and deep contemplation of Judaism’s big questions: What is God? What is Torah’s truth? He wants the Riverway Project to help constituents find meaning in Jewish worship

through song and music and to help them create community over Shabbat and holiday meals. Woven through these projects and goals is Rabbi Morrison’s clearly articulated philosophy of open debate about Judaism as multivalent in many aspects of life. After three years, the Riverway Project has a mailing list of over 900 individuals. Approximately one-third of these individuals have joined the congregation.⁵⁶

Young interfaith couples interviewed from the Riverway Project, in contrast to many of the older couples previously interviewed, see pressure to convert as a negative. Both the Jewish and non-Jewish partners appreciated that there is not pressure from the clergy at Temple Israel or from their families to convert. Some non-Jewish participants said that potential premarriage pressure from in-laws to convert to Judaism would have ruined relationships with future in-law parents. They also would be “turned off to Judaism” if they were approached about conversion by clergy or even family friends. These strong anti-pressure feelings, which were articulated far less often by an older and somewhat more settled generation, seemed particularly characteristic of the Gen-Xers interviewed.

There are several reasons why most Riverway Project interviewees decided not to pursue conversion. One participant, Marlow, grew up in rural North Carolina as the child of nonpracticing Chinese Buddhists. He was the target of proselytization from his neighbors and peers until he left home to attend college. Marlow says that his own lack of religious beliefs and discomfort with Christianity made it easy to agree to having a Jewish household and raising Jewish children. He believes it would be dishonest and awkward to convert when he does not believe in God, but is happy that his children will be raised in a faith tradition (in contrast to his own upbringing). The same is true for Molly, the daughter of “lapsed Catholics,” whose fiancé is Jewish. Molly and Jack had been engaged for only two weeks at the time of the interview, but she said that she agreed to raise her children as Jews so they would not be “directionless,” without a faith tradition. She said that she has difficulty with religion because of the “mixed mes-

sages” sent by her parents, and does not want to put her future children in the same position. Molly’s “baggage” from childhood has left her hesitant to identify with a formal religion herself, and she has yet to join Jack in synagogue or other Jewish-related activities.

Religious differences have not been completely worked out, even after some young couples marry. Conrad, whose wife, Gemma, attended Jewish day school for ten years and comes from a strongly Jewish-identified family, for example, has not converted and does not plan to. He was raised Catholic, but now considers himself an atheist and is not comfortable with religion. Conrad describes their relationship as “monofaith” and admits that the burden for raising their infant son in a Jewish home will reside with Gemma. However, he insists that he and his wife continue to celebrate Christmas. Conrad describes Christmas in his family as “the one day in which the family commits to spending together” and wants his son to have the same experience, complete with a “secular” Christmas tree. Gemma is uncomfortable with the tree, and said the Christmas situation was “bumpy.” Nevertheless, she has acquiesced resentfully to Conrad’s strong feelings, and they have had a tree in their home since their wedding three years ago. Disagreements over faith and religious practice show that an agreement to raise children Jewish does not ease the differences between Jews and their non-Jewish spouses, especially among younger couples.

Part III: Conversion in Jewish Life

The Impact of Conversion on Individual and Family Identification

Conversion into Judaism is almost always a process in the contemporary American context. Some of the people interviewed in *Choosing Jewish* had been thinking about becoming Jews ever since they were young adolescents. Others didn’t consider the possibility of converting until they began seriously dating a Jew, or until their first child was born. However, regardless of when they first started thinking about choosing Judaism and the Jewish people, becoming a Jew was an idea they worked with over a period of time, frequently going back and forth in their own minds. It took months at the very least, and sometimes years, until born non-Jewish informants were ready to make a decision to convert into Judaism.

Non-Jewish spouses who don’t convert before the marriage often “live a Jewish life” for several years before they decide to convert formally. Moreover, the notion of a conversion that is not part of an organic process is offensive even for many who eventually chose to convert into Judaism. As Chuck Kerry put it:

One thing kind of annoyed me with the rabbi down in Macon who wouldn’t marry us. He was like, “If you convert now, I could do it with no problem?” I [thought] ... does that make me a better person now? If you like me, you like me, and you can do it. It seemed kind of stupid to say, “Oh, if we just do this real quick, it’s not a problem—whatever.”

Couples often reinforce their decisions for or against conversion by socializing with couples whose decisions match theirs and thus can

serve as role models. A group of non-Jewish husbands of Jewish wives, for example, socialize frequently, and have taken to calling themselves the “Goy Luck Club.” In contrast, after conversion, many Jews by Choice feel increasingly comfortable spending time with unambiguously Jewish families, instead of with mostly intermarried families. These social networks work to further increase the Jewish profile of the family.

Here is what Jackie Gheary, whose husband, Charles, converted before their marriage fifteen years ago, said about why she is closer to completely Jewish families than to her mixed-married friends:

They go to the girls’ families for the Jewish holidays, but clearly it’s not a Jewish home. Two of them have Christmas trees at the holiday time. One of them sent me a card with their kids with Santa Claus. The rabbi actually named their kids, but they were also baptized or something.... I think it’s very confusing, and I think you should choose something, whatever it is, because to do a little of everything doesn’t put this kid anywhere. And I think that is what happens. If someone doesn’t convert, I think that issue is always there, that it is a household of two religions. What happens when there’s a mishmash of everything? Where do they fall? Unless one is very strong-willed and can take the initiative.

Jews by Choice, as we have noted, often become not only more knowledgeable but also more religiously observant than their born-Jewish spouses and their Jewish in-law families. Because the discovery of Judaism is for some of them a passionate journey, they are often attracted to more demanding wings of Judaism than the wing in which they were originally converted. Craig Semple is one of those converts. Although he was happily converted within Reform Judaism with a rabbi he really likes and respects, he has recently become close to a young French Orthodox rabbi in the community. He spends much of his discretionary time studying Judaic subjects. Craig has tried to become completely Sabbath-observant, but relaxed his observance when his born-Jewish wife said that Craig’s Judaism was “over the top,” and that “peace in the household is also a Jewish value.” She

complains, “My family says that if I had only married a Jew, I wouldn’t have to deal with all of this.” Here are Craig’s own words:

I probably would have done my conversion differently, even though it was a wonderful experience. I probably would have done an Orthodox conversion, because you are expected to learn a lot more when it’s Orthodox than when it’s Reform. It’s light-years ahead. I don’t know, it’s like a band-aid when it’s a Reform conversion. It doesn’t make you work hard enough or learn hard enough.

[Orthodox Judaism contains] hundreds of years of tradition, and it doesn’t break. It’s what was handed down and what the sages handed down, and it never deviates. It’s that tradition, to me, that’s so important. If it really weren’t for ... the Orthodox, they kept it alive. Good or bad, or whether you believe in it or not, ... it’s what has kept the boundaries of Judaism alive.

Craig also has negative comments about the “relevant” Reform teen education classes:

The class we did together just didn’t work out, and the kids just bailed on it. They hated it. It was about marriage and cults, and a really strange kind of topic. So we started this Torah study class, aiming it at them, like, “What does this mean in your life?” And we’ve done some Shabbatons [weekend retreats organized around the celebration of the Sabbath] and it stuck.

In a powerful display of overcoming turf differences, Craig’s Reform rabbi has welcomed the French Orthodox rabbi into his temple and made room for him to teach every Wednesday night.

Nevertheless, conversionary households often continue negotiating holiday and other religious issues with their Christian extended families. Although Christian families are much less likely to try to introduce Christian practices into a family that has chosen to be Jewish than they are into an interfaith family, testing behavior often continues for decades. Jackie Gheary told a story about a “winter holiday” meal she volunteered to have in her home about fifteen years after Charles’s conversion and their marriage. She made it very clear to the

whole family beforehand that “we don’t have Christmas decorations.” Ignoring these instructions, when Charles’s family arrived in several cars, Charles’s older sister, Clare, came prepared to make Christmas happen. Jackie recalls:

Clare took a big bag out of her car, and I started to shake. I couldn’t really believe that she didn’t even say, “Jackie, I have something in the car.” She didn’t say anything. She just takes it out like it’s nothing—it was a nativity scene. And the aunts and everyone are looking. I think one of the aunts had made it years ago. And I looked at her, and she said, “Oh, you know, I’m taking it home with me later; it’s just for now. It’s for your kids.” I said, “My kids don’t need it. My kids don’t want it.” I’m sure I was quite rude. And she said, “OK, OK.” That was it. She put it in the car.

I am actually pretty close with the rabbi, and I saw him Monday, and I had to tell him the whole story. He said he has to put this in his scrapbook of stories. I don’t think it was intentional or hurtful in any way. She’s a very sweet person. I just don’t think she thought about what it meant. I think for her it was something very pretty, and why couldn’t I take it? It was an awful feeling. It really was. Do you think she was trying to see how far she could get?

Although conversion does not erase all tension over holidays between the conversionary household and the non-Jewish extended family, systematic research conducted on intermarried and conversionary households over the past three decades has demonstrated that conversion makes a profound difference in individual and family identification, behaviors, and attitudes. As noted previously, individual Jews by Choice and conversionary households are not a monolithic group. Nevertheless, beyond the conscious decisions people make, conversion opens the way for a pro-Jewish drift. Mixed marriage opens the way for a pro-Christian drift. Part of the reason for a pro-Jewish or pro-Christian trajectory is related to the impact of the norms of social networks: Once they have converted, Jews by Choice are more likely to make more Jewish friends and to take a more active role in Jewish organizations. For many, conversion also lessens feelings of

conflict about accommodating two religious traditions. Converts and their families typically observe more Jewish religious rituals and holiday celebrations, and the majority confine Christian celebrations to visits to the extended family and friends.

Many converts are encouraged by the goal of becoming Jews just like their spouse and their children. “It meant that now we were all one of a kind, rather than Daddy being one thing and Mommy and the kids being another,” as one converted father put it. Significantly, many converts articulate the belief that now their families have religious integrity. Convert Craig Semple remembered the way he and his Jewish wife, Jenny Semple, talked about religion before they were married:

We agreed, before we got married, to raise our kids Jewish. My whole deal was, if we’re going to do that, it’s like you’ve got to practice what you preach. She can’t be Jewish and I’m not, and we can’t *not* have a Jewish household, so before we got married, I started converting. . . . We do Shabbat, and we teach the kids and read to the kids, and that kind of stuff. . . . My son [and I], actually started a class with the rabbi, and every other Monday he teaches me and a few other kids Torah with their parents.

The overt and subtle effects of conversion help to explain why statistics on how convert families act shows that they are much more like inmarried families than like mixed-married families. Being the same as one’s children was one of the most powerful psychological incentives for conversion. That choice can have an enormous impact even on adult children. Ed Case, director of InterfaithFamily.com and for years a passionate advocate of the feasibility of raising Jewish children in a nonconversionary mixed-married household, was recently surprised by the impact of conversion on his own household. According to a Jewish Telegraphic Agency article by Sue Fishkoff:

Case’s wife converted only last fall, after 30 years of marriage. . . . But Case was taken aback when his college-age daughter said that while she feels Jewish, it’s “not the first thing” she thinks about. “She said, ‘If it were, it would only make me feel more different

than my mother [who was not yet converted] than I want to be,” Case says. “When my wife heard that, she said, ‘I thought I gave her permission to be Jewish.’”⁵⁷

The Case family’s experience matches closely the findings of American Jewish Committee-sponsored intermarriage research most recently reported in *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage*. As Jewishly oriented as a mixed-married household may be, children are very aware that their parents are connected to two different faith traditions. When they reach the teen years and young adulthood, they often feel uncomfortable or guilty about preferring one parent’s religion over another. It feels to them as though they are slighting the parent along with the religion. This is one of the reasons that the majority of children of intermarried families tend to identify as “half and half” or “no religion” rather than as Jews.

Children of conversionary households, in contrast, grow up in households that are distinguished by a constellation of Jewish behaviors and attitudes. They have relatively high rates of synagogue membership and ritual performance, and are more likely than inmarried couples to actually attend synagogues on a regular basis. Their children are almost as likely as the children of inmarried households to receive formal Jewish education. The majority of conversionary households do not incorporate Christian observances into their home location.

When conversion was examined with reference to denomination, Medding et al. found in the late 1980s that synagogue affiliation was reported by 36 percent of mixed-married, 54 percent of conversionary, and 68 percent of inmarried Conservative couples, compared to 21 percent of mixed-married, 57 percent of conversionary, and 59 percent of Reform inmarried couples.⁵⁸ These average rates of affiliation, already impressive at well over half of conversionary families, mask the broad range of behaviors found in conversionary households and the multifaceted Jewish profiles of Activist converts. Those conversionary families that affiliate with the most activist populations

within each type of synagogue replicate the norms of the social groups associated with those institutions, including the Jewish educational norms. They often produce highly Jewishly educated and identified children who can speak with equanimity about spending time with “the Christian side of my father’s family” without feeling that Christian observances are an internalized part of their own religious heritage. While this outcome may not be considered optimally desirable from the standpoint of American inclusiveness and familial multiculturalism, it is a highly desirable goal from the standpoint of the cultural transmission of a minority culture—that is, from a Jewish survivalist perspective.

The Cumulative Effect of Secularism and Non-Jewish Family Members

Most Jews who intermarry today are not necessarily fleeing identification with the Jewish community, as was often the case in previous generations. Many declare that they are proud to be Jewish and want to maintain their identification as Jews. However, what they feel about their own identification is not the same thing as their goals for their children. As noted earlier, only about one-third of intermarried Jews intend to raise their children as Jews. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the statistics show a Jewishly negative cumulative effect of having one non-Jewish parent which grows from generation to generation.

First, it should be noted that Jewish intentionality is extremely important in the quest to raise Jewish children in interfaith households. As Bruce Phillips notes in his “Children of Intermarriage” study, “[O]nly those intermarried Jews who identified as Jewish by religion raised Jewish children in intermarriages; those who identified as secular or with some other religion did not raise Jewish children.” Second, the religion of the grandparents and of siblings has an effect on children raised in an interfaith family. Children whose Jewish parent has two Jewish parents and all Jewish siblings are much more likely to be raised as Jews. Conversely, second- or third-generation

children of intermarriage (grandparents and/or great-grandparents were intermarried, and/or has non-Jewish aunts and uncles) are much less likely to be raised as Jews.⁵⁹ Thus, among interfaith families who say they are raising Jewish children, not all succeed in raising Jewishly identified children. However, within the two-thirds of interfaith families who are not attempting to raise Jewish children, very few in fact grow up to become Jewishly identifying adults.

Finally, several studies show that Jewish secularism is negatively associated with the likelihood of raising Jewishly identified children. Jews involved in mixed marriages are more likely to describe themselves as “secular” than non-Jews who are married to Jews: More than half of Jews with children who are married to non-Jews describe themselves as “secular.” In contrast, only one in ten non-Jews married to Jews in households with children is self-described as “secular.”⁶⁰ This creates households that almost universally include Christian holiday observances of some type, albeit frequently with a lack of religious or spiritual context. It seems likely that part of the reason that conversion makes such a big difference in how children are raised is that it dramatically increases the likelihood that the family will hereafter celebrate only Jewish, rather than Jewish and Christian holidays, and also because it effectively moves the two spouses, both the born Jew and the born non-Jew, out of the secular category. Typically, both spouses are engaged in some type of a spiritual journey as the non-Jewish spouse travels along the path to conversion. Thus, conversion classes and similar programming have a potentially transformative effect on the entire household.

Professionals Creating Jewish Connections

Tendencies toward secularism and a rise in non-Jewish connections have de-Judaizing effects that persist and increase from generation to generation. Secularism and non-Jewish connections are demonstrably increased by rising rates of intermarriage. In response, over the past few decades a new Jewish “industry” has emerged: the outreach organ-

ization, staffed by the outreach professional. Within various segments of the American Jewish religious and communal world, outreach professionals have taken on the express task of reaching out to interfaith couples and opening doors to Jewish connections. Some of these professionals openly work toward conversion into Judaism for the non-Jewish partner or spouse of a Jew; Conservative or Orthodox-run Jewish projects are more likely to fall into the clearly conversionary category. Other outreach professionals and projects, in contrast, simply try to provide Jewish enrichment without necessarily advocating conversion as an end goal. Reform-run and nonsectarian communal outreach projects are more likely to fall into the nonconversion-espousing category. Some outreach programs are local, some national.

The *Choosing Jewish* research team conducted interviews with persons working professionally within outreach and conversion programs. In the following section, selections from those interviews are supplemented with statements from other professionals available in print and on the Internet, with the goal of providing an indication of the range of professional attitudes and approaches, viewed in the context of transformed and diverse communal norms.

Professionals reaching out to and educating interfaith dating couples, interfaith families, and/or assimilated or underaffiliated Jews might be said to have two “clients”—the populations they reach out to and educate, and the broad body politic of Jews. As they work to create relationships between individuals, families, and the Judaic social, cultural and spiritual heritage, some outreach workers—particularly those oriented toward nonsectarian settings and toward Reform Judaism—express a primary advocacy for the people to whom they reach out. In contrast, other conversion-g geared outreach professionals—particularly those embedded in Modern Orthodox or Conservative religious communities—express primary responsibility to cultural continuity concerns within affiliated Jewish communities.

The choice of primary orientation has an enormous impact on the perceptions of outreach professionals. Those who feel responsible

to cultural continuity within the affiliated Jewish community emphasize the ability of their outreach programs to culminate in conversion. Those who feel a primary responsibility to their outreach population, on the other hand, focus on meeting unaffiliated individuals “where they are,” and often identify with their attitudes. When stronger connections are not forthcoming, outreach-population advocates sometimes place blame on the affiliated Jewish community for alienating the outreach population. Some—but not all—of the professionals working in the outreach effort might classify themselves as secular Jews, and thus identify closely with some of the attitudes of their clients. Much of the professional outreach community falls somewhere between these two poles on an attitudinal continuum, articulating concern for both, but feeling somewhat closer to one or the other primary responsibility.

One example of a professional who is primarily oriented to Jewish continuity concerns is Debbie Coltin, executive director of the Jewish InMarriage Initiative—JIMI. The American Jewish Committee sponsored a Coalition for the Support of Inmarriage, and JIMI grew out of that coalition. “Our goals,” Coltin states, “are to encourage Jews to marry Jews, to encourage parents in interfaith relationships to raise exclusively Jewish children, and to encourage conversion for spouses of Jews who aren’t currently Jewish.” Coltin heads up a Continuity Plan and Interfaith Outreach Committee on the North Shore near Boston, Massachusetts. As she discusses her role as “the architect of the Continuity Plan, of the Interfaith Outreach Plan,” and as a director of and teacher in the two plans, she is quite clear about her goals. She directs a number of informal educational activities whose end goal is to create good feelings about being Jewish among teenagers and young adults, with the hope that they will seek out other Jews for romance and marriage. When an interfaith relationship develops, Coltin’s strategy is to encourage conversion, preferably before marriage, but conversion after marriage is also seen as a desirable direction. Where no conversion has occurred or is likely to occur, Coltin works

toward the establishment of a home with exclusively Jewish religious activities.

Coltin has created programs called “Why Be Jewish” and “Why Marry Jewish” that encourage both parents and young people to talk about critical issues. She says, “The program gave parents and others in attendance the tools to answer our kids’ tough questions.... It puts ownership back in the Jewish community.” Coltin notes that her program has been generously funded by a local philanthropist, and suggests that similar programs could be launched in other regions of the country with similar funding.

Although the program’s goal is clearly conversion, the class is called “Introduction to Judaism” rather than “Conversion Class,” because Coltin estimates that only 20 percent of attendees know for sure when they begin the class that they intend to convert. “It is for those who are thinking about conversion, those who are exploring Judaism, and for those Jews who have been disengaged and unaffiliated and know they’re Jewish, but don’t know what that means or haven’t had a formal education.” Not surprisingly, most of those who enroll are involved in interfaith relationships. Ages tend toward young marrieds, dating couples, and parents of school-age children; among the conversions that result from the class are children living in the families of class participants. For those who already have children, Coltin notes, an upcoming bar/bat mitzvah is often a catalyst for conversion. Significantly in terms of communal policy decisions, offering programs close to the residential area where converts live is important:

One gentleman who did convert [had] always wanted to do it, and his daughter’s bat mitzvah was coming up. The fact that the class and the conversion process were offered on the North Shore meant a lot to him, because of the time commitment. He said he might not have gone through with it if it hadn’t been offered on the North Shore.

Coltin also mentions that the North Shore community subsidizes the costs of conversion. Without that financial help, the costs of

the course (\$500), books (\$100), and conversion (\$150 for women, \$225 for men) might certainly be a deterring factor for some would-be converts. “For the Jewish community to say, ‘We want you to be a part of our community’ is a very powerful, welcoming statement to these people,” Coltin notes. Although the program has one major generous donor, federation gifts have increased “by over a thousand new donors” because of communal satisfaction with the program, according to Coltin. The donor has also been funding youth trips to Israel that predated birthright Israel; Coltin reports that she herself went on the second such trip more than thirty years ago.

Similar attitudes are expressed by Rabbi Judy Kummer and Elana Perkins, both of whom work with potential converts in primarily Conservative venues. The Jewish Discovery Institute in Boston incorporates two entities, the Gerim Institute and new congregational Keruv work. Because these programs attract many people who are seriously considering conversion, the issues raised by participants often relate directly to their experiences on the road to conversion. Most of the couples are young, and a substantial proportion of them are considering conversion before marriage, although the group also includes some older couples who are undergoing post-marriage conversions. Some of their issues center on decisions about what level of Jewish observance to adopt, as Elana Perkins describes:

People are making choices. The process of change and adopting a new lifestyle is an issue. Some people are very focused on how to adopt new rituals. Some people want to keep kosher, want to observe Shabbat. It is helpful for them to talk about what it’s like, what their decision-making process is, how they take that on. Of course, different people do it in different ways, and they relate to their social environment differently.

Other issues concern relationships with parents, extended families, and friends:

Who you do it with, and how do you explain to people? It’s not uncommon for people not to have told everyone in their life about [their] conversion. Sometimes people haven’t told their families

that they’re planning to convert. Sometimes they’ve told their family, but they haven’t told their friends.

One new development in Perkins’s experience is the proliferation of narratives about anti-Semitism.

I think it’s very indicative of the times. The last group spent the whole session dealing with all the anti-Semitism they’ve encountered since they’d decided to convert. People who were born Christian in this country haven’t had to deal with that. How do you respond to it? How do you live with it? What [do] I tell my children? They are going to have to deal with that! How do we do it? How do we protect our children? How do we handle it?

Many of the couples who come to the Gerim portion of the program Perkins manages are committed to conversion. She observes:

The people who are converting tend to seem very excited about converting; there’s so much positive energy. They’re making a change. They’re excited about it. They may not be sure about how to do it, but there’s a lot of good feeling.

Perkins believes that part of this “good feeling” may be self-selection, since the converts are choosing to convert through the Conservative movement, which is perceived as “being more religious,” or having stricter standards, so that couples have worked through most personal ambivalence before they begin. This extends itself to resolving religious issues within their homes, where Perkins notes:

The December dilemma is not as much of an issue as it used to be; people have already sort of figured it out. People have a lot of role models. They fall very quickly into, “We can go visit my family for Christmas.”

The area that remains painful for the couples Perkins sees are issues around dealing with parents and extended family. Jewish families tend to eagerly accept the convert into Judaism and the family. However, non-Jewish families may have negative feelings about their children leaving Christianity. Some of these families are “mourning the loss of their child who is becoming Jewish.” Perkins observes:

People tend to be very sensitive to wanting their parents and families to feel good. They ask, “How do I help them realize I’m not rejecting them? How do I help them feel comfortable at the wedding?”

Couples who enroll in classes through the Jewish Community Center, unlike the Conservative-oriented Gerim program, tend to be younger and less sure about their religious-cultural decisions. As Perkins comments:

They aren’t involved in synagogues, and are less religiously inclined. They tend not to have thought things through as much. They’re at an earlier stage in figuring out their role of religion.

Perkins feels that with this group “my job is to raise the issues for them, what we need to think about, what would be helpful to think about.” However, Perkins is clear that “we don’t prescribe one position or another.”

Rabbi Judy Kummer manages many educational and logistical details of conversion for Boston’s United Synagogue (Conservative) organization. Most people who come to study under her supervision become part of the program with a “sponsoring rabbi,” who later often attends the conversion, which is presided over by a *beit din* (rabbinical court) composed of three rabbis. Kummer comments that the “*beit din* creates a very joyous, celebratory environment at the conversion, which alleviates the anxiety that many potential converts feel.”

Rabbi Kummer is especially aware of feelings of anxiety or concern from potential converts, because her job is to interview potential converts before the conversion procedures take place and to make all the logistical arrangements for a ritual circumcision, in the case of males who convert, as well as for the ritual immersion in a *mikveh* for men, women, and child converts.

In the center of the spectrum in terms of traditionalism and emphasis on conversion is popular writer Anita Diamant, an enthusiastic and vibrantly creative advocate of bringing born non-Jews—and their genes—into the Jewish people, preferably, but not exclusively,

through conversion. She urges the Jewish community to “show honor” to converts as individuals and as a group. Diamant has gained celebrity in the greater Boston community not only through her feminist novel, *The Red Tent*, but also through her galvanizing role in the creation of a state-of-the-art community *mikveh*, “Mayyim Hayyim,” which is used for conversions as well as for diverse celebrations, healing ceremonies, and life-cycle events, in addition to more traditional *mikveh* usages. Diamant has extensive experience with converts into Judaism on a personal level (she is proud and happy that her husband is a Jew by Choice), as well as through the creation of Mayyim Hayyim; indeed, the perceived need for a transdenominational *mikveh* for user-friendly conversions was one of Diamant’s main motivations in fund-raising for and building the facility.

Diamant is particularly eloquent in discussing the reasons for after-the-marriage conversions, which she notes are often linked to a life-cycle event, “often a bar or bat mitzvah, a pregnancy, the birth of a child.” She notes, “Sometimes it’s a trip to Israel, and sometimes it’s the example of seeing other people in your congregation or community do it, and you think, ‘It could work for me.’”

She talks about a friend from Chicago, married to a cantor, who could not bring herself to convert before marriage because she didn’t feel Jewish. They have been married for ten years and have two children, and now she is preparing to convert, because now being Jewish feels meaningful to her. Diamant comments:

It’s this moment, this liminal moment, of transition in life, and it’s embracing what your children are embracing, and you realize, that, after all, I’ve already made this decision. The image I had a long time ago is that when people used to convert, it was like a trapeze jump—you were leaping from one to another. And this is much more like a shift of weight. You’ve already shifted, you’re on both feet, but you were sort of on one foot, but now it becomes clear to you: “I’ve really moved to this other foot already.” So it really becomes an affirmation rather than a conversion—which is interesting language for a lot of people.

Because of her close relationships with many Jews by Choice, Diamant is especially sensitive to converts' needs for a public acknowledgment of what a "big deal" conversion is for them. Diamant urges congregations to create some kind of a "big hoo-ha" that shares the fact that "their hearts are in it, their hearts are going crazy." She also wishes that converts had more venues for "loving follow-up" support services in congregations and Jewish communal settings—a need she believes is mostly unmet.

I think congregations should have at least an annual support dinner, parties for people, especially new people, mentoring programs, so that somebody who's been through this before you can help you get through your first Easter dinner with the family... What kinds of greeting cards do you send at Christmas and Hanukkah? They're little things, but it's really nice to have someone to talk to. Should you feel guilty humming Christmas carols on the radio? Looking in a mirror and saying, "I don't think I look Jewish. How long does it take before I feel that I'm seeing a Jew in the mirror?" These conversations are really important. Not doing them is like bar mitzvahing a kid and saying, "OK, you're Jewish. You're finished. I'll see you at your wedding." That's stupid. We know that's not the right thing to do—same thing with people who are converting.

Inclusiveness, along with freedom of choice, is a sacred value for many leaders in the Reform religious community. This emphasis often contributes to an ethic and an ethos that downplay conversion as a privileged outcome. For example, Paula Brody, director of outreach programs for the greater Boston metropolitan area of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), draws a "stark distinction" between the Gerim Institute and her Introduction to Judaism class:

We would like to see that people want to become Jewish because they fall in love with Judaism, not because they've fallen in love with someone who's Jewish. We feel that it's our responsibility, during the course of the sixteen weeks that they're studying with us, to have our best faculty teaching and really engage people, and hopefully nurture that process. It is all about Judaism. We also

hope—whereas there are some people who are considering conversion when they enroll in the class, there are definitely people who do not consider it beforehand, but are actively considering conversion when they finish the class. That's sort of the process—not actively pushing conversion, as much as teaching Judaism and love for Judaism.

Brody, who has worked for close to fifteen years in the area of outreach to interfaith families, emphasizes that most of the programs she runs do not overtly gear themselves toward conversion. Many of the persons who choose to take classes do consider conversion, but the Introduction to Judaism class, for example, "is not marketed as a conversion class."

Rabbi Jonah Pesner of Reform Temple Israel in Boston consciously creates an environment in his congregation that sends "a message of inclusion," a fact that he feels is partly responsible for their very diverse congregation. He also credits geography: "Temple Israel is incredibly diverse because we're at the crossroads of urban/suburban, economic diversity, because Massachusetts is so liberal and Boston is so liberal, gender, race, people of color, people who are gay or lesbian, seekers—we really get everything." The temple's policy toward interfaith families is to encourage them in their Jewish journeys, to welcome conversion, but not in any way to make conversion a privileged conclusion to that journey. One of the factors discouraging conversion, Pesner admits, is a simple lack of time. He could facilitate many more conversions if he had more time to devote to this process.

At the least traditionalist end of the spectrum is outreach worker Robin Margolis, who identifies heart and soul with adult children of intermarriage, partially because she quite literally shared a world with them "for many years," when she "self-defined as a 'Jew of mixed parentage' or a 'Jew with a Christian father.'" Robin describes herself as the senior lay leader of a Jewish Renewal havurah (bethshkinah.org) and the facilitator of a new international organization for adult children and other descendants of intermarriage, the Half-Jews Network

(halfjews.net). She has worked in outreach in various capacities for two decades, with a goal of helping each individual person of Jewish background to feel fully Jewish:

But I have spoken over the last twenty years to hundreds of children of intermarriage—I ran a national organization for them in the late 1980s and early 1990s before starting my current group. I was forced to recognize that many of our fellow matrilineals and patrilineals just don't identify as full Jews. They feel it completely negates their other "half." This seems to include whole groups of Jewish-identified ones, who are currently checking into Hillel groups that they personally have labeled: Half-Jews, The Goyim, and Religious Mutts. They chose these titles, not their Hillel staff. Whatever the problems with the terminology, if we're going to outreach our fellow children of intermarriage, don't we need to meet them where they are and as they define themselves?⁶¹

In her concern that "matrilineals and patrilineals" identify "as full Jews," Margolis seems unconcerned that they deliberately choose names that symbolize their unwillingness to "negate their other half"—names that publicly declare the fact that they are not committed to the exclusive practice of Judaism as their sole religion.

Conclusion: Advocating for the Creation of Jewish Homes

Choosing Jewish opened with a summary of positive and negative feelings about conversion which, perhaps counterintuitively, emanate from both traditionalist and liberal segments of Jewish communities. As noted, some liberal observers assert that conversion is superfluous—"the critical point is that you live as a Jew, not that you formally convert." At the same time, some traditionalists assume that conversion is ineffective—"a convert never really feels like and acts like a 'real' Jew." Beyond these very different assessments of the advisability of conversion, *Choosing Jewish* has shown that ideas of what comprises conversion range as widely as—and are related to—ideas of what comprises Jewish identity itself. Indeed, our glance backward at the talmudic emphasis on the potential convert's acceptance of the concept of Jewish law as an obligation spotlights the fact that widespread contemporary rejection of the concept of obligation as a cornerstone of Judaism among liberal Western Jews has a profound impact on their understanding of conversion into Judaism as well.

Despite these religious differences, however, and despite reservations expressed by detractors along the Jewish religious spectrum, research data unequivocally demonstrate that converts bring energetic Jewish commitments, not only to the Jewish families they help to create, but also to the Jewish communities in which they live. The great majority of converts become members of the Jewish community and display levels of involvement that match those of born Jews. Together, households with two Jewish parents (whether born Jews or Jews by Choice) make up the practicing and practical core of the Jewish community. Among others exploring these dramatically differing levels of

Jewish involvements, Steven M. Cohen demonstrates that of Jews ages 25 to 39 with children, 96 percent of Jews who are married to Jews attend Passover Seders, compared to only 46 percent of Jews married to non-Jews. Furthermore, Cohen's statistics highlight the inaccuracy of common contemporary Jewish communal defeatist assumptions that intermarriage is a tidal wave outnumbering completely Jewish households: He finds that households of Jews married to Jews comprise the largest group, 39 percent of the Jewish population ages 25 to 39; "followed in turn by the nonmarried with 36 percent; and the intermarried with 25 percent."⁶²

Choosing Jewish asserts that three different models of converts have differing relationships to and effects on their families and communities. One cohort—Activist converts—demonstrates levels of connectedness that far surpass those of many born Jews. As a group, Jews by Choice tend to relate primarily to Judaism as a religion. Earlier scholarship indicated that converts relate less to ethnic or peoplehood aspects of Judaism. However, *Choosing Jewish* data demonstrate that Activist converts are often attracted precisely to peoplehood, to Jews as an ethnic group, even before they convert into Judaism. Many of them identify deeply with the Jewish people, not only in the United States but also in Israel and around the world, and feel themselves to be connected to the destiny of the Jews. Accommodating converts have lower measurable levels of Jewish behavior and attitudes than Activist converts, but they are still in many ways comparable with moderately affiliated born Jews.

Ambivalent converts, on the other hand, resemble the majority of intermarried non-Jews, in that they retain or return to a sense of connection to their non-Jewish ethnic or religious antecedents. We must emphasize that the clear divisions between differing types of converts in the *Choosing Jewish* interview data demonstrate that the Judaic apathy of Ambivalent converts in no way reflects on the involvements of Activist and Accommodating converts. Although concern about ultimate quality of Jewishness in the households of Ambivalent con-

verts is not misplaced, one can rightly point out that a similar level of concern might be applied to the households of unattached, ambivalent born Jews. Similarly, while ambivalent born Jews do not, typically, introduce elements of other religions into their households (as some Ambivalent converts do), they also frequently do not particularly introduce Judaism into their households either, whether through their own behaviors or through providing their children with Jewish education.

Conversion makes it far more likely that children of one born Jew and one born non-Jew will be raised in unambiguously Jewish homes. In contrast, identifying with more than one religion in the household—or even identifying as a “secular Jew,” rather than as “Jewish by religion”—makes it almost certain that children will not be raised as Jews or identify as Jews when they reach adulthood, as research has demonstrated. The cumulative effect of other religions in the home and of secularism in the home increases the likelihood of non-Jewish identification from generation to generation.⁶³ The only positive effect of secularism, in terms of Judaic identification, occurs when the born non-Jew in an intermarried household describes him/herself as “secular” rather than as a practicing Christian.

The negative impact of Jewish secularism in all three types of Jewish households—inmarried, conversionary, and intermarried—is a critical issue for policy makers confronting the changed landscape of the American Jewish community. For example, some in the Jewish outreach industry suggest that more emphasis should be placed on “secular” Jewish identity and activities that appeal to secular Jews. The flip side of this suggestion, of course, is de-emphasis on activities that might be seen as “religious.” Advocates of secular programming support their view with statistics showing growing rates of secularism among well-educated white Americans, including Jews.⁶⁴ However, statistics also show that ideological secularism seems particularly unsuccessful in promoting the type of spiritual journeys that move in the direction of conversion and Jewish identification. Moreover,

attachments to religious ideas have held fairly constant among younger American Jews, while behaviors exhibiting ethnic loyalties have declined.⁶⁵ Creating policies that play down religious behaviors, Jewish intellectual skills and textual study, and spiritual development in order to please or attract secular populations may well result in Judaic impoverishment without any substantive commensurate gain.

The Impact of Individual Difference

Choosing Jewish interview research has revealed many aspects of intermarried and conversionary households that are not readily apparent from statistical surveys. The interviews with Guy and Varda Kirk, for example, are instructive on several levels. First, the history of Guy's grandfather, who enjoyed such ethnic Jewish foods as herring and potato pancakes, dramatically illustrates that culinary ethnicity does not transmit Jewish culture to the next generation, in the absence of more substantive Jewish contexts. Although Guy grew up eating piquant Jewish foods, he does not look back at the grandfather who converted into Christianity and think about reclaiming the Jewish heritage of his grandfather's childhood home. On the contrary, Guy feels guilty that he is "abandoning" the Christianity that his grandfather adopted and in which his parents raised him. Guy uses the language of abandonment over and over again when discussing the ethnoreligious character of his new married home.

Second, Guy's interview further illustrates the impact of individual differences. In the earlier *Jewish and Something Else* intermarriage interviews, the control group of conversionary and inmarried households included interviews with Gerhardt Giele and Kenneth Jackman, converts who had very similar growing-up stories to Guy Kirk's, but took their ethnoreligious lives in Jewishly intensive directions. Gerhardt Giele, raised by devoutly Christian German parents, declared his dissatisfaction with Christianity as a young adolescent. When told that his grandfather was Jewish, Giele stopped going to church and began a spiritual journey that resulted years later in the conversion

into Judaism of Giele, his African American wife, and their two daughters. In an unlikely departure from the majority culture, the Giele family now has been Jewishly affiliated and active for some time.

An even more striking comparison can be made with Kenneth Jackman, who, like Guy Kirk, was raised as a Christian and grew up to marry an Israeli woman, Batsheva. Kenneth Jackman (like Guy Kirk and Gerhardt Giele) discovered in his teens that he had a Jewish grandparent. Jackman became more and more interested in Judaism. He studied, and became increasingly observant and affiliated. Eventually he married Batsheva under a *huppah* (marriage canopy). He learned Hebrew and continued his Judaic studies. He is intensely Zionist; if anything, his Jewish nationalism surpasses that of his wife. Their daughter celebrated her bat mitzvah in a garden near the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. A few years ago he left his Conservative synagogue for a Modern Orthodox institution, which he attends weekly. Regular worship is his own doing, because his secular Israeli wife attends synagogue only on special occasions. His eldest son works for the Jewish community and recently married the daughter of Israelis. Neither of Jackman's two younger brothers identifies as a Jew. Both consider themselves secular Christians, and neither has married a Jew or has any connection to the Jewish community. One of Jackman's brothers, Ned, and his actively Protestant wife, Melinda, were also interviewed in the *Jewish and Something Else* study. Ned declared his puzzlement that they were selected for interviews, because, "this isn't really an intermarriage," he said. "I am a non-Jew married to a non-Jew. Having a Jewish grandparent doesn't make me Jewish."

What makes Judaism resonate for one sibling and not the other two? Why does one adolescent who discovers his Jewish antecedents think of them as roots and work hard to reclaim them, while another thinks of his Christian childhood as the tradition that should not be abandoned? Why does one grandchild of a Jew resist his Israeli wife's pressure to commit to a completely Jewish household, and regard the interweaving of Jewish religion, culture, ethnicity, and nationalism as

infuriating, while another adds Jewish religiosity to his secular Israeli wife's strong ethnic and nationalistic Jewishness? One Orthodox convert remembers her outwardly Christian Southern grandmother boiling her silverware every spring:

Once a year during spring cleaning, Big Mama (grandmother in Southernness) put all the dishes into her biggest pot with a rock and boiled them in spring water. She didn't know why, but said her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother all did it. So did my mother, and so did I [before conversion]. The first time as a convert that I kashered for Pesach, I schlepped my utensils down to the synagogue for dunking in their 60-gallon tub, and was confused when there was no rock in the water.⁶⁶

Much of this study traces interview narratives and systematically analyzes patterns. However, it is important to remember that some answers will not be found in sociological patterns because they reside, ultimately, in the mystery of human personality. Policy decisions are most effectively based on the patterns that research reveals rather than on the sparks of Jewishness that emerge improbably from unlikely places. Nevertheless, communal policies should make room for these surprising rediscoveries.

Despite diverse narratives of Jewish exploration, research shows that conversionary households are, by and large, interested in maintaining and increasing their Jewish connections. Synagogues and Jewish communal institutions have been called upon to provide more services and strategies for conversionary families. Recognizing that Jews by Choice must deal with psychosocial and familial complexities not faced by born Jews, many converts urge the Jewish community to create a mentoring community for converts and conversionary households. They urge rabbis, families, and community members to support the Jewish identity of Jews by Choice, who have been shown to bring new dimensions of energy and commitment to contemporary Jewish societies.

One challenge facing those who believe that the Jewish future

depends on promoting Jewish religious exclusivity rather than religious syncretism is finding strategies to advocate for conversion among interfaith couples, both before and after marriage. The first location for advocacy on behalf of Jewish homes is, obviously, Jewish homes of origin. Many parents have articulated the wish that their synagogues and Jewish institutions would run workshops to help them think through ways to talk to their middle-school and teenage children about endogamy, conversion, and the creation of Jewish homes, beginning with the questions: "Why is being Jewish important to me? Why do I hope that Jewish connections, and creating a Jewish home, will be important to you? Why is it preferable for a Jewish child to be raised with two Jewish parents?" Similar workshops could explore conversations about conversion.

The second tier of locations in which it is critically important to advocate for the creation of Jewish homes through inmarriage and conversion is synagogues and temples and other Jewish institutions, including organizations for Jewish youth, college students, and young adults. An unwillingness to advocate for unambiguously Jewish homes has a profound effect on social norms and undermines the efforts of parents in this regard. As noted, recent public statements within both the Reform and Conservative movements supporting a new emphasis on conversion seem a hopeful sign. If the comfort level with conversion rises within all wings of Judaism, it will be possible for Jewish religious and communal leaders to create a coherent policy regarding Jewish marriages that openly encourages inmarriage and conversionary households as the most effective environments for transmitting Jewish culture. When rabbis and Jewish communal professionals find language to make clear their opposition to religious syncretism and their preferences for conversion, without disrespecting interfaith families, and when they make conversion enough of a priority that there is always time to work with a convert, it seems likely that levels of conversion will rise—and with them, levels of Jewish engagement across the communal spectrum.

A Summary of Major Findings

Types of Converts

- Conversionary households are not monolithic. Their Jewish attitudes, behaviors, and affiliations range from the highly to the scarcely identified—as do the profiles of inmarried Jews. As a group, conversionary households are closer to inmarried than to mixed-married patterns. Looking at average conversionary behaviors should not hide the important differences between Activist, Accommodating, and Ambivalent Jews by Choice.
- Activist converts, who can be found in every wing of Judaism, surpass the Jewish profiles of most American Jews. In addition to their measurable Jewish connections and activities, many have deep spiritual feelings about Judaism as a religion.
- Contrary to earlier studies of converts, Activist converts often identify deeply with Jewish peoplehood and with Israel. Ethnic identification among converts has been reported as lower than among inmarried Jews because Ambivalent converts pull the average down in attitudinal surveys. However, the striking depth of Jewish peoplehood among Activist converts should not be lost in the homogenizing effect of averaging the group.
- The children of Activist conversionary households are often highly identified Jews, virtually indistinguishable from the children of inmarried households except for their connection to Christian relatives. Given high rates of mixed marriage among the Jewish inmarried population, however, having Christian relatives is no longer the novelty it once was among American Jews.

- The children of Ambivalent converts often grow up sharing their parents' ambivalence. Many of them define themselves as “half Jews,” or as persons of “no religion.” Their observances are often limited to secularized Christian holiday ceremonies and attendance at the occasional Passover Seder.

Catalysts for Conversion

- Advocating for conversion makes it more likely that born non-Jewish spouses will decide to convert. Advocacy tells the potential convert—we have something precious here, and we'd like you to share it. It takes confidence in Judaism to advocate for conversion.
- Early Judeophilism or philo-Semitism is the most common attribute of the eventual convert.
- Of all the catalysts for conversion, the one cited most often was that converts preferred Judaic religious cultural approaches to those of Christianity. Converts were quite specific about aspects of Jewish religious and social characteristics they preferred: encouragement of discussion of ideas, lack of dogma; openness to questions of all kinds; emphasis on family life; lack of emphasis on salvation and the world to come; and attachment to specific Jewish observances such as Shabbat and holidays. Male converts especially reported that their feelings of dissatisfaction with Christianity began when they were adolescents.
- The well-being of children and the preferability of having one religion in the household were the second most frequently cited catalysts for conversion. Perhaps counterintuitively, male converts were more than twice as likely to speak about converting for the sake of the children than were female converts.
- Women and men were equally likely to say they had converted for spiritual reasons.

Working toward and Living with Conversion

- Conversion is a process that takes time. Lovers, family, friends, and rabbis who understand conversion as a process keep opening doors, and eventually the convert walks through that door.
- Convert families often strengthen their ties to Judaism by choosing primarily Jewish friendship circles. This contrasts with interfaith families, who tend to have mostly mixed friendship circles, with no more than a third of their friends being Jewish.
- Conversionary households often continue negotiating holiday and other religious issues with their Christian extended families.
- Among younger couples in which the non-Jewish spouse is resistant to conversion, there is often a lot of conflict over Christian holidays, even if both spouses say they are “raising the children as Jews.”
- Almost universally, respondents reported that religion came up early in their dating relationships. A significant proportion said that the issue was reopened after marriage.
- Spousal encouragement for conversion was very significant, especially for men. Many men reported that their Jewish romantic partners had insisted early in the relationship that they could not continue unless conversion was on the table.
- In contrast, female converts more often suggested that they underwent a process of growing closer to Judaism that gradually culminated in conversion. Nevertheless, women were twice as likely as men to convert before marriage, while men more often converted as part of starting a family.
- Among those conversionary households identifying as Reform, more converted after marriage but before having a family. Among those identifying as Orthodox or Conservative, more converted before marriage. Some had begun conversion studies before they met their spouse.
- Virtually all of the Jews by Choice underwent formal education as part of their conversion process. About half of them have continued to study in adult educational settings.
- About half of non-Jews involved in relationships or married to Jews have taken adult Jewish educational classes at some point.
- One-third of the conversionary households reported weekly Shabbat observances. Another one-third said they occasionally celebrated Shabbat.
- Observance of the High Holidays and yearly festivals (*haggim*) was virtually universal in conversionary households.
- The majority of converts reported that the Jewish community was “very accepting” of them and their families.
- Communal financial support of conversion, in the form of free classes and subsidized conversion procedures, can have a positive impact on the number of conversions. Regional philanthropists can make a major difference in this regard.
- Jews by Choice often become both more knowledgeable and more observant than the born Jewish spouse and spouse’s family.
- All types of families reported that their Judaic activities increased after they had children.
- Jewish women were three times more likely than Jewish men to report that they dated only Jews in high school.
- The primary Jewish friendship circles that conversionary families choose work as social networks to reinforce Jewish behaviors, and often serve in a mentoring capacity as well.
- Jewish spouses who made a point of wanting a completely Jewish household were more likely to have had primarily Jewish friendship circles as teens, to have grown up in Jewishly active families, and to have had above-average levels of Jewish education.

Endnotes

1. Percentages of individual Jews who marry non-Jews differ from percentages of intermarriages in this way: Given ten Jews, if six Jews marry each other, they are six inmarried Jews who have created three endogamous marriages. If the remaining four Jews marry non-Jews, they are four intermarried Jews who have created four intermarriages. With three inmarriages and four intermarriages, these ten Jews have an intermarriage rate of 57 percent—although the majority of them have, in fact, married Jews. Thus the rate of intermarriage—which counts marriages, not individuals, is higher than the rate of individual Jews who have intermarried.

2. Bernard Lazerwitz, J. Alan Winter, Arnold Dashefsky, and Ephraim Tabory, *Jewish Choices: American Jewish Denominationalism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 189. Among marriages performed in the two decades from 1970 to 1990, 12 percent of the born non-Jewish wives of Jewish men and 5 percent of the born non-Jewish husbands of Jewish wives converted into Judaism; as of 1990, about 16 percent of intermarriages resulted in conversion into Judaism. Lazerwitz et al.'s analysis uses data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations (1990 NJPS).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 189. In 1990 data indicated that “98 percent of Jewish-Convert couples report they are raising their children as Jews, and 38 percent of mixed married couples report they are doing so.”

4. *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York: Mandell L. Berman Institute-North American Jewish Data Bank, 2003), p. 55. The United Jewish Community's analysis of NJPS 2000-01, a study conducted by the UJC, suggested that 33 percent of the children of intermarriages were being raised as Jews.

5. Gabriele Glaser, “Can a Gentile Wife Raise Jewish Kids?” *Moment* 24;2 (April 1999), pp. 58-61, p. 59.

6. Benjamin Phillips and Shaul Kelner, “Reconceptualizing religious change: ethno-apostasy and change in religion among American Jews,” forthcoming, *Sociology of Religion*, Special Issue on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, Moshe and Harriet Hartman, eds., pp. 20-26.

7. JOPLIN Listserv, JOPLIN@lists.joi.org, Nov. 27, 2005.

8. Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, *American Jewish Identity Survey 2001* (AJIS) (New York: The Center for Cultural Judaism, 2001), p. 7.

9. NJPS 2000-01 data, analyzed by Benjamin Phillips and Sylvia Barack Fishman. Unless otherwise specified, data cited from NJPS 2000-01 was run by Phillips and Fishman.

10. Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik, *Jews by Choice: A Study of Converts to Reform and Conservative Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1991), is based on mail-back questionnaires sent to students in 1987 and 1988 Introduction to Judaism classes for potential converts, administered by the Chicago Association of Reform Rabbis and the Chicago Region of the Rabbinical Assembly,

and to members of West Suburban Temple Har Zion. Their study presents intriguing materials; however, it is limited by its use of a rabbi-selected inmarried control group, by the lack of data on national statistical contexts such as the 1990 NJPS and Gallup polls, and by the potentially problematic nature of mail-back surveys. When stating their finding that 61 percent of converts believe in God, to cite just one example, the authors do not bother to compare this figure to readily available materials on born Jews. The reader thus has minimal basis of comparing converts' behavior to those of born Jews.

11. Marshall Sklare, “The Jew in American Sociological Thought” (1974), reprinted in Jonathan Sarna, ed., *Observing America's Jews* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 1993), pp. 159-180, p. 178.

12. Gary A. Tobin, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). Another proponent of widespread Jewish proselytism is Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Theory and Practice of Welcoming Converts to Judaism: Jewish Universalism* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

13. “Welcoming the New Jews,” *Forward*, July 8, 2005.

14. Marc Lee Raphael, personal conversation, Brandeis in the Berkshires, Lenox, Mass., Aug. 7-12, 2005.

15. FYI, Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Divrei Giur, Guidelines for Working With Prospective Gerim* (New York: Committee on Conversion, 2001), p. 9. Also in Avis Miller, Janet Marder, and Steven Bayme, *Approaches to Intermarriage: Areas of Consensus* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1993), p. 2.

16. J. David Bleich, “The Conversion Crisis: A Halakhic Analysis,” in Emanuel Feldman and Joel B. Wolowelsky, eds., *The Conversion Crisis: Essays from the Pages of Tradition* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV/The Rabbinical Council of America, 1990), pp. 19-45, p. 38.

17. Phillips and Kelner.

18. This research was published first as an American Jewish Committee report, *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed-Married Families* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001) and later in expanded form in a book: Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Dartmouth, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2004).

19. Transcriptions from the original conversion study interviews were analyzed in two ways: (1) using NUDIST software, which can be utilized both to quantify the answers and to extract significant quotations; and (2) readerly “immersion” in the transcripts, a time-honored method. Both were useful: NUDIST because it allowed us to identify large patterns of thought and behavior, and immersion because it allowed us to analyze each transcript according to its individual rhythms.

20. Forster and Tabachnik's Chicago-based study of Jews by Choice found that 15 percent of their primarily female married conversionary population converted before they met a Jewish partner, out of attraction to Judaism itself.

21. For elaboration of this profile of lifestyles that cultural cross-marryers wish

to create, see Fishman, *Double or Nothing?*, pp. 17-54.

22. Forster and Tabachnik, pp. 81-82.

23. Bruce Phillips, *Re-examining Inter-marriage: Trends, Textures and Strategies* (New York: American Jewish Committee and Wilstein Institute for Jewish Policy Studies, 1997).

24. Bruce Phillips, "Toward a New Typology of Mixed Married Families," paper presented at Hadassah-Brandeis Institute Conference on *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Waltham, Mass.: April 13-14, 2004); available on HBI Internet Web site.

25. *Ibid.* Occupying the position of the most Jewish is the Judaic family, composed of a Jew who considers him/herself to be Jewish by religion and a non-Jew who considers him/herself to be secular. In the middle of the continuum are two types of families: the Secular family consists of a secular Jew and a secular Christian; the Dual Religion family consists of a Jew by religion and a Christian by religion. Closer to the Christian side of the spectrum in Phillips's typology is the Christian family, composed of a secular Jew and a Christian by religion. The most intensely Christian family in the typology is the Double Christian, composed of a Christian Jew (formally converted or not) and a Christian by religion. Perhaps the most important point Phillips makes for the purposes of this research report is that secularism makes a spouse—whether Jewish or Christian—less likely to advocate for inclusion of his or her own religious customs in the intermarried household.

26. Harvey Cox, *Common Prayers: Faith, Family, and a Christian's Journey through the Jewish Year* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 83.

27. Bruce Phillips, "Children of Inter-marriage: How Jewish?" in Peter Medding, ed., *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. XIV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 81-127, pp. 118-19.

28. Verbatim quotation from one of the *Double or Nothing?* interviewees.

29. *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*, Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (New York and Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

30. Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 261.

31. Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1991), points to indicators of transformation in the narratives about Ezra and about the Samaritans. First, in the biblical account of Ezra's proclamations when a small, vulnerable group of exiles returned to Judaea (around 450 B.C.E.), the relatively large proportion of non-Jewish wives was perceived to be a threat to the establishment of a clear ethnoreligious identity. The traditional understanding of these materials is that Ezra urged the divorce and banishment of non-Jewish wives and their children (Ezra 10:2-5). In the second example of the Samaritans, as work on the rebuilding of the Temple was begun, Samaritans, who were descendents of the Northern Kingdom of Israel that had been destroyed in 722 B.C.E., approached the Judaeans and pre-

sented themselves as potential partners in that rebuilding. Partially because they had adopted syncretistic religious practices and partially because they were still identified with the once-competitive Northern Kingdom, Schiffman suggests, they were turned away by the Judaeans. However, their rejection was also hardened by the fact that as yet no process for conversion had been established (p. 46). Cohen, on the other hand, argues that historically Ezra may have intended to "purify" the Judaeans lineage rather than calling the legitimacy of these unions into question (p. 268).

32. Cohen, pp. 110-11.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-211. Cohen puts Tractate Gerim, which describes the process of proselytizing, as "almost certainly" post-talmudic (i.e., post-500 C.E.) and "first attested explicitly about 1300" (p. 211).

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-22.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 232-33.

36. Forster and Tabachnik, p. 34.

37. Judah Halevi in the Kuzari discusses "the uniqueness of the people of Israel, in that they alone possess the faculty of prophecy ... which enables them to approach the divine presence." He also asserts that "all science originated with the Jews." In Cecil Roth, editor-in-chief, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 10, p. 363 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972).

38. The dominant rabbinic approach of a respectful attitude toward converts was more recently articulated by the brilliant right-wing Lithuanian scholar Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966), who chaired the *Moetzet Gedolai haTorah* of the fervently Orthodox Agudat Israel. His commentary on the Pentateuch, *Oznayim LaTorah*, indicates that a sincere convert was to be treated as a Jew, with the utmost respect, and never reminded of his or her non-Jewish origins. See Zalman Sorotzkin, *Insights in the Torah: The Chumash with Translation and the Complete Classical Commentary of the Master Rav and Maggid, Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin*, Vol. 5 (New York: Artscroll Mesorah Series, 1994), p. 278.

39. Todd M. Endelman, "The Social and Political Context of Conversion in Germany and England, 1870-1914," in Todd M. Endelman, ed., *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World* (New York, London: Holmes & Meier, 1987), pp. 83-107, p. 85.

40. "By the Numbers: Understanding American Jewry," a conference at Brandeis University launching the Steinhardt Social Research Institute (November 3, 2005), explored just how complex these calculations are. Leonard Saxe, Elizabeth Tighe, and Benjamin Phillips noted that (1) respondents are far more likely to identify as Jews if they are asked: "Are you Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish?" than they are if asked: "With what religion, if any, do you identify?" (2) Results are also dramatically affected by who is counted as a Jew. Does an individual with one Jewish parent or one Jewish grandparent who does not identify with any religious group "qualify" to be computed as a Jew? Thus, differing population surveys suggest somewhat different results. Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, who conducted the *American Religious Identification Survey 2001* (ARIS, New York: The

Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001) and the *American Jewish Identity Survey 2001* (AJIS, New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001; reissued by the Center for Cultural Judaism, New York, 2003), assert that secularism has grown dramatically among white Americans, and that “the proportion of the population that can be classified as Christian has declined from 86 percent in 1990 to 77 percent in 2001” (ARIS, p. 10). The AJIS study calculates that about 7.7 million Americans report having some Jewish ancestry, and that “nearly 4 percent of America’s 105 million residential households have at least one member who is Jewish by religion or is of Jewish parentage or upbringing or considers him/herself Jewish” (AJIS, p. 6).

41. Benjamin Phillips and Sylvia Barack Fishman, “Causes and Consequences of American Jewish Inter-marriage,” forthcoming, *Sociology of Religion*, Special Issue on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey, eds., Moshe and Harriet Hartman, p. 19.

42. One example of the high standards characteristic of Orthodox rabbinic authorities in the contemporary period can be found in Rabbi Moses Feinstein’s *Iggrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah*, Vol. 3, # 106 (Tamuz 1969). In this case, Rabbi Feinstein decided to reject a woman who wished to convert because of marriage but rejected the standards of modesty required of Orthodox women in their clothing and head coverings; Rabbi Feinstein declared the woman to be not motivated “for the sake of heaven.”

43. According to one report, Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel urged rabbinical courts to convert the non-Jewish spouses of Jews quickly before they change their minds. The rabbis who follow this directive base their approach on the many classical rabbinic sources that simply require potential converts to be told about some of the most difficult laws and some of the easiest laws, without requiring promises of completely Orthodox behavior before a conversion. Bialik and Ravnitsky’s *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* contains materials on the appropriate treatment of proselytes. One offering from Tractate Yevamot 47 A-B is influential among liberal segments of the contemporary Orthodox community: “Our masters taught: If, at the present time, a man comes to you seeking to be a proselyte, he should be asked: What makes you wish to be received as a proselyte?... If he says, ‘I am fully aware [of the suffering of the Jews] but I am scarcely worthy of [the privilege of becoming a Jew],’ he is to be received at once and instructed in a few minor and a few major precepts. He should be told of the sin of not giving gleanings, forgotten sheaves.... One should take care not to impose on him too many commandments nor go into fine details about him.” Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitsky, eds., William G. Braude, trans., *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah, Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), p. 350. *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* was originally published in Hebrew in Odessa, 1908-11.

44. One particularly telling Conservative decision concerned how to respond to men who were not born Jewish and want to convert into Judaism, but cannot undergo a circumcision due to serious medical problems. More liberal Conservative

rabbis argued that the sincerity of the would-be convert should override the impossibility of circumcision in such cases, citing the fact that women, after all, become Jews without circumcision. However, in a 1994 paper approved by a CJLS vote (15 in favor, 3 opposed, and 5 abstaining), the majority of CJLS members agreed that conversion of males cannot proceed without circumcision, no matter what the medical circumstances. In addition to the opposing opinions of the three rabbis who voted against this decision, there is a note at the conclusion of the article opening a new door: The editor suggests that it is possible in the future that laser circumcision may be used safely—and halakhically—on those who cannot medically tolerate a conventional circumcision. Indeed, even such generally liberal contemporary Orthodox authorities as Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, the *S’ridei Aish*, commented that a man who wishes to become a convert but for medical reasons cannot undergo circumcision must not be allowed to convert: “The end of the matter is: one should not permit in any fashion whatsoever conversion with immersion alone in the case of one where circumcision is a danger to him! Furthermore, even if the individual wishes to possibly endanger himself and undergo this circumcision one should not accept him as a convert because there is a desecration of God’s name in this matter, and a danger to all of Israel should he die because of the circumcision.” Cited in Herbert J. Mandl, “Conversion to Judaism without Circumcision Due to Medical Complications,” in Kassel Abelson and David J. Fine, eds., *Responsa, 1991-2000* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 2002), pp. 133-36, p. 135. Significantly, the Conservative movement agrees with the approach of the *S’ridei Aish* in this regard.

45. Cited by Daniel Schiff, Rappaport Center for the Study of Assimilation, Bar-Ilan University, Neve-Ilan Conference Center, July 22, 2005; *American Reform Responsa*, Item # 148, Rabbi Officiating at Mixed Marriages (Vol. XXXIX, 1919), pp. 75-76.

46. Schiff, *CCAR Responsa*, 5759.2, “Baptism and Jewish Status.”

47. David Landau, *Who Is a Jew? A Case Study of American Jewish Influence on Israeli Policy* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1996).

48. Michele Chabin, “Easing the Way to Conversion,” in *New York Jewish Week*, Oct. 21, 2005, pp. 28-29.

49. Marshall Sklare, “The Image of the Good Jew in Lakeville,” reprinted in Jonathan Sarna, ed., *Observing America’s Jews* (Waltham: Brandeis U. Press/University Press of New England, 1993); Charles S. Liebman, “American Jews: Still a Distinctive Group,” *Commentary* 64, No. 2 (Aug. 1977), pp. 57-60.

50. Joplin-joi.org@lists.joi.org, July 18, 2005.

51. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Tom Beau-doin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of GenX* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2000); James Cote, *Generation On Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1991); Richard

W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds., *GenX Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

52. See, for example, Tobin Belzer, *Jewish Identity at Work: GenXers in Jewish Jobs* (Unpublished Dissertation: Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University, 2004); Debra R. Kaufman, "Embedded Categories: Identity among Jewish Young Adults," in *Race, Gender, and Class* 6.3 (1999): 1-13; Lisa Schiffman, *Generation J* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

53. Anna Greenberg for REBOOT, *OMG! How Generation Y Is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era* (www.rebooters.net) 2004, p. 16.

54. Leonard Saxe, Charles Kadushin, Shahar Hecht, Benjamin Phillips, Shaul Kellner, and Mark I. Rosen, *birthright israel: Evaluation Highlights 2004* (Waltham, Mass.: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 2004), p. 31.

55. Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin, *Eight Up: The College Years: The Jewish Engagement of Young Adults Raised in Conservative Synagogues, 1995-2003* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004), pp. 36-37.

56. For earlier qualitative work, see Aryeh Meir, *Twentysomething and Jewish: Personal Reflections on Jewish Identity* (New York: American Jewish Committee, Institute of Human Relations, 1994). A recent follow-up to it is Adam Janvey, ed., *Identity: Young Jews Speak Out* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2005). This section of *Choosing Jewish* is based on the work of Beth Cousens, M.A., who is currently completing Ph.D. research at the Riverway Project, looking at the impact of informal Jewish education on young adults, in a dissertation with the working title: *Educating Generation J: The Jewish Growth of Adults in their Twenties*.

57. Sue Fishkoff, "How to Reach Unaffiliated Jews? Go to Them, Community Heads Told," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, April 29, 2005 (www.JTA.org).

58. Peter Medding, Gary A. Tobin, Sylvia Barack Fishman, and Mordechai Rimor, *Jewish Identity in Conversionary and Mixed Marriages* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1992), pp. 22-23.

59. Phillips, "Children of Intermarriage," pp. 110-19.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

61. Joplin-joi.org@lists.joi.org, July 18, 2005.

62. Steven M. Cohen, "Engaging the Next Generation of American Jews: Distinguishing the In-Married, Intermarried, and Non-Married," in *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (Fall/Winter 2005), pp. 43-52.

63. Phillips, "Children of Intermarriage," pp. 110-18.

64. See especially Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, ARIS and AJIS.

65. Steven Cohen, *Religious Stability and Ethnic Decline* (New York: Jewish Community Centers Association, 1998), p. 45.

66. WTN@shamash.org, Oct. 31, 2005.



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